



Doctoral Programme in
Agrifood and Environmental Sciences

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From Consumers to Governance

Understanding Food Choices, Alternative Food Networks, and Urban Policies

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LIST OF SYMBOLS AND ABBREVIATIONS

AFN(s) – Alternative Food Network(s)

CSA – Community Supported Agriculture

CSA – Event Structure Analysis

FPC – Food Policy Council

GAS – Gruppi di Acquisto Solidale (Solidarity Purchasing Groups)

GSP – Gross Saleable Production

GDP – Gross Domestic Product

MLP – Multi-Level Perspective

SPT – Social Practice Theory

ABSTRACT

The global food system is facing increasing challenges related to environmental sustainability, social inequality, and economic viability. Industrialized agricultural practices have led to soil degradation, biodiversity loss, and climate change, while globalized food chains have exacerbated social inequalities and food insecurity. These structural issues highlight the need for a transformation toward sustainable food systems. This dissertation examines the transformation of food systems through the interconnected roles of consumer behavior, Alternative Food Networks (AFNs), and urban food governance. By integrating insights from consumption studies, food systems analysis, and urban governance, this research investigates the dynamics that drive or hinder sustainability-oriented food system changes.

The central research questions guiding this thesis are: (1) What are the key barriers and opportunities within consumer behavior, AFNs, and urban food governance that influence the transformation toward sustainable food systems? (2) How do these three components interact to shape food system transformation?

Existing literature on food system sustainability highlights the complexity of these transformations, emphasizing multi-level interactions between niche innovations, established regimes, and broader socio-political landscape. Previous studies have explored consumer choices as a potential driver of sustainability but often overlook structural constraints that shape these behaviors. AFNs, such as Community Supported Agriculture (CSA) and farmers' markets, offer promising pathways for localized food system innovations, yet they frequently struggle with issues of inclusivity and scalability. Meanwhile, urban food governance has emerged as a critical site for intervention, with

Food Policy Councils and municipal initiatives demonstrating the potential to integrate sustainability goals into policy frameworks.

This thesis employs a mixed-methods approach, combining qualitative and quantitative data collection. The research draws on participant observation, in-depth interviews, focus group discussions, and survey data collected over several years in Trentino, Italy, and within a broader European comparative framework. The analysis utilizes Social Practice Theory (SPT), Convention Theory, and the Multi-Level Perspective (MLP) to examine interactions between consumption habits, grassroots initiatives, and governance structures.

This research contributes to the literature on food system transformation by empirically demonstrating how consumer behavior, Alternative Food Networks (AFNs), and urban food governance interact in complex, context-dependent ways. Key findings reveal that while consumers aspire to sustainable practices, their agency is constrained by structural inequalities, cultural norms, and institutional trust levels. AFNs, though innovative, face scalability challenges due to both entrenched regime logics and dominant practices, along with infrastructure gaps. Urban governance initiatives like Nutrire Trento highlight the potential of participatory models but also their fragility when lacking long-term institutional support. The study underscores the need for integrated, multi-level strategies that address power asymmetries, align policies with grassroots innovations, and reconfigure socio-material conditions to enable systemic change. These insights offer actionable pathways for policymakers and practitioners to foster resilient and equitable food systems.

CHAPTER 1. INTRODUCTION

Over the past recent decades, the global food system have encountered growing pressures stemming from several challenges, including environmental degradation, resource depletion, and persistent social inequalities.

Conventional agricultural practices have played a central role in these phenomena. Heavy reliance on synthetic fertilizers, pesticides, and large-scale intensive monoculture cropping systems has led to soil degradation, loss of biodiversity, and pollution of water bodies (Foley et al., 2011). Additionally, agriculture is a major contributor to greenhouse gas emissions, accounting for approximately 25% of global emissions when including deforestation and land-use changes (Smith et al., 2014). These emissions contribute to climate change, which in turn trigger phenomena such as altered weather patterns, increased frequency of extreme weather events and the emergence and spread of new pests and diseases. These cascading effects have a significant impact on food production (Wheeler & Von Braun, 2013).

Moreover, the overuse of water, soil nutrients, and fossil fuels poses a significant threat to the sustainability of food systems. Agriculture is the largest consumer of freshwater resources, using about 70% of the world's freshwater for irrigation (Molden, 2007). The over-extraction of water for irrigation has led to the depletion of aquifers, reduced river flows, and increased salinity in soils, all of which threaten the sustainability of agricultural production. Soil degradation, resulting from overuse and mismanagement, reduces the land's fertility and productivity, making it increasingly difficult to meet the food demands of a growing global population, aggravating situations of undernourishment (Montgomery, 2007). Furthermore, the agrifood system's dependence on fossil fuels for machinery, transportation, and synthetic inputs like fertilizers and pesticides intensifies these

resource constraints, locking food production into an unsustainable cycle of finite energy depletion (Tilman et al., 2002).

Compounding these environmental and resource challenges, the global food system perpetuates severe inequalities in food access, driven by systemic social and economic disparities.

Despite the global abundance of food, uneven distribution lead to significant inequalities in access to food, resulting in both undernutrition and overnutrition (Maxwell & Smith, 1992). Approximately 828 million people globally were undernourished in 2021, while obesity and diet-related non-communicable diseases are on the rise in many parts of the world (FAO, 2022). These disparities are often rooted in broader social and economic issues, including poverty, lack of access to land and resources, and marginalization of vulnerable groups such as smallholder farmers, women, and indigenous communities (Patel, 2012). The industrialization and globalization of food systems have exacerbated these inequalities, leading to the concentration of power and wealth in the hands of a few multinational corporations, while small-scale farmers and rural communities face increased economic pressures and loss of livelihoods (Weis, 2007).

These challenges have highlighted the urgent need for transforming today's food regime towards sustainable food systems, understood as those that ensure food security and nutrition for all without compromising the economic, social and environmental foundations for future generations (FAO, 2018). This is further highlighted by recent global events that have exposed the fragility of the current globalised food system. These events underscore the vulnerabilities of a system that relies heavily on long supply chains, centralized power, and industrial agricultural practices.

One prominent example is the COVID-19 pandemic, which significantly disrupted food supply chains worldwide, leading to increased unemployment and heightened food insecurity. This impact

was felt not only in low-income countries but also in high-income nations, where even affluent cities faced challenges. For instance, in Italy, people queued for hours for food donations during the 2020 lockdown, a situation mirrored in countries like Sweden and Switzerland, despite their high GDP per capita and human development index (Kingsley, 2020; Dasgupta & Robinson, 2022; Nordensvärd et al., 2022). These instances highlight the inherent vulnerabilities in the current food systems, which are not solely tied to economic disparities but are also influenced by logistical and structural factors.

Similarly, the war in Ukraine has exacerbated global food and energy price inflation, threatening food security on a worldwide scale. The conflict not only endangers the food security of Ukraine but also affects other countries that are reliant on food imports from the region (FAO, 2022). These examples underscore the risks associated with the globalized food system's heavy reliance on a few key regions and crops for food supply, demonstrating the need for more diversified and localized food production systems.

The complexity of this transformation is further emphasized by the need to balance ecological integrity, social equity, and economic viability, which are the three pillars of sustainable development (Brundtland Commission, 1987). Transforming food systems, therefore, requires a holistic approach that not only addresses production but also prioritizes other pivotal aspects, such as the role of consumers, community-based initiatives, and collaborative governance as key drivers. By examining the interplay between these factors, this thesis aims to provide a comprehensive understanding of the pathways to food sustainability.

1.1 Aims and Research Questions

In this thesis, I explore the transformation of food systems towards sustainability by examining the interconnected roles of consumer behavior, alternative food networks (AFNs), and urban food governance. Drawing on theoretical frameworks from consumption studies, food systems analysis, and urban governance, I investigate how these components interact to shape the change toward more sustainable food practices. The complexity of food systems, which operate at multiple levels—from local to global and from the individual to the institutional level—and involve a variety of actors, including consumers, producers, policymakers, and civil society organizations, is well established in the literature (Ericksen, 2008; Hinrichs, 2014). Building on work that highlights the importance of cross-sectoral collaboration and governance innovation (Wiskerke, 2009; Moragues-Faus et al., 2017), this thesis seeks to address the interaction between these stakeholders, identifying the dynamics that drive or hinder food system transformation and offering insights into how food systems can be restructured to foster sustainability. Therefore, the central questions guiding this thesis are:

- 1) *What are the key barriers and opportunities within consumer behavior, alternative food networks, and urban food governance that impede or facilitate the transformation to more sustainable food systems?*
- 2) *How do consumer behaviour, alternative food networks, and urban food governance interact to influence the transformation of food systems towards sustainability?*

In selecting consumer behavior, Alternative Food Networks (AFNs), and urban food governance as the three focal elements of this thesis, I intend to capture the transformation of food systems across interrelated levels of action and influence. Consumers represent the micro level, where everyday practices, values, and constraints directly shape demand and reveal structural barriers. AFNs operate at an intermediate level that could be defined as meso, embodying basic experiments and collective organisation that test alternatives to the dominant food regime. Urban food governance constitutes the

macro level, where institutional frameworks and public policies can either enable or hinder change. While these elements differ in scale and scope, they are deeply interconnected. In fact, these three dimensions contribute to shaping the surrounding foodscape and are, at the same time, influenced by it. The concept of *foodscape*, developed in geography and widely used in urban studies and public health to describe the set of places and spaces where food is purchased, prepared and consumed, has been extended by sociological research to include the institutional structures, cultural spaces and discourses that mediate our relationship with food (MacKendrick, 2014). Within this foodscape, consumer practices toward sustainability are shaped not only by individual aspirations but also by the opportunities created by AFNs and by the role of urban governance. This multi-level approach is not only a theoretical choice but also reflects the empirical trajectory of my research, which combined opportunities arising from international collaborations, local fieldwork, and engagement in policy processes. By examining these three elements together, the thesis highlights how food system transformation cannot be understood through a single lens, but requires attention to the interplay between practices, networks, and governance arrangements.

1.2 Overview of the literature

The complexity and multidimensionality of food systems have long been recognized by scholars across various disciplines, including sociology, political economy, ecology, and geography. These systems operate at multiple scales (local, national, and global) and involve a wide range of actors, including consumers, producers, policymakers, and corporations. Food systems are not only shaped by the physical processes of food production and distribution but also by social, economic, political, and cultural forces that influence how food is grown, traded, and consumed. Scholars from diverse

perspectives have explored how these factors interact, emphasizing that any effort to transform food systems must account for their multifaceted nature.

A foundational approach to understanding the transformation of food systems and to providing historical context to the topics that will be addressed throughout this work is Harriet Friedmann and Philip McMichael's (1989) pioneering work on food regimes, which has been instrumental in linking food systems to global political economy and historical shifts in power relations. Food regime theory traces the evolution of food systems through various historical phases, identifying three distinct food regimes from colonial agriculture to the current globalized industrial food system. This framework provides a structural understanding of how global food governance has evolved, shaping production and trade practices that often prioritize corporate and state interests over sustainability.

During the First Food Regime (1870s–World War I), European colonial powers established global agricultural systems that extracted raw materials and food from colonies to fuel industrialization in Europe. Colonies produced primary commodities like sugar, wheat, cotton, and coffee, which were shipped back to the metropole. This regime was characterized by a global division of labor, where the colonies supplied cheap raw materials and foodstuffs, while Europe and North America industrialized. Land was consolidated into large plantations or commercial farms, often displacing smallholder farmers. The colonial food regime reinforced imperial power structures and trade patterns, benefiting industrialized nations at the expense of colonies.

After World War II, the second food regime (1945–1970s) was shaped by the geopolitical power of the United States and the emergence of industrial agriculture. This period saw the rise of the Green Revolution, where technological advancements such as chemical fertilizers, pesticides, and high-yield crop varieties were introduced to increase agricultural productivity, particularly in countries in the so-called Global South. The U.S. played a key role in reshaping global food systems by promoting surplus

agricultural exports, particularly grains, and by advocating development models that favoured industrial agriculture. The global spread of industrial agriculture during this period was supported by institutions like the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund (IMF), which pushed development programs on the Global South, often tied to the expansion of large-scale, export-oriented agriculture. This food regime increased agricultural yields considerably, but also exacerbated the marginalisation of small farmers in favor of large-scale agribusinesses.

The third and current food regime, emerging from the 1980s onward, is characterized by the global dominance of transnational corporations in agriculture, food processing, and retail. This regime is marked by the consolidation of power in the hands of a few agribusiness corporations that control significant portions of global food production and distribution. The rise of supermarket chains, global fast-food companies, and the commodification of food reflect the neoliberal economic policies that have shaped this period. Indeed, this regime has been marked by deregulation, trade liberalization, and the intensification of global food markets, leading to a prioritisation of efficiency, scale and standardisation over local equilibria. While this corporate food regime has led to the increased availability of affordable food globally, it has also exacerbated environmental degradation and labor exploitation.

This preliminary historical background is instrumental in introducing the main barriers to sustainability in current food systems, particularly the dominance of transnational corporations and industrial agriculture, which prioritize efficiency and profit over social justice and environmental health. Building on these aspects, a brief outline will now be given of how the literature has addressed the different levels addressed in this thesis: consumers, alternative food networks and governance.

1.2.1 Consumer Behavior and Power Relations in the Food System

Consumer behavior plays a critical role in shaping food systems, with scholars highlighting the dynamics between consumers and other actors such as producers, retailers, and policymakers. The neoliberal notion of individualism and the liberal tradition that celebrates the free market often frame consumer choices as expressions of free will and self-determination, attributing responsibility for actions solely to individuals (Lemke, 2001; Giesler & Veresiu, 2014). This framing suggests that consumer power, driven by personal preferences and ethical considerations, can influence food production and distribution through market choices. Furthermore, other relevant concepts such as "food citizenship" (Johnston et al., 2009) reflect the idea that consumers, through ethical consumption, can promote changes in the food system.

However, scholars have increasingly critiqued this individualistic approach and the notion of consumer power (Guthman, 2008), arguing that it overlooks the structural, habitual, and institutional contexts in which consumption practices are formed. Warde (2016) asserts that individual explanatory models of consumption fail to account for the normative patterns of behavior shaped by broader political and economic systems. Additionally, Dubuisson-Quellier (2022) critiques the use of a generalized consumer model, emphasizing that market technologies often frame consumers in specific ways depending on their socio-economic background. This points to the need for a more nuanced understanding of consumer behavior that accounts for the institutional and political forces that shape consumption practices (Johnston & Goodman, 2015; Smith & Jehlička, 2007).

Comparative studies support this view by demonstrating how institutional factors related to markets and regulations, as well as cultural and civil society structures, influence food consumption patterns across different countries. For instance, significant differences exist among European consumers in both attitudes and behaviors, shaped by local geographical, economic, and political conditions (Kjærnes et al., 2013, 2022; Veisser et al., 2008). Inequalities rooted in welfare state

structures, alongside governance traditions and food cultures further determine how different populations engage with food issues (Thøgersen, 2010; 2011).

While consumer behavior is certainly an important factor in food system transformation, it must be understood within the context of these wider socio-political forces. Without addressing the institutional and structural conditions that shape consumption, the potential for individual consumer actions to drive significant change in the food system remains limited.

1.2.2 Alternative Food Networks (AFNs) and Sustainable Transformation

As critiques of the industrial food system have grown, so have efforts to develop alternatives that emphasise sustainability, localism and equity. Alternative Food Networks (AFNs), such as farmers' markets, community-supported agriculture (CSA), and organic food cooperatives, have been hailed as potential drivers of food system transformation. These networks challenge the dominant food system by fostering direct relationships between producers and consumers, promoting transparency, and often prioritizing environmentally sustainable practices (Goodman et al., 2012).

Much of the literature on AFNs focuses on their potential to enable sustainable transformation. For example, Seyfang (2006) argues that AFNs operate as "niches" within the broader regime of industrial food systems, creating spaces where innovation in production, distribution, and consumption can emerge. These innovations, if scaled up, could contribute to broader systemic shifts toward sustainability. However, other scholars caution against overly romanticizing AFNs, noting that they often remain niche markets worn to affluent consumers, and may not address broader issues of social equity or food access (Alkon and Agyeman, 2011).

Indeed, AFNs can even reinforce existing social inequalities, precisely because participation in these networks often requires certain levels of economic and cultural capital (Goodman et al., 2012;

Rosol, 2012; Marsden and Morley, 2014; Fourat et al., 2020; Cerrada-Serra et al., 2018). Thus, while AFNs offer important models for more sustainable food practices, their role in transforming food systems at a larger scale is still contested. For broader impact, these networks must become more inclusive and better integrated with policy efforts at various levels of governance.

The focus on AFNs, as opposed to other intermediary organisations involved, such as consumer associations or NGOs, stems from their dual nature: they combine economic reorganisation, seeking to reshape supply chains and market practices, with social innovation, building new cultural norms and collective identities. AFNs therefore provide a particularly revealing meso-level arena in which to observe how transformations towards sustainability emerge in practice. They do not merely advocate sustainability, but practise it, constituting veritable living laboratories where new practices in the food system are tested and implemented (Signori & Forno, 2016; 2019). Moreover, precisely because AFNs aim to reconnect the two extremes of the supply chain, they offer a lens to include producers as fundamental stakeholders, who would otherwise remain underexplored in the consumer- and governance-oriented parts of this thesis.

1.2.3 Urban Food Governance: Cities as Key Sites for Transformation

In the context of rapid urbanisation and the growing need for sustainable urban food systems, cities have also emerged as critical sites to address food system challenges. This involves urban food governance, where municipal governments, civil society organizations, and other stakeholders collaboratively shape food policy and infrastructure at the city level (Morgan, 2009). Such efforts include initiatives like urban agriculture, local food procurement programs, and policies aimed at reducing food waste or improving access to healthy, affordable food.

The role of cities in food system transformation has been underscored by initiatives such as the Milan Urban Food Policy Pact, which has spurred international collaboration among cities to tackle urban food security and sustainability issues (Moragues-Faus & Morgan, 2015). These efforts highlight the potential of cities to drive food system change from the bottom up, leveraging local resources and engaging diverse stakeholders.

However, the capacity of cities to transform food systems is not without limitations. Pothukuchi and Kaufman (2000) argue that food issues have often been neglected in urban planning, and many cities still lack the infrastructure and governance frameworks needed to support sustainable food systems. Moreover, as Cohen and Ilieva (2020) note, urban food policies can be constrained by political, financial, and logistical challenges, including conflicts between local and national policies or the influence of powerful food corporations.

Despite these challenges, urban food governance represents a promising arena for food system transformation. By integrating food into broader urban sustainability and resilience strategies, cities can play a pivotal role in addressing global food system challenges while also responding to local needs.

1.3 Data Collection

This PhD thesis provided a key opportunity to continue the observation of the local Food Policy, Nutrire Trento and of the key phenomena within the Trentino food system. This longitudinal analysis started as the focus of my master thesis, continued during a research grant within the project SATURN-‘System and sustainable approach to virtuous interaction of Urban and Rural’ and finally became the focus of my PhD research. The insights gained in these early stages, particularly through

fieldwork and interactions with stakeholders, shaped the trajectory of my research and informed the development of a more comprehensive and focused investigation of the local food system. By continuing the work begun in these earlier phases during the doctorate, I have been able to build a robust mixed-methods data set and a deeper understanding of the complexities of the Trentino food system, further enriching the scope and depth of my thesis.

While each of the four articles employs methods tailored to its specific research questions, it is important to outline the methodological approach of the thesis as a whole and the ontological standpoint that guided these choices. The ontological standpoint underpinning this thesis is broadly consistent with a relational critical realist perspective, an orientation that resonates with aspects of the theoretical approaches employed. Although neither framework was originally developed within a critical realist tradition, they can be read through a relational realist lens that highlights the stratified, emergent, and dynamic nature of social reality.

The MLP conceptualizes transformation through interrelated levels (niche, regime, and landscape) endowed with distinct generative capacities. At the same time, it incorporates interpretivist insights by recognizing that regimes are constituted not only by formal structures but also by shared cognitive routines, cultural meanings, and discourses. This ontology is inherently relational and non-deterministic: it views regimes and niches as dynamic configurations of actors, artifacts, and rules, leaving space for contingency, agency, and political struggle in shaping transitions (Geels, 2010; Sorrell, 2018).

While developed for socio-technical systems, this perspective can be extended to food systems, provided certain adjustments are made. In particular, food systems are not reducible to technological change but are deeply embedded in everyday practices, cultural conventions, and ecological relations. To account for this, the thesis complements the MLP with insights from SPT and conventions theory,

which foreground the role of meanings, routines, and justifications in shaping food practices. In this way, the MLP provides a structural-relational scaffold, while practice-based and cultural approaches illuminate how transformation is enacted in everyday life.

Adopting a critical realist stance also entails a reflexive position toward knowledge production. My participation in CSA activities and governance forums (such as Nutrire Trento) gave me access to actors' perspectives but also shaped the knowledge generated. In line with the critical realist distinction between the real, the actual, and the empirical, I acknowledge that this thesis presents one situated account of broader transformative processes, co-produced through engagement with fieldwork and interpretive analysis.

In the next sections, the collection process for both qualitative and quantitative data will be presented, while the duration is represented in Graph 1.

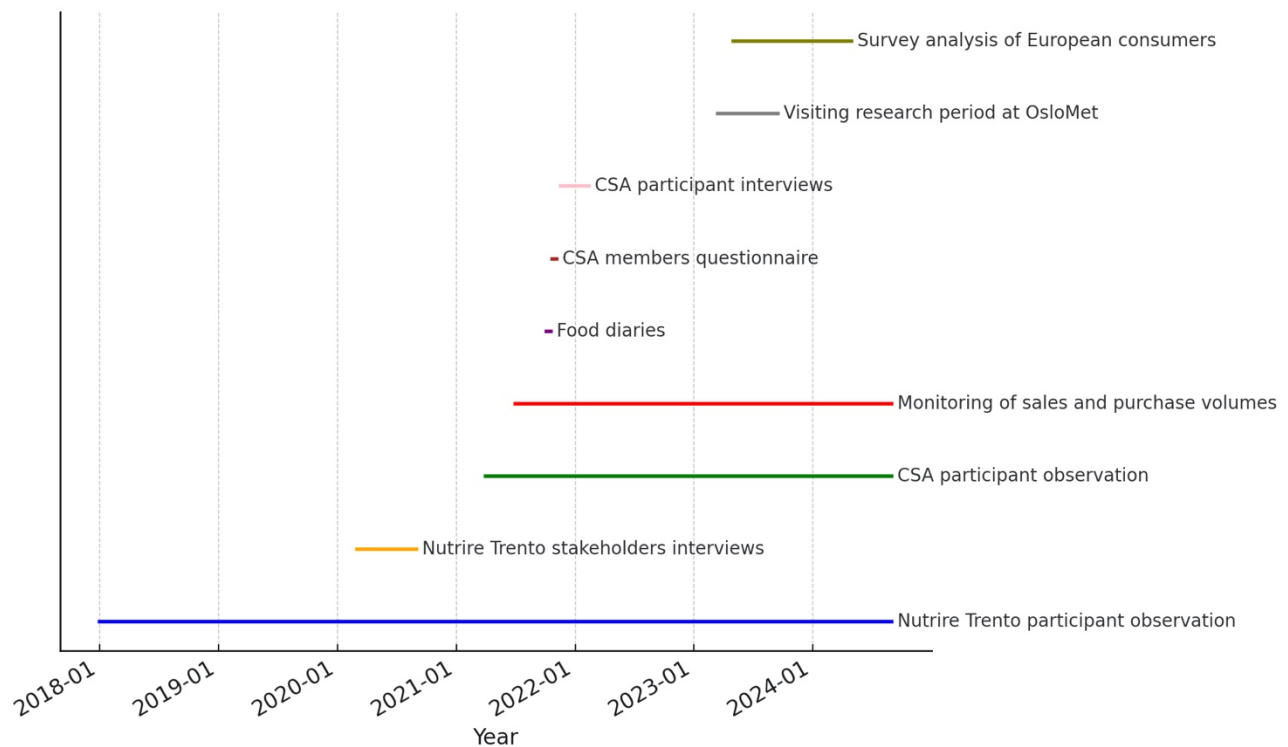


Figure 1 – Data Collection Timeline.

1.3.1 Qualitative Inquiry

As mentioned, participant observation was conducted from the very beginning, including the continuation of the monitoring of the CSA process and the Nutrire Trento initiative started earlier.

For Nutrire Trento, the participant observation began in September 2018, with systematic minute-taking at each meeting to track the progression of discussions, initiatives within the local food network and capturing the evolution and relevant details. The first set of in-depth interviews with Nutrire Trento participants was conducted in March 2020. Both field notes and interviews were analysed qualitatively by identifying and linking all the events that marked the evolution of the initiative, following the Event Structure Analysis (ESA) methodology, and using thematic coding derived from the multilevel perspective (MLP). By applying MLP concepts such as landscape, regime, niche and diffusion to this process, the patterns of institutional dynamics that influenced Nutrire Trento were identified.

For the CSA case study, participant observation commenced in April 2021, with detailed monitoring of the processes involving consumer and farmer engagement. Also in this case study, participation involved taking detailed minutes to record the decisions taken, problems, barriers and opportunities reported by the participants. Furthermore, in-depth interviews with CSA participants (27 households and 9 farms) were conducted between 17 November 2021 and 12 February 2022. These interviews were analyzed qualitatively using the combination MLP and SPT frameworks, focusing on how niche innovations and social practices, such as those related to food consumption and production, interacted at multiple levels and across dimensions.

Moreover, focus group discussions (FGDs) were conducted to explore biocultural diversity and consumers' views on their food environments in Italy, Norway, and Germany. The FGDs aimed to

provide in-depth insights into food supply and consumption patterns, contributing to a comparative understanding of food practices across different localities. Two focus groups were held in each country, with 5 to 8 participants per group. Participants were initially recruited from local food networks, followed by snowball sampling to include consumers not involved in collective food efforts. Most participants had above-average incomes, and there were more female than male participants, with diverse backgrounds in terms of food experience.

A standardized protocol ensured consistency across all focus groups, with sessions lasting about two hours and moderated by a facilitator. Key topics explored included participants' perceptions of their local food environment, the diversity and accessibility of organic and 'good food,' barriers and opportunities for sustainable diets, and the social and cultural meanings of food. Techniques such as mapping exercises and visual materials (e.g., photos of 'typical' food baskets and 'good food') were used to facilitate rich, grounded discussions and enable comparative analysis. Privacy concerns were addressed by avoiding photos of individuals. These methods aimed to capture concrete experiences and foster participant engagement, aligning with established practices in food-related research.

Together, these qualitative methods—participant observation, in-depth interviews, and focus group discussions—provided a comprehensive understanding of the dynamics, practices, and perceptions shaping local food systems and sustainability efforts across different contexts.

1.3.2 Quantitative Inquiry

As for the CSA, the quantitative component aimed to triangulate field notes, interviews, and minutes with additional data sources. It began on 1 July 2021 with the monitoring of sales and purchase volumes. A food diary was distributed to participants on 4 October 2021 and completed by 18 October 2021, allowing for the collection of detailed consumption data. Through these diaries, the

participants were asked to record daily, for 14 days, all expenses incurred for food and beverages (including expenses for meals away from home, take-away meals or meals at home), and were also asked to mark the expenses incurred at the CSA, to understand the relevance of this initiative in the consumption habits of the participants. A questionnaire survey was subsequently administered on 22 October 2021, gathering responses from 28 consumer households and 11 farmers. These questionnaire data provided insights into the operational dynamics of the CSA, consumer preferences, motivations and expectations, providing further insight into the barriers and opportunities of the initiative.

Furthermore this PhD benefited from participation in the international research consortium within the FOOdIVERSE project, financed by the ERAnet Cofund programme (H2020) SUSFOOD/Core Organic. This scientific project aims to provide multi-layered perspectives on the transformation of local food systems in Europe, increasing their sustainability and diversity in crops, farms, markets, food policies, meals, thereby achieving a higher level of food security.

In addition to constant and stimulating discussions with the team members, who certainly guided various stages of the research and enriched the theoretical foundations of the topics discussed, access to this network also allowed me to spend 6 months as a visiting researcher at the SIFO (Consumption Research Norway) research centre in Oslo and to be involved in the research on a sample of 15,000 consumers from seven European countries that constitutes the first article of this thesis. The decision to include this study, despite not having participated in the data collection phase, is linked to its consistency with the objectives of the thesis: focusing on consumers in seven European states in the first article serves to establish a broader framework that captures key trends and patterns in food consumption and sustainability across diverse socio-economic and cultural contexts in Europe. This initial wider scope provides valuable insights into the ways consumer behavior is shaped by structural factors such as market dynamics, policy environments, and cultural influences on a supranational

level. By examining these larger-scale influences, the article offers a fundamental understanding of the wider forces at play in shaping food systems, which is essential for contextualizing more localized studies. Thus, the first article provides a crucial macro-level context that helps to inform the subsequent micro-level analyses of case studies in Trentino. The broader European study sets the stage for understanding how local food systems, like that of Trentino, interact with and are influenced by wider and general trends, while the rest of the thesis delves deeper into the particularities of the local case, contributing to a more comprehensive understanding of food system transformations.

Indeed, following this initial exploration, the focus of the thesis narrows to the local context of Trentino, where a more in-depth, place-based analysis is conducted. The shift from a European focus to the specific case of Trentino allows for a detailed exploration of the unique social, cultural, and political dynamics that characterize local food systems in this region. Trentino represents a distinct context in which the broader trends identified in the first article can be observed in a localized, concrete setting, allowing for a more nuanced exploration of how global and European-level dynamics manifest at the local level, interacting with the characteristics of this territory. In the following section, a brief description of the local context of the Trentino agri-food system will be presented.

1.4 Research Context: Agrifood System and Dynamics in Trentino

The Municipality of Trento, capital of the Autonomous Province with the same name, is located in an Alpine territory with a surface area of approximately 620,000 hectares and a total number of inhabitants of approximately 540,000, including 120,000 residents in the city itself. The province is made up of valleys, medium-altitude spaces and high mountains with a high percentage of steep slopes, and most of the municipalities in the province (64%) are above 600 m a.s.l. These

topographical characteristics have always made cultivation difficult, and terraces have been created to overcome this problem: 70% of the provincial surface is covered by forests and pastures, along with the waters of its lakes and streams. Cultivated agricultural areas, on the other hand, cover about 9% of the provincial surface. Only 1.8% of it is occupied by urban areas, while over 16% of the territory is made up of bare rocks, glaciers and snowfields (Trento Statistical Service, 2008).

Looking at the agricultural sector in detail, about 16,500 companies are operating and 63.5% of them occupy an area of less than 2 hectares. The Gross Saleable Production (GSP) of the agricultural and forestry sector amounts to 698.4 million euro, 95% of which is attributable to the agricultural sector and 5% to the forestry sector (Rural Development Programme of Trento, 2022). Fruit-growing is the main activity, with 33% of the sector's GSP, followed by animal husbandry with 17% and viticulture with 15%. Apple production accounts for 82% of the GSP of fruit growing, followed by small fruits with 11%. Apple orchards extend over 10,798 hectares and involve 5,864 farms. As for the wine sector, 91% of the GSP value comes from the wine grape sector and 7% from the sale of rooted cuttings. There are just under 8,000 wine-growing holdings, with an invested area of about 10,389 hectares. The average area is 1.3 hectares, confirming a very small average size in this segment as well. It is also very important to consider that 80% of wine production is delivered to 15 social wine cellars, i.e. cooperatives that deal with both the processing and sale of the product (Rural Development Programme of Trento, 2022). The organic sector, although growing, is still very limited. In 2021, there were only 1153 certified organic farms and the area cultivated organically was 23,628 hectares, or 3.8% of the entire provincial area. However, it should also be considered that the trend is constantly increasing: in 2000 there were only 200 farms and 1000 hectares cultivated organically (Trentino Agricoltura, 2021).

The current almost monoculture agricultural landscape is a relatively recent fact. Until the 1960s, the agricultural system was characterised by associations: on every farm where vines were cultivated using the double pergola system, other products such as cereals (including ancient and minor grain varieties such as barley, spelt, millet, rye, oats) and vegetables (mainly potatoes or cruciferous plants) were also planted between the rows. Another important crop, mulberry trees were a legacy of 18th- and 19th-century silkworm breeding and were dotted around the valley floor countryside (Villa, 2022). Finally, tobacco cultivation, especially in the lower Vallagarina area, was an important source of income. Maize was prevalent in some side valleys (such as the Valle del Chiese, Val di Fiemme and Valsugana). The medium and high altitudes instead saw small multifunctional farms, where alongside the cultivation of cereals, vegetables and a few fruit trees, sheep, goats and cattle were reared in small numbers in each stable. A substantial part of the land was under collective management (woods and pastures): this specific mode of autonomous governance of individual communities of modern heritage allowed to supplement family income and to have resources available for further investment, especially in the most difficult areas (Bigaran, Villa 2019).

However, there has always been a need to import vegetables and fruit from outside the province's borders. Trentino's agricultural sector has historically struggled, never achieving self-sufficiency (Villa 2019a). Historical sources reveal that from the modern era to the 20th century, the region suffered from the catastrophic effects of the Little Ice Age, including floods, frost, and pests, which severely impacted sectors like mulberry cultivation and viticulture (Villa, 2017). Additionally, the socio-political landscape played a key role in shaping the region's agricultural challenges. After the fall of the Episcopal Principality and during the Napoleonic conquest, Trentino passed under Austro-Hungarian rule, and later became part of the Kingdom of Italy after World War I. In both

cases, the region received little support from central governments, despite continuous requests from local politicians (Villa, 2019b).

Only the foundation of the Agrarian Institute of San Michele all'Adige and the work of Edmund Mach, together with the cooperative movement initiated by Don Lorenzo Guetti in the 19th century, enabled the region's agricultural sector to find alternative paths for subsistence. Over time, Trentino adopted monocultures, first linked to viticulture (Bigaran & Villa, 2022) and later to fruit cultivation in valleys like the Val di Non (Villa, 2021).

Specialised viticulture and fruit-growing became established in the 1950s and 1960s. Mechanisation, the establishment of new land leases, the diversification of family incomes and, a very important factor, the presence of the cooperative system in those years ensured a new prosperity for the agricultural segment (De Bertolini, 2014). In 1945, the unity of the Cooperazione Trentina was rebuilt and, thanks to the emergence of the Region and Province that supported cooperation, the movement flourished again. At the beginning of the new millennium, Trentino Legacoop, established to protect labour and consumer rights and consisting of 40 cooperatives and 7,500 members, merged with the Federation (Trentino Agricoltura 2013). In particular, cooperation in this area appears to play an important role in the protection of small businesses that, by uniting, manage to cope with increasing global competition. It is precisely this organisational characteristic that has made the local agricultural sector economically efficient while protecting workers' incomes. Today, there are five producer organisations: Melinda, Trentina, Sant'Orsola, Paganella and C.I.O. (Associazione Produttori Ortofrutticoli del Trentino). Around 95% of Trentino's fruit and vegetable production is managed and placed on the market by these organisations (from the Autonomous Province of Trento website), to which the 370 cooperatives in the area refer. There is also an Association of Producer Organisations with representation and coordination functions. An organisational model that profoundly grasps the

approach underlying the organisation of agricultural markets as advocated and encouraged by the EU in the Single Common Market Organisation (EU Reg. 1308/2013), and that therefore profitably succeeds in grasping its legal and economic opportunities. Producer Organisations implement so-called 'operational programmes' and benefit from EU financial aid of 50% of the costs incurred. However, if on the one hand the Trentino cooperative system is what many claim has ensured greater economic resilience for the agricultural sector even in times of crisis, on the other hand it is also often pointed out that this same system poses lock-ins to the adoption of more sustainable practices (Fonte and Cucco, 2017). In this regard, the findings of ISPRA data, which would indicate that Trentino is the second region where more pesticides are sold in Italy compared to the agricultural surface area used (ISPRA, 2018), are relevant. If the Italian national average of active ingredients sold was 4.3 kg per hectare in 2019, for the Autonomous Province of Trento, this value is 9.8 kg/ha, i.e. more than double. Cooperation, especially in agriculture, is based on the need to produce economically satisfactory results in the short term in order to avoid internal tensions between members. This has led to a progressive orientation towards a purely productivist model, centred on a competitive market paradigm, which leads to a lack of aptitude for crop differentiation, the use of alternative experimental practices and even well-known methods such as organic farming (Gios and Santuari, 2002). In other words, in traditional cooperation the mutualistic character prevails over aspects of general interest, i.e. the economic purpose (community of interests) becomes much more important than the territorial purpose (community of place) (Magnani and Osti, 2016).

The presence of a traditional cooperative system, which has partly lost its connection to original cooperative values (Forno, Maurano, & Vittori, 2019), not only seems to limit the adoption of organic farming methods but also hinders the spread of alternative food networks. These networks struggle to find appropriate marketing spaces in the area, despite the fact that, in 2010, the Province of Trento

became the first local institution in Italy to adopt a law (LP 13/2010) promoting the Solidarity Economy and Corporate Social Responsibility. Moreover, high land values and significant land fragmentation, two key characteristics of the Trentino area, create additional challenges for farmers and alternative organizations seeking to introduce changes and innovations to this system (cf. Andreola et al., 2021).

1.5 Overview Articles and Contribution of the Thesis

The four articles constituting this thesis address different but complementary aspects of sustainable food systems. Each article contributes to an insightful understanding of the challenges and opportunities involved in transforming food systems. The integration of these perspectives provides a holistic view, highlighting the interconnectedness of individual behavior, community initiatives, and institutional frameworks. By examining this interplay, the thesis underscores that sustainable food systems cannot be achieved in isolation, but requires a coordinated effort that considers the different levels. Consumer behavior influences the success of community-level initiatives; on the other hand, these initiatives can shift consumer norms and practices by making sustainable options more accessible and visible. Institutional frameworks can either support these grassroots efforts through supportive policies and regulations or impede them with restrictive measures.

For instance, urban food governance can facilitate the proliferation of AFNs by providing spaces for farmers' markets and CSAs, supporting urban agriculture, and implementing policies that favor local food procurement. This, in turn, encourages more consumers to engage in sustainable food practices, bridging the gap between intention and behavior. The literature on technological transitions and sustainability transitions (Geels, 2002; 2011) also suggests that systemic change occurs when

innovations at the niche level (e.g., AFNs) gain momentum and start to influence or replace existing regimes. This may be fostered whenever such process is significantly driven and/or supported by supportive institutional actions and frameworks.

1.5.1 Article 1: Consumer Behavior and Sustainable Food Choices

The first article – co-written with a team of researchers from the Consumption Research Norway (SIFO) research centre in Oslo, Gunnar Vittersø, Unni Kjærnes, Sabina Kuraj, Alexander Schjøll and Hanne Torjusen – is entitled ‘Conditions for sustainable food consumption. A comparative study of Europeans’ valuations of chicken meat’ and was published in the 37th volume of *Consumers and Consumption in Comparison* of the journal *Comparative Social Research* Edited by Eivind Jacobsen, Pål Strandbakken, Arne Dulsrud and Silje Elisabeth Skuland (2024).

As mentioned, consumer behavior plays an important role in shaping food systems, with growing demand for sustainable food products identified as a key driver in promoting ecological and social sustainability within food systems (Schäufele & Hamm, 2018; Vermeir & Verbeke, 2006). This demand often manifests through ethical and sustainable food choices, such as organic produce, fair trade products, and foods with high animal welfare standards, which are identified as pathways to foster more sustainable practices in agriculture and food production (Grunert, Hieke, & Wills, 2014).

However, while research indicates an increasing awareness of the ethical implications of consumers’ food choices, their actual purchasing behavior frequently fails to align with these concerns (Hughner et al., 2007). This gap, often referred to as the "attitude-behavior gap," suggests that while consumers may express a preference for sustainable options, various barriers—i.e. higher prices, limited availability, and lack of information—prevent them from acting on these preferences (Carrington, Neville, & Whitwell, 2010; Grunert et al., 2014; Vittersø et al., 2019). Additionally, the

role of trust, cultural norms, and socio-demographic factors has been highlighted as significant determinants of sustainable consumption (Ertz, Karakas, & Sarigöllü, 2016).

This article delves into the variability of consumer engagement with sustainable food choices across Europe, focusing on indirect quality attributes such as animal welfare, organic production, and origin labeling. By analyzing questionnaires data from seven European countries, this study provides empirical evidence of how different cultural, social, and institutional factors influence consumer behavior. It contributes to the literature by demonstrating that variations in consumer trust and socio-demographic characteristics lead to different patterns of ethical consumption, even within a seemingly unified regulatory environment like the European Union. This underscores the need for context-specific policies that go beyond the neoliberal emphasis on individual consumer responsibility, advocating for systemic changes that facilitate sustainable consumer choices.

1.5.2 Article 2: Bio-Cultural Diversity and Food Conventions

This article, co-authored with Stefan Wahlen, Bärbel Mahr, Francesca Forno, Gunnar Vittersø, Hanne Torjusen, and Sabina Kuraj, explores the interplay between biocultural diversity and food practices in Italy, Germany, and Norway through the lens of French conventions theory (Boltanski & Thévenot, 2006/1991). Drawing on focus group data, the study examines how cultural conventions around food, such as tradition, sustainability, and creativity, are shaped by broader concerns about natural resources and biodiversity. The analysis identifies three dominant cultural "worlds" influencing food practices: the Domestic World, rooted in tradition and personal relationships with producers; the Green World, focused on environmental sustainability; and the Inspired World, driven by creativity and innovation in food choices (Ponte, 2016).

The study reveals that while these cultural worlds coexist, tensions often arise between traditional food practices and the demands of modern, market-driven food systems (Swaffield et al., 2018). In Italy, the Domestic World predominates, with strong ties to local food traditions and family-based practices, although ethical eating is gaining influence (Andreola et al., 2021). Germany is led by the Inspired World, where participants emphasize creativity and sustainability, particularly in minimizing food waste (Forssell & Lankoski, 2017). Norway reflects a mix of the Domestic and Green Worlds, where self-sufficiency and sustainability intersect with cultural identity, though reliance on food imports poses challenges (Amilien, 2011).

By applying conventions theory, the study moves beyond simplistic categorizations of "sustainable" or "unsustainable" food practices, revealing the complex and often contradictory ways in which consumers navigate their food choices within local and global systems (Diaz-Bone, 2018). It highlights the gap between consumer preferences for local, organic products and structural barriers such as cost, availability, and reliance on imports, underscoring the need for systemic changes that go beyond individual responsibility (Vittersø et al., 2024; Thorslund & Lassen, 2017). Furthermore, the study emphasizes the role of biocultural diversity, showing that sustainable food systems are most effective when they integrate cultural traditions. Finally, it offers practical policy recommendations to align market forces with ecological and cultural values, fostering resilient and socially inclusive food systems. This paper is currently under review for *The International Journal of Sociology of Agriculture and Food*.

1.5.3 Article 3: Alternative Food Networks and Food Regime

The third article, entitled “(Un)Successful Alternatives: Bridging Practices and Regimes in Sustainable Food Networks” is a single-authored article which has been accepted for publication in *Discover Sustainability Journal*.

Alternative Food Networks (AFNs) have emerged as a response to the limitations and failures of conventional food systems, which are often criticized for their environmental impact, social inequities, and disconnection from local contexts (Goodman, DuPuis, & Goodman, 2012). AFNs, including initiatives like Community Supported Agriculture (CSA), represent efforts to create more localized, transparent, and sustainable food systems (Sonnino & Marsden, 2006). This article examines the rise and challenges of an example of AFN, using a CSA initiative as a case study, particularly in light of the disruptions caused by the COVID-19 pandemic.

The concept of AFNs is deeply rooted in the idea of social innovation, which involves new social practices aimed at meeting social needs in a better way than existing solutions (Moulaert et al., 2005). Social Practice Theory (SPT) offers a valuable lens to understand how everyday practices can evolve to integrate new norms and values associated with sustainability (Shove, Pantzar, & Watson, 2012). The Multi-Level Perspective (MLP) framework is also relevant here, as it conceptualizes transitions as the outcome of interactions between niche innovations, established regimes, and the broader landscape (Geels, 2002).

This article contributes to the understanding of AFNs by highlighting the barriers they face in sustaining their operations beyond immediate crises. Using a mixed-methods approach that integrates MLP and SPT, the study reveals the complex intersections between entrenched food system regimes and emerging niche innovations. The findings point to the need for supportive institutional frameworks and policies that can help embed these innovations into mainstream practices, thus ensuring their viability and impact in the long term.

1.5.4 Article 4: Urban Food Governance and Democratic Innovations

The fourth article, entitled “Tracing Democratic Innovations: A Longitudinal Perspective on a Food Policy Council” was co-authored with professor Francesca Forno from the University of Trento and Michela Giovannini from the Free University of Bozen and is published in the journal *Environment and Planning C: Politics and Space*.

Governance is a critical component of sustainable food systems, particularly in urban settings where food production, distribution, and consumption are concentrated. Urban food governance involves the coordination of various stakeholders, including local governments, businesses, and civil society, to create policies and initiatives that promote sustainable food systems (Sonnino, 2009). Food Policy Councils (FPCs) have emerged as innovative platforms that facilitate participatory governance, enabling diverse actors to collaborate in shaping food policies (Harper et al., 2009). This article explores how FPCs can serve as platforms for democratic innovation in urban food systems, using the Nutrire Trento initiative in Italy as a case study.

The literature on urban food governance highlights the importance of multi-stakeholder collaboration and the integration of food policies into broader urban planning agendas (Moragues-Faus & Morgan, 2015). Collaborative governance frameworks emphasize the role of participatory processes in enhancing the legitimacy and effectiveness of policy outcomes (Ansell & Gash, 2008). The Multi-Level Perspective (MLP) provides a useful framework to analyze the dynamic interplay between niche innovations like FPCs, established regimes, and broader socio-political contexts (Geels, 2011).

Through an ethnographic study of the Nutrire Trento initiative, this article illustrates how FPCs can influence sustainable food policies by bringing together diverse stakeholders. The integration of MLP with Event Structure Analysis (ESA) provides a nuanced understanding of the factors that enable or hinder the success of such initiatives. The study highlights the critical role of collaborative

governance in advancing food justice, local control, and sustainable practices, identifying key enabling conditions such as strong institutional support, inclusive participation, and adaptability to changing contexts.

1.6 Implications for Sustainable Food System Transformation

Together, these articles offer a comprehensive exploration of different levels at which food system transformations can occur: individual consumer choices, alternative food networks, and urban governance. They underscore the importance of understanding the socio-cultural, institutional, economic, and political contexts that shape sustainable food practices. This thesis argues that a multi-level approach is essential for effective food system transitions, where consumer behavior, community-based initiatives, and governance mechanisms are interlinked. The findings suggest that achieving sustainable food systems requires not only changing individual behaviors but also reconfiguring institutional frameworks and governance structures to support and sustain these changes. Furthermore, this thesis contributes to the growing literature on sustainable food transformation by providing empirical insights into the dynamics of these three levels, ma anche

The different theoretical approaches mobilized in this thesis, Conventions Theory (CT), Social Practice Theory (SPT), and the Multi-Level Perspective (MLP), should not be read as isolated frameworks applied ad hoc, but as complementary lenses that together illuminate different but interconnected dimensions of food system transformation.

Conventions Theory highlights the normative and justificatory dimension of food practices. By examining the “worlds of worth” actors invoke when evaluating what counts as good, fair, or sustainable food, CT makes visible the moral and cultural negotiations underpinning consumer

choices and collective arrangements (Boltanski & Thévenot, 2006). Social Practice Theory shifts attention to the embodied and practical dimension: the routines, materials, and competences through which food practices are enacted and potentially reconfigured in everyday life (Shove et al., 2012). The Multi-Level Perspective, finally, provides a structural and temporal scaffold, conceptualizing how niches, regimes, and landscapes interact to enable or constrain change over time (Geels, 2002; 2004; 2011).

Bringing these perspectives together allows for a more comprehensive analysis than any one of them alone. CT foregrounds the discursive and justificatory struggles that shape legitimacy; SPT uncovers the practical dynamics through which change is enacted or resisted; and MLP situates both within broader socio-technical configurations and trajectories. Together, they provide the analytical tools to understand how consumer practices, AFNs, and governance processes are shaped by cultural conventions, enacted in everyday practices, and embedded within structural contexts. Rather than a unified meta-theory, this thesis adopts a pragmatic pluralism, selecting and combining theories that, when read together, shed light on the interplay between meaning, practice, and structure in food system transformation.

By examining these interconnected dimensions, the thesis offers valuable lessons for policymakers, practitioners and scholars engaged in promoting sustainable and equitable food systems.

CHAPTER 2. CONDITIONS FOR SUSTAINABLE FOOD CONSUMPTION. A COMPARATIVE STUDY OF EUROPEANS' VALUATIONS OF CHICKEN MEAT.

Gunnar Vittersø, Mattia Andreola, Unni Kjærnes, Sabina Kuraj, Alexander Schjøll, Hanne Torjusen (2024). In *Consumers and Consumption in Comparison* (pp. 115-138). Emerald Publishing Limited.

Abstract

Presently, we are witnessing an increased public attention directed towards the negative impacts on climate and environment from food production and consumption. Policies aimed at changing consumption patterns are focused on voluntary measures, such as information and labelling schemes for consumers to make conscious choices in the market. However, such measures have proven to be of highly variable importance and only a small proportion of consumers consciously choose so-called ethical products when buying food. By a comparison of Europeans' valuations of chicken meat, we discuss the dynamics between individual processes and the social and contextual conditions for consumption changes. The study is based on national representative surveys carried out in seven European countries, and concerns peoples' valuations of indirect quality factors related to origin, animal welfare, and their relation to producer, brand and production methods (organic, breed). Overall, the engagement varies considerably across Europe as well as in the sociodemographic patterns. We ascribe this variation mainly to cultural, social and institutional differences. The article concludes that despite European harmonization of regulations and integrated markets, the consumer role is shaped quite differently depending on cultural and social structures as well as institutional configurations and trust. These contextual conditions need to be considered when formulating policies on food consumption and food system transformation.

2.1 Introduction

In light of political goals to reduce greenhouse gas emissions and stimulate more sustainable consumption patterns, there is increased public attention to the role of consumers as agents of change and how so-called ethical or political consumption can play a role in this transition (Evans et al., 2017; Kjærnes et al., 2022). Several international agreements, such as the Paris agreement on climate change, the Kunming-Montreal Global Biodiversity Framework and the UN Development Goals (SDGs), all point to the need to change production and consumption patterns. Strict policies aiming to curb GHG emissions by taxation of foods with a high carbon footprint may prove quite effective (Lykkeskov and Gjerris, 2017). Yet, with considerable political and public opposition to strict regulations, policies based on individual voluntary solutions are often preferred. Consumer-oriented environmental policy, not least in the EU, seeks to encourage individuals acting as consumers to make conscious choices in the market. Labelling schemes and information measures aimed at consumers are key policy instruments to achieve these goals (Gorton et al., 2021). They are all based on the idea of ethical or political consumers who, by ‘voting with their wallet’, can contribute to significant changes in production and consumption patterns (Micheletti, 2010; Morgan, 2010; Seyfang, 2005; Micheletti and Stolle, 2012; Jacobsen, 2017). This type of ‘soft’ measure has proven to be of limited and highly variable importance in the European market, where it turns out that only a small proportion of consumers consciously choose so-called ethical products (Grunert et al., 2014).

However, there is insufficient empirical knowledge about the conditions that promote or hinder more ethical or sustainable consumption as part of everyday practices. We address this by looking at the food quality aspects that people appreciate, particularly aspects that are not directly perceptible, but rather linked to how the food has been produced and sourced, such as organic food or animal welfare issues, in this article defined as indirect quality aspects. A comparative survey across seven

European countries seeks to improve the understanding of such processes. Using chicken meat as a concrete case, this article will take a closer look at what factors are important when purchasing food.

We ask how and why interest in environmentally sustainable purchases varies in the population of different countries and regions in Europe. A European comparison allows us to discuss the dynamics between individual opinions on consumption change and the structural and contextual conditions for such changes.

2.2 Theoretical Framework: Sustainable Food Consumption and the Consumer

The neoliberal notion of individualism and the long liberal tradition that celebrates the free market have framed choices as an expression of free will based on self-determination, and thus ascribing responsibility for actions solely to individuals (Lemke, 2001; Giesler and Veresiu, 2014). However, it is argued that individual explanatory models overlook the normative and habitual structures in which consumption practices form (Warde, 2016), as well as the specific institutional and political systems that shape these structures (Dubuisson-Quellier, 2022; Johnston and Goodman, 2015; Smith and Jehlička, 2007). Dubuisson-Quellier (2022), for instance, states that specific market technologies frame different groups of consumers and argues against the use of a generalized ideal-typical consumer model detached from its social foundations (see also Jacobsen and Dulsrud, 2007; Boström and Klintman, 2009; Terragni et al., 2009). Comparative studies have found important differences in food consumption that are attributed to institutional factors related to markets and regulations (Kjærnes et al., 2013, 2022; Veisser et al., 2008), as well as cultural conditions and features of civil society in different European countries. These differences are among others formed by local geographical, cultural, economic, and political conditions (Holm and Gronow, 2019; Amilien, 2011;

Amilien et al., 2022; Halkier et al., 2007; Kjærnes et al., 2013; Barjolle and Sylvander, 2000; Mann, 2019; Boström and Klintman, 2009).

In the Nordic countries, Niva et al. (2019) point out that: “consumers' and citizens' mobilization in sustainable consumption takes shape in the context of societal, economic and political developments on local, national and international level” and that “specific national configurations of discourses, markets and policies significantly affect what people think and do as food consumers” (Niva et al., 2019: 189). Factors, such as inequality in the social model itself (Esping-Andersen, 1990), governance traditions, and not least food culture have an impact on the engagement with food issues in the population (Thøgersen, 2010). While the food sector in the North of Europe is characterized by a greater sense of trust and consensus among actors, South and East European countries have lower trust, hence food quality and safety being of major concern in the population.

In this article, we use such social and contextual factors as an interpretative framework for analysing variations in public opinions on the importance of environmental and ethical concerns when purchasing chicken. Chicken is an everyday food item to most Europeans, but also contested in terms of safety, animal welfare, and environmental issues. Moreover, in the last 50 years, the consumption of chicken meat has increased almost three-fold. Today, chicken meat is the second most consumed type of meat in EU with an average of 25.6 kg per capita versus the 31.1 kg of pigmeat consumed per capita (Bellini, 2021). Almost 80 per cent of European consumers state that they eat chicken once a week or more often (Vittersø et al., 2022). Chicken represents a mundane product perceived by many as relatively affordable and probably less subject to social distinction compared to for instance beef. In this context chicken is particularly suitable as a proxy for food in general.

First, we explore to what extent Europeans are concerned about a range of qualities related to the origin of the product, production methods and animal welfare, the breed of the chicken, labels, and brands. We have called these indirect quality aspects.

Second, we search for social variations, and ask what are the sociodemographic and socioeconomic characteristics common to those who seek out indirect quality aspects and to what extent may such characteristics explain variations in the focus on these aspects? In accordance with an individual perspective on sustainable transitions, many studies focus on who the ‘sustainable consumers’ are, especially in terms of socioeconomic background. Those characterized as ethical consumers, similar to those emphasizing indirect aspects of food and engage in sustainable food practices, are often portrayed as well-educated upper middleclass women (Schjøll and Thorjussen, 2019; Starr, 2009; Wier et al., 2008). To what extent do our data confirm such an image?

Third, we ask how trust in information from food system actors may affect the valuation of indirect food quality aspects, as indicated by several previous comparative and national studies on trust in food (see e.g., Berg, 2014; de Jonge et al., 2008; Kjærnes et al., 2013, 2022; Murphy et al., 2021; Wu et al., 2021). Trust in food system actors affects how people orient themselves in the food market. Chicken has been subject to significant critique and distrust due to the industrialized farming practices that characterize modern broiler production. High trust may imply trust in product labels that describe some quality aspects (origin, organic, animal welfare, etc.) and brands. To the contrary, generalized trust in the food system may mean that they, as consumers, do not take labels or other indirect quality aspects into consideration when buying food, because they trust that the food products in themselves are safe and live up to high quality standards. High distrust may lead to very specific purchase strategies within or outside conventional markets – or apathy and non-involvement. We

anticipate that the different ways in which trust is important for purchases and engagement, both generally and in the market, depend on broader contextual political and cultural factors.

Fourth, to what extent is emphasis on indirect food qualities part of a broader engagement in sustainable food practices? Grunert et al. (2014) have found considerable country differences, where a general concern for sustainability issues does not necessarily translate into behaviour and the authors relate this to contextual factors on the country level. Other studies find that ‘ethical consumption’ often is ideologically motivated (e.g., engagement in environmental organizations or specific political party preferences) and connected to certain ‘lifestyles’ (e.g., engaged in other sustainability practices, dietary choices, or cooking skills) (see e.g., Holt, 1993; Boström and Klintman, 2009; Niva et al., 2014, 2019; Terragni et al., 2009; Torjusen et al., 1999; Torjusen and Vittersø, 2023; Schjøll and Thorjussen, 2019). Thus, we investigate possible links between emphasis on indirect quality aspects of chicken and engagement in food sustainability practices more generally.

In the following, we first present the data and the analytical design followed by a presentation and discussion of the results. The results are discussed in relation to previous comparative research on sustainable food consumption and trust in food emphasizing a European configuration of citizens’ engagement. The conclusion points to a complex dynamic between individual engagement and structural factors, in terms of social structures as well as institutional trust within the country context. Despite European harmonization and market globalization, European countries have characteristically different institutional configurations and interrelationships with people as consumers and the role of food in everyday life.

2.3 Methodology

Data were collected in an online survey using a web panel in June 2019 in seven European countries: France, Germany, Italy, Norway, Poland, Spain, and the UK. The survey was conducted as part of the EU Horizon 2020 project Organic-PLUS¹ and the countries represented 70 % of all EU inhabitants (including the UK) at the time of the data collection. Norway was included as the only country outside EU. Kantar Norway was responsible for data collection in all seven European countries of study, and the survey population was sampled from Kantar's web panels in each country.

Researchers from Consumption Research Norway (SIFO) were drafting the questionnaire and researchers from the countries of the study contributed to adapt the questionnaire to each national context. The questionnaire was then translated into the official language in each country, and back translated into English to secure the reliability of the translations. More about the data collection can be found in Vittersø et al. (2019).

The sample (Table 1) is representative for gender, age, and the number of people living in the household. When it comes to education and income, the sample is skewed towards the higher levels. This is a general problem with public opinion surveys and should be noticed here because people with high income and education traditionally may be more interested in environmental issues and have greater capacity to pay the price for expensive food (Martin and Schouten, 2012).

Table 1 – Sociodemographic and socioeconomic characteristics of survey respondents by country. Percent. (N=13 510).

Variable	Country							Grand total	N
	Norway	France	UK	Spain	Poland	Italy	Germany		
Women	50	51	52	53	53	53	52	51.8	8 156

¹ European Union's Horizon 2020 research and innovation program under grant agreement No. [774340].

Age Groups									
Under 30	20	17	18	13	20	13	16	16.8	2 364
30-44	25	25	26	25	28	25	22	25.1	3 538
45-59	26	25	26	29	24	28	29	26.6	3 743
60+	29	32	31	33	27	4	32	31.4	4 422
Education									
Primary school	3	2	1	3	2	3	3	2.3	355
Secondary school	16	22	34	23	44	35	22	28.3	4 398
Vocational college	16	28	25	26	9	31	47	26.2	4 077
University degree (Bachelor)	34	31	27	33	12	18	12	23.7	3 680
University degree (Master or higher)	30	16	13	13	31	13	13	18.2	2 829
Other	0	1	1	2	1	1	3	1.4	220
Income									
Low income	23	54	56	35	8	42	48	38.3	5 356
Middle income	55	39	31	56	50	32	40	43.1	6 023
High income	23	8	13	9	43	26	12	18.6	2 608
People living in									

the household									
1	25	23	19	9	9	9	28	16.5	2 264
2	42	36	35	34	29	30	39	33.9	4 644
3	14	18	20	25	27	28	17	22.4	3 070
4	14	17	17	23	21	26	12	19.4	2 657
5+	6	5	8	8	13	7	5	7.7	1 056
N	1 655	2 034	2 059	1 935	1 876	1 933	2 018		13 510

2.4 Research Design

2.4.1 The Dependent Variable

As part of the Organic-PLUS project, the questionnaire was developed to capture European citizens' views on phasing out contentious inputs in organic agriculture (Vittersø et al., 2019). In addition, we collected data on people's perception of, and commitment to, sustainable food consumption. The respondents were asked several questions about frequencies of eating different food products, food practices and purchasing habits, use of food labels, trust in food system actors and quality aspects they consider when purchasing food, including 'chicken meat'. As basis for the dependent variable, we used this question: "When buying chicken (in any form), which of the following factors are important to you?" Respondents were asked to rate from 1 'not at all important' to 5 'very important' for the following factors for chicken meat:

- Specific brand
- Specific breeds of chicken

- Price
- Animal welfare / free range production
- Organic production
- Taste
- My knowledge of the producer
- Produced in my country (Italy, Germany, Poland, UK, Norway, Spain, and France)
- Produced in my local area
- Best before date

As show in Table 2, the factor analysis revealed two dimensions. One dimension contains the direct (search and experience) quality aspects, and includes price, taste and best before date. The other dimension includes the seven indirect quality aspects. These aspects are often referred to as credence qualities, especially in marketing research, however the aspects included in this study comprise a broader range of quality issues that are not only reduced to the credence value of the product. We have, thus, introduced indirect quality as a more general term. The factor analysis formed the basis for creating one indicator on indirect quality aspects for chicken utilized as dependent variable in analyses of the research questions. An additive index was constructed to form a general measure of the extent to which respondents emphasized indirect aspects of food quality. A reliability test was carried out, calculating the Cronbach's Alpha parameter to measure the internal consistency of the battery of Likert questions, giving a result of .86.

Table 2 – Structural matrix of a factorial analysis of quality aspects considered when buying chicken meat.

Quality aspect	Component	
	1	2
Specific brand	.683	
Specific breeds of chicken	.745	
Price		.711
Animal Welfare	.710	.330
Organic production	.773	
Taste	.326	.717
My knowledge of the producer	.775	
Produced in the Country	.681	.324
Produced in my local area	.785	.300
Best before date	.370	.718

Following the strategy also adopted in Niva et al. (2014), the individual items were recoded, leaving the most extreme response categories isolated (1 'not at all important' and 5 'very important') and combining the three central response categories (2, 3, and 4). This was done to obtain a normal distribution, thus allowing the application of common regression techniques, such as multiple linear regression (MLR). A Kolmogorov-Smirnov normality test confirms the normal distribution of the dependent variable under investigation (results not shown). From a purely logical point of view, it seemed reasonable to allocate the index scores by distinguishing between those who are not at all interested in the parameters, those who have a degree of interest greater than one but less than the maximum, and those who have the maximum interest. Figure 3 shows the distribution for each

country. We use the indicator for emphasis on indirect quality aspects to answer our first research question.

2.4.2 Independent Variables

The remaining three research questions were studied using multiple linear regression (MLR), where various types of independent variables were introduced in a stepwise procedure reflecting each of these questions. Thus, five sociodemographic and socioeconomic variables, a variable on trust in food system actors, and a variable on sustainability practices were included in the analyses.

The sociodemographic and socioeconomic variables are the following: gender, age, education, income, and number of household members. Gender was coded as a binary variable where the constant is male. Age was classified into four categories at 15-year intervals (the first category includes all individuals younger than 30 years and the last includes all respondents over 60 years). Regarding education, it was measured with a five-category variable, where the categories were (1) primary school only or no education, (2) secondary school, (3) vocational college, (4) a bachelor's degree, and (5) a master's or higher university degree. Income, originally classified into 12 categories (adapted to each country), was remodelled into 3 ordinal categories: low income, middle income, and high income. The number of household members is coded from a minimum of 1 to a maximum of 25.

A trust index was constructed based on a question concerning truth-telling of various food system actors. The question was retrieved from the comparative European research study Trust in Food only modified by specifying 'organic' chicken (Kjærnes et al., 2013): "Imagining that there is a food scandal concerning salmonella in organic chicken. Do you think that the following would tell the whole truth, only tell part of the truth, or would give misleading information?", with the following options to be rated on a scale 1-3 (Give misleading information, Parts of the truth, or Whole truth):

‘press, television, and radio’, ‘the processing industry’, ‘supermarket chains’, ‘farmers or farmer organizations’, ‘consumer organizations’, ‘politicians’, ‘public food authorities’, ‘organic food labelling bodies’ and ‘independent food experts (e.g., academic/researchers)’. The index was constructed as an average of all the ratings in each country. All the institutions/actors are treated equally, meaning that the index is not weighed. In theory a country could have a high trust index if just one actor/institution has a high trust, and all others have medium trust.

As demonstrated in Figure 2, country responses reflect very similar relative ratings of the various types of actors/institutions while levels vary consistently between the countries. This justify using a non-weighted index since the relative valuation of the institutions across countries is almost the same.

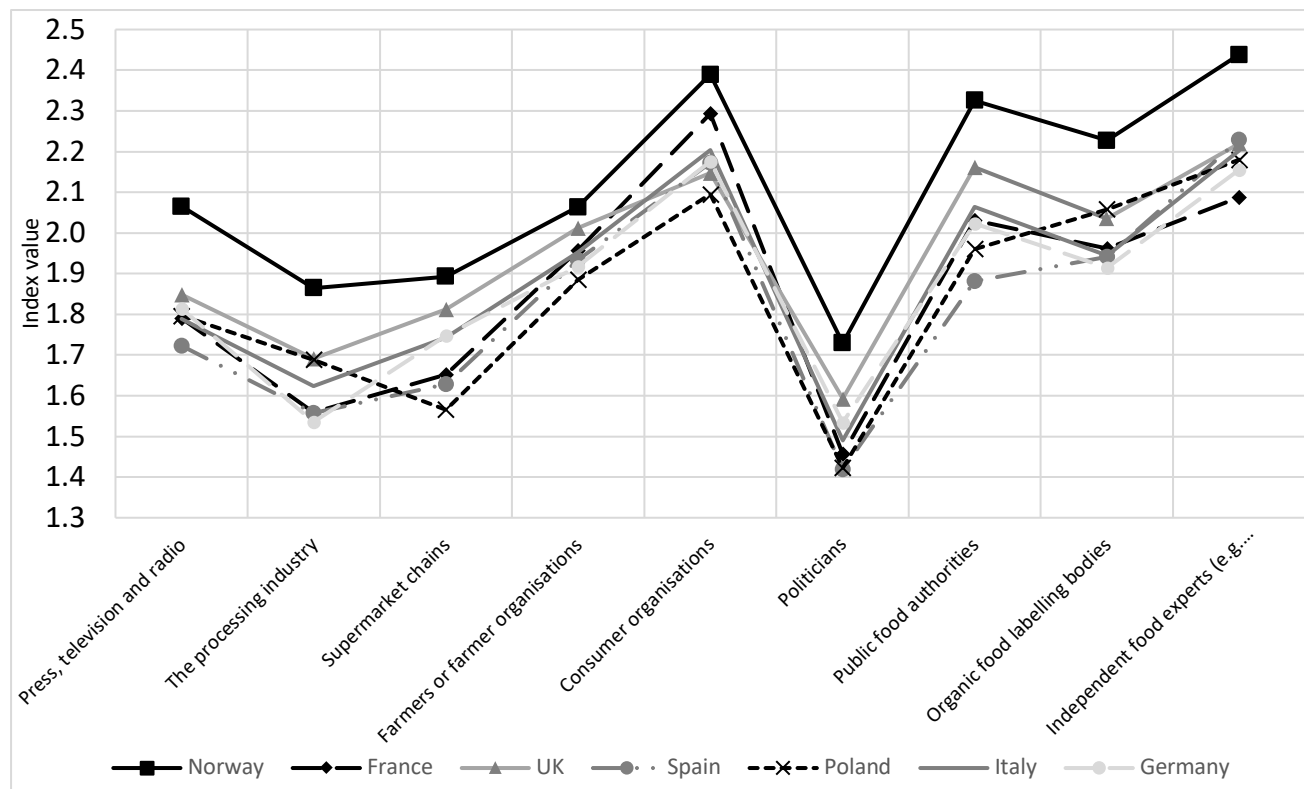


Figure 2 – From Vittersø et al. (2019): *Imagining that there is a food scandal concerning salmonella in organic chicken. Do you think that the following would tell you the whole truth, only tell part of the truth or would give misleading information?*

Regarding sustainable food practices, we asked a battery of questions previously used by Niva et al. (2014) and Tobler et al. (2011). Respondents were asked “Are you doing or planning to do the following things to reduce your environmental impact?”, with the following sub questions: ‘buy regional (local) food’, ‘avoid food products that were imported by airplane’, ‘consume only seasonal fruit and vegetables’, ‘buy organic food’ and ‘consume meat at most twice a week or a little at a time’. Four answering alternatives were given to the respondents: ‘I am doing this already’; ‘I would like to do this, and I already know how to start’; ‘I would like to do this, but I do not know how’; ‘I am not doing this’. Based on these statements an index of engagement in sustainability practices was constructed where the highest score was given to the respondents answering ‘I am doing this already’ and the lowest score were given to ‘Not doing this’. These questions, initially included in a larger battery, were selected by performing a factor analysis to ensure that they all identified the same dimension. Subsequently, a one-dimensional index was created to measure the level of engagement of the respondents' food-related sustainability practices. A high score on the index, thus, means high level of engagement.

2.5 Analysis

The effects of the independent variables on the indirect quality index were explored by means of MLR, using SPSS statistical software. We used stepwise regression. In the first model, we examined the effects of sociodemographic and socioeconomic variables (gender, age, education, income, and number of household members). In model 2 the trust index variable was included as an explanatory variable followed by the sustainability practice variable in model 3 as illustrated in Figure

2 below. Analyses were made separately for each study country to allow for different country dynamics between the various elements.

The first model was included to analyse the importance of social and demographic status (e.g. gender, education, income) for emphasis on indirect qualities. As discussed previously, the literature is somewhat divided regarding engagement in sustainability as a marker of socioeconomic and/or - demographic status. The purpose of model 2 was to investigate how trust in the food system effect interest in indirect food qualities. Based on previous research we anticipated differences between countries on the importance of trust. The introduction of sustainability practices in model 3 opened the possibility to investigate the relationship between a more general engagement in food and sustainability issues and emphasis on indirect qualities. In addition, it allowed us to examine if the associations found in model 1 and 2 changes when introducing sustainability practices into the analysis. Figure 3 indicates associations rather than causal links, all within a specific country context. The order of the MLR of variations in emphasis on indirect qualities has the following logic:

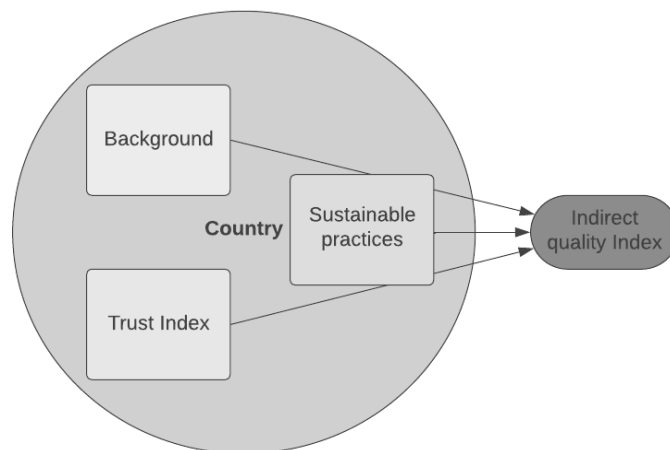


Figure 3 – Influences on public opinions on the importance of indirect qualities. An analytical model.

There were considerable variations in response patterns across Europe. Regressions were therefore run country by country (Table 3). An aggregate model was also used, with the respondents'

country of residence as a variable, to test the effects of the previous models and to see how much is determined by the contextual (policies, markets, and cultural) elements of individual countries. Detailed results of this analysis are not shown, but comments will be added where relevant.

2.6 Results and discussion

Our first question was how respondents across Europe view various indirect quality aspects when purchasing chicken. All the seven indirect quality factors were considered of less importance than the direct qualities, such as taste, best before date, and price (see Vittersø et al., 2022). However, Figure 4 shows marked differences between the indirect quality factors on average and between countries. According to the average percentage values among the seven factors, the characteristic considered most important is the origin being one's own country, considered very important by more than 4 out of 10 respondents (44%). Following this, animal welfare also appears clearly relevant, indicated as very important by almost the same number of respondents (39%). The chicken being produced locally is seen as an essential factor by almost 3 out of 10 respondents (29%). One out of four respondents emphasised organic production (25%) and knowledge of the producer (24%), respectively, as very important factors. On the other hand, aspects such as branding and the use of specific breeds seem secondary, indicated as very important by less than one in five respondents (18% and 19% respectively).

Overall, we observe that the Norwegian respondents are the most disinterested in all these characteristics. The exception is the chicken being produced in their own country, rated as very important by more respondents in Norway than in the UK. French and British respondents seem to

primarily emphasize country of origin and animal welfare. Italian respondents, on the other hand, are the most interested in all these indirect factors, apart from the use of specific breeds.

Regarding animal welfare, the figure obtained from this survey (39% of participants said they were very interested) does not differ too much from the results of the various Eurobarometer surveys (47% in 2016, latest survey on the subject which also presents data for the UK). Previously Italians have been among the European populations least interested in this aspect, however, figures from the Eurobarometer 2023 may indicate increased concern about animal welfare amongst Italians (European Commission, 2023). In our survey, the Spanish are the next most interested, after the Italians, in knowing the producer. Poles, on their part, emerge as the second population after Italians most interested in organic production. Finally, Germans appear as least distinctive, with ratings of these indirect quality aspects quite close to the average for all seven countries.

The study has found that engagement in indirect qualities as a reference for the respondents appears to be moderate. If at all important, there seems to be some consensus that the country of production of chicken is most decisive, people generally preferring chicken produced in their own country. This is in line with earlier studies (see e.g., Harju et al., 2024; Nagy et al., 2023; Fuentes et al., 2023; Thøgersen et al., 2019). People know how the system in their own country operates, while imports involve a series of unknown actors whose standards may be more uncertain. For instance, in Norway domestic chicken is viewed as safer due to less instances of foodborne diseases associated with chicken meat than in many other European countries.

Least importance is placed on brands and breeds. Conventional production of chicken is based on a few varieties of breeds in most European countries and consumers are mainly unfamiliar with the different breeds used for poultry meat (Escobedo del Bosque et al., 2021). The production process is highly standardized and with relatively little differentiation in the supermarkets. This may explain

why respondents regards brands and breeds of less importance when buying chicken meat. Relatively high importance is given to organic production and animal welfare. In the overall sample, respectively 25 and 39 percent state that this is very important. This is in accordance with earlier studies. When asked, people tend to emphasize aspects such as organic production and animal welfare to a greater extent than sales data suggests (Thøgersen, 2009, 2010). This seemingly lack of consistency between valuation and purchases may either be that people answer in accordance with what they view as socially acceptable or desirable, or that sales data do not reflect the actual demand for organic and animal welfare products. Little availability and too little information are often mentioned as important barriers towards buying these products (Grunert et al., 2014; Vittersø et al., 2019).

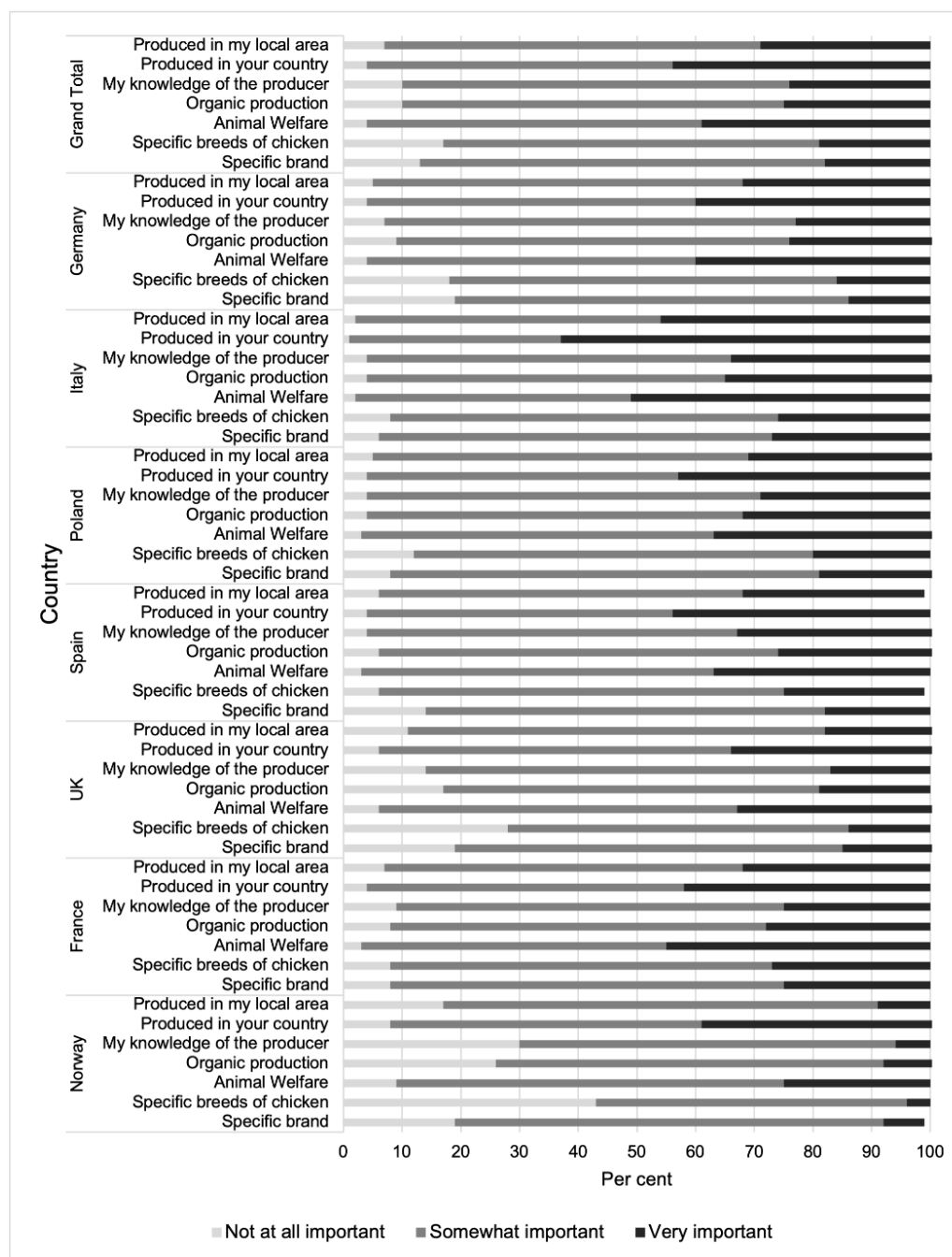


Figure 4 – Views on the importance of various indirect quality aspects by country (N = 13 421). Percent.

Our second research question concerns to what extent sociodemographic and socioeconomic factors matter for whether people emphasise indirect aspects when purchasing chicken. The findings for the first regression model (Table 3), including a range of demographic and social background variables, indicate that generally such factors matter to some, but not to a very large extent. Yet,

patterns vary considerably across the seven European countries. Socioeconomic distinctions, income, and education are most pronounced in France and the United Kingdom. This is of some importance in Poland, too, but then with a negative impact of income, meaning that lower-level income groups emphasize indirect quality more. Income matters more than education. In the overall data set, the influence of educational level is not significant (data not shown). On the country level, education is significant only in the UK. Sociodemographic background is least important in Germany and Norway, but the two countries differ in that while gender is more important in Norway, household type is decisive in Germany. In South and Eastern Europe, what seems more important is the type of household and age, perhaps indicating that this is a matter of family type and phase of life. While the constant for age is positive in these countries, indicating that interest in indirect qualities increases with age, this is more common among younger age groups in the UK. However, taken together, in all seven countries these sociodemographic and socioeconomic variables explain less than 1 percent of the variation in the dependent variable (adjusted R²). Thus, the direct effects of distinctive social background factors seem weak and highly heterogeneous across Europe.

Often, engagement in food and sustainability issues has been associated with personal resources. The conventional picture of those who take ethical (organic or animal welfare) and/or food system aspects (local or national origin or knowing the producer) into consideration when buying food, is one of well-educated women, often young or middle-aged (Schjøll and Thorjussen, 2019; Starr, 2009; Wier et al., 2008). Instead, our study finds variations across Europe in the socioeconomic patterns of engagement. At one end, there is a highly socially homogeneous pattern in Norway, while the UK, at the other end, is strongly differentiated when it comes to socioeconomic background. While, as discussed above, for the countries between these two, demographic influences, age, and household type, seem to matter more.

Research question three concerns how trust in food system actors may affect the valuation of indirect food quality aspects. In model 2, the effect of trust is statistically significant when controlled for social background factors in all but two countries, Norway, and Spain. The coefficients are positive; as the respondent's level of trust increases, so does the importance attributed to indirect factors when purchasing chicken. Introducing trust to the model does not seem to change the significance of social background factors, thus suggesting that the importance of trust in this case is not socially divided. Moreover, despite significant effects, adding the trust index does not increase the explanatory power of the model to any large extent, with some exception for France and Italy, where the adjusted R² is doubled by adding trust.

A previous study of trust in food safety found that highly diverse opinions across Europe could be linked to specific configurations and interrelationships between the various institutions and elements of the food system (Kjærnes et al., 2013). This involved market structures, regulatory arrangements, civil society, and public discourse, as well as household structures and food cultures. In broad terms, the study identified three basically different configurations that tended to dominate in different regions of Europe (to some extent also in accordance with different types of welfare states (the classical reference is Esping-Andersen, 1990). These different configurations imply different types of trust formation.

In the North, in Scandinavia, highly concentrated and standardized markets are found (Alfnes et al., 2019), closely associated with 'behind the scenes' political traditions, and a homogeneous consumer culture (Kjærnes et al., 2022). The highly generalized system trust is reflected in low involvement and activism among people as consumers as well as a consensual public discourse, with widespread beliefs that institutional actors together ensure that conditions for, for example, farm animals are acceptable, often with public authorities taking a leading role. In Norway, the food market

involves neither much product differentiation nor alternatives to standardized supermarket distribution. Consumers in the mainstream Norwegian food market therefore have limited possibilities to take distinctive quality aspects into consideration in their food practices. In Norway we find relatively low engagement and little social differentiation (Kjærnes et al., 2022). The level of trust in information from institutional actors does not matter much for their engagement.

Second, and to the contrary, most typical in the South-European countries, there is highly generalized distrust in institutional actors, who in turn appear distant and disinterested. Despite harmonized European regulations, the implementation of them is here less obvious and frequently met with suspicion. The sale of fresh food from butchers and market stalls is more important. Consumer strategies are often quite laborious, based on personal interrelations and emphasis on direct experience of quality and knowledge of origins, such as the chicken farmer (Halkier et al., 2007; Torjusen et al., 2024).

Emphasis on indirect qualities may thus follow from tradition and general distrust in societal institutions rather than representing modernization and a new trend. This kind of involvement is also associated with a family-oriented food culture (Halkier et al., 2007). The configuration and its implications seem to make sense for the interpretation of our findings especially from the Italian respondents. They are more engaged in a range of indirect quality aspects, in particular origins and familiarity. Age and household type matter for their engagement, as part of a broader set of everyday practices. In a context of generalised distrust, trust is important for their engagement. The association between engagement and trust in the model may suggest that those being engaged are more trusting.

A third type of configuration is, according to Kjærnes et al. (2013), dominated by competitive and differentiated markets, with supermarkets taking a lead position, linked to expressly market promoting, but also controversial, policies, and a consumer culture focusing on active market

participation. Trust in the various institutional actors is much more contingent upon what they do and say, as reflected even in a more contentious public discourse and collective activism. Contrary to generalized system trust, this more ‘reflexive’ type of trust/distrust refers to distinctive market strategies (e.g., product labelling), less to what the government does. In Europe and the EU, both discourse and political strategies have reflected such an understanding, closely linked to market-oriented policies with individual consumer involvement and responsibility for issues such as environmental concerns and farm animal welfare through consumer choice (European Commission, 2023).

Using this as a frame for understanding the UK findings, it may then come as no surprise that this is where we find the clearest patterns of socioeconomic differentiation. However, in France, rather than responding similarly to Italy and Spain, also has relatively distinct socioeconomic response patterns. The quality of meat is being strongly emphasized, but through (often government supported) labelling schemes (e.g., Label Rouge) rather than personal relationships. Moreover, along with a high-end quality-oriented distribution system, there is a strong, highly price-oriented market – addressing economically different market segments (Kjærnes et al., 2009). This makes the consumer role more similar to that in the UK (Plessz and Le Pape, 2019).

German respondents take a ‘middle position’ in this categorization, with emphasis on indirect qualities close to average and with few very distinctive features in the regression analyses. However, as in the South, the German engagement has the same associations with age and household type and trust does matter. Earlier studies have shown that distrust in food institutions is higher, compared to countries in the North and the West. The explanatory power of the regression model (adjusted R²) is quite good, thus suggesting that the relevance of the model is at the same level as the other countries.

Finally, the fourth research question asks to what extent is emphasis on indirect food qualities part of a broader engagement in sustainable food practices? In model 3, by including the sustainability practices, the picture changes considerably. In all countries, emphasizing indirect qualities for chicken appears to be closely associated with a more general pattern of food and household practices related to sustainability, all with levels of significance below .1%. There is, furthermore, a substantial increase in the explanatory power of the model, the adjusted R². An emphasis on indirect food quality aspects of chicken is strongly connected to sustainability practices, suggesting that this emphasis is an expression also of a broader engagement for sustainable food. This is in line with previous studies that have found a strong association between sustainable eating and purchasing practices and broader environmental concerns (see Niva et al., 2019; Tobler et al., 2011).

Turning to results for individual countries, we observe a highly complex dynamic. The influence of social background variables changes and, for most countries, becomes more significant, but with highly diverse effects (see Table 3). Starting out with Norway, the effect of gender has remained, now joined by income, when controlled for sustainable practices. Thus, taking practices into consideration reveals that engagement in indirect quality is affected by income. In Germany, the effect of social background factors seems independent, not through sustainable practices. The role of household size remains significant. The same goes for the UK, even though here with socioeconomic differentiation being most significant, plus age (negative). Even in Poland, gender (positive) and income (negative) remain significant. However, the effect of age is now nonsignificant, indicating an indirect effect of age upon giving emphasis to indirect quality, through sustainable practices. In France, however, significance patterns change. While the effect of income remains significant, gender and age now have become nonsignificant while education has become significant, suggesting a moderating effect of sustainability practices. So, gender and age mainly influence through practices. In Spain, age, and

household size remain significant, while education is nonsignificant in this model. In Italy, household composition, gender, and age have become nonsignificant by adding practices to the model. This suggests that opinions on the indirect qualities of chicken is not only embedded in more general sustainable practices but is also associated with life phase and certain types of family life. As in Poland, it is the lower-level income groups who emphasize indirect quality in Italy, with practices having a moderating effect.

While somewhat confusing, these dynamics do suggest that many effects of sociodemographic background factors are indirect, framing and shaping people's daily practices and environmental sustainability more specifically. Opinions on the importance of various indirect quality dimensions for chicken seem to develop with reference to - or embedded in - such more general patterns of practices. This influence is to some extent socially differentiated within each country, while the main variations appear when comparing different countries.

It is also worth noticing that trust in information from various institutional actors is variably affected by introducing sustainable practices to the model. In Model 3, the effect of trust on opinions on indirect qualities disappears in the UK and Germany, while being reduced, but still significant, in Poland. In France and Italy, the effect of trust remains strong and independent of sustainable practices, while in Norway and Spain opinions on indirect factors remain unaffected by trust. In other words, trust seems to be expressed through specific practices in the UK and Germany, while having an independent effect on the importance attributed to indirect qualities in France and Italy.

Based on the results of the complete regression analysis, we argue that engagement in indirect quality aspects manifest itself differently in countries and regions of Europe. This was also shown in Figure 3 where we found noteworthy variations between countries in the importance given to indirect quality aspects. For instance, as much as 46 percent of the Italian respondents answered that it is very

important that the food is produced in my local area compared to only 9 percent among the Norwegians. In the following section these national and regional variations will be further discussed.

Table 3 – Regression table on social variations in the importance given to indirect quality aspects when purchasing chicken. Linear regression. Statistical significance (<.05 p-value) in bold.

Model	Variable	Country						
		Norway	France	UK	Spain	Poland	Italy	Germany
1	Constant	11.547	13.687	13.014	14.093	13.675	15.573	13.168
	Gender	.855	.448	.042	.189	.985	.257	.287
	Education	.063	-.056	.35	-.111	.079	-.095	.081
	Income	.118	.526	.609	-.066	-.465	-.151	.185
	Age Group	.01	.193	-.432	.443	.315	.283	.151
	No. in the househ.	-.045	.113	.051	.201	.144	.146	.207
Adjusted R2		.024	.023	.09	.027	.053	.013	.013
2	Constant	11.351	11.912	11.821	13.518	12.468	13.878	12.401
	Gender	.845	.376	.076	.177	.946	.292	.27
	Education	.061	-.066	.347	-.104	.082	-.083	.079
	Income	.118	.498	.577	-.066	-.467	-.162	.17
	Age Group	.009	.178	-.434	.441	.307	.283	.156
	No. in the househ.	-.045	.088	.054	.198	.14	.136	.212
	Trust Index	.012	.123	.073	.035	.077	.096	.047
Adjusted R2		.023	.048	.099	.028	.062	.029	.016
3	Constant	7.557	9.171	7.708	9.594	9.124	10.591	9.359
	Gender	.541	.156	-.04	-.003	.565	.102	.035

	Education	-.043	-.151	.161	-.082	.077	-.094	-.027
	Income	.299	.332	.288	-.123	-.511	-.202	-.037
	Age Group	-.014	-.009	-.333	.332	.124	.099	-.03
	No. in the house.	-0,067	.113	.084	.237	.092	.089	.224
	Trust Index	.004	.067	.008	-.019	.039	.066	-.016
	Sust pract. Index	.436	.378	.522	.411	.418	.348	.430
Adjusted R2		.229	.18	.339	.179	.248	.13	.225
N		1 269	1 574	1 533	1632	1 619	1 675	1 571

2.6.1 European configurations

Based on previous comparative studies we have argued that food culture and practices follow some distinct patterns or configurations on a European level. It must be emphasized that these are schematic descriptions and country configurations are neither uniform nor static. Importantly, the European countries included in this study have many shared features, for example the increasing role of supermarket distribution and a European regulatory framework. Yet, it does make sense that Norwegians show the least emphasis on indirect food qualities, while respondents in the Mediterranean countries are the most engaged.

The systematic country variations found in this study underlines the importance of the contextual political, structural (market) and cultural differences in Europe. Perceptions of good and proper food are related to the character of the frameworks for food provisioning and purchasing decisions (Dubuisson-Quellier, 2022; Halkier et al., 2007; Kjærnes et al., 2022 and others). The survey

here confirms that it is a 'silk-curtain' (Amilien, 2011) dividing the north and south of Europe. However, Poland is, interestingly, more like the southern European countries than for instance Germany as a neighbour country. Germany is probably more regional divided with the Northern regions equal to other North- and western European countries and the southern regions more similar to the south European countries. Poland on the other hand, may represent a different type of configuration more generally, associated with other eastern European countries, where especially strong social bonds combined with informal types of food economies (local barter or self-provision) contribute to preserving cultures and social institutions (Kopczyńska, 2020; Smith and Jehlička, 2007). This might contribute to explain more similarities to the southern European patterns than to a general applicability of West- and North-European forms of sustainability.

The social dynamics in these configurations are very different. In Continental and South-European countries, emphasis on indirect qualities as well as sustainable food practices seems to be associated with particular types of households and phase of life. Being conscientious about what food to buy and eat emerges as part of establishing a family, often then maintained even later in life. The opposite pattern can be observed in the UK, where emphasis is more connected to younger generations and highly divided according to socioeconomic differentiation. In Norway, the social dynamic is much less distinctive. Yet, overall, economic resources in the household becomes more significant when the practice level is brought into the model. These varied social dynamics underline the need to also consider cultural features and the wider societal context within which it develops.

It has been suggested that there is a positive relationship between trust in food system actors and emphasizing indirect quality aspects. While not contradicting this, Boström and Klintman (2009) state that "political consumers are critical in orientation and take a critical – albeit active – stance on mainstream established domestic political institutions". They have underlined that this active and

critical consumer role emerges as part of a broader process of collective mobilization and political discourse. This seems, in our analysis, to capture the role of trust in the third configuration as represented mainly by the UK. The significance of an active, critical consumer role is illustrated by the Norwegian findings, where high institutional trust occurs together with a passive, accepting consumer role. Rather than addressing consumers, the environmental movement in Norway tends to concentrate on political decision-making. However, and importantly, we have found consumer engagement in indirect qualities within a very different societal configuration, namely the one characterized by generalised institutional distrust. Here, engagement in indirect qualities seems to be part of a wide, culturally defined concept of food quality to be ensured by more specific control of and insight into the production and provisioning of specific food items. In this study, our findings from Italy and to some extent Poland and France, indicate such a dynamic between trust and engagement in indirect qualities, embedded in everyday food practices and family life with influences going both ways between trust and engagement. This also underlines a multi-dimensionality of trust that our study, building on one question on trust, does not capture. Trust may be specific or highly generalised and build on different social and cultural mechanisms (Kjærnes et al., 2013).

Dubuisson-Quellier (2022) has analyzed how consumption is framed by subtle, differentiating market strategies and technologies applied by retail businesses. Without overlooking social variations in engagement, based on our analyses, it seems rather that these technologies are applied differently in different markets and countries. Competition on price matters everywhere, while the role and expressions of quality are highly varied. Chicken meat has become 'cheap' meat compared to other meat and fish, but may also be sold with references to its local origins, taste, treatment, etc. As for safety, indirect quality aspects may be ensured through standardized regimes or personal interrelationships.

The survey was conducted before the Covid 19 pandemic and war in Ukraine and price will probably have become a much more important issue since then.

2.7 Concluding Remarks

Environment friendly and local food and good animal welfare are “good causes” that gain wide support and, when asked, many people are concerned. However, the practical implications tend to be limited. Our study shows that when asked about buying chicken, direct factors related to food consumption and eating, such as price, taste, and "best before date", are most important.

Contrary to widespread beliefs, engagement across Europe does not seem to be tied to one specific sociodemographic or -economic group. Instead, patterns vary, with some regional commonalities. Our analyses thus underline the need to compare across different contexts, here represented by different countries, to unravel the dynamics that promote or prevent food related practices becoming more sustainable. This is in line with sociological theories of eating (Warde, 2016), which sees the choice of food and the emphasis on ethics or sustainability (indirect quality aspects) as part of a complex set of practices, influenced by and formed within broader social and cultural conditions.

Our study shows that while emphasis on indirect qualities in the purchase of chicken is characterised by a broader commitment to sustainability and food consumption, this commitment is expressed or configured differently from country to country and regions in Europe. Moreover, there seem to be a range of different venues or social processes leading to engagement in sustainable practices as concretised here by what people emphasise when purchasing chicken. For example, while such engagement seems to emerge among young, quite resourceful, but also critical, people in the

UK, interest in the ethical and sustainable aspects of chicken production among Norwegians is often not being associated with their own food related practices, instead referring to the responsibility of producers and public authorities. Yet, in both these countries, animal welfare forms a specific issue. In a country like Italy, engagement in such issues is often embedded in a comprehensive concept of good food quality, often symbolized by a specific – local – sourcing communicated via personal interrelationships (Torjusen et al., 2024). This “good food” is not just a selling argument but is closely linked to family meals and thus to family patterns.

Our study has an explorative character, referring to previous studies on national differences and regional configurations. Further studies are needed to clarify whether we should develop further types of configurations, for example a typically Eastern European and/or a Continental type (see e.g., Smith and Jehlicka, 2007). More efforts are also needed to develop a theoretical framework for systematic comparative studies to capture how practices change and how they are made to change. We see a need for methodological development, where quantitative and qualitative methods complement each other to build updated insights into the dynamic between people’s everyday practices and expectations, on the one hand, and institutional and cultural conditions, on the other. This type of analysis can provide even greater insights into the conditions that promote or hinder more ethical or sustainable consumption as part of everyday practices.

In conclusion, while this chapter provides a statistical overview of consumer orientations toward sustainable food, it also reveals the limits of attitudinal and value-based approaches. The observed tensions between environmental, economic, and social dimensions of sustainability highlight that consumer behavior cannot be understood independently from the organizational and institutional contexts in which it is embedded. This finding motivates the qualitative turn in the following chapters, which examine how these orientations are enacted, negotiated, and institutionalized within Alternative

Food Networks (Chapter 3 and 4) and participatory governance processes (Chapter 5). Thus, the quantitative analysis presented here serves as an entry point to a multi-level exploration of food system transformation that combines macro patterns with meso- and micro-level perspectives.

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CHAPTER 3. BIO-CULTURAL DIVERSITY AND GOOD FOOD CONVENTIONS: COMPARING ENGAGED EATERS IN GERMANY, ITALY AND NORWAY.

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Abstract

This paper explores tensions and conflicts between biocultural diversity and food consumption among highly invested consumers in three European countries - Italy, Germany and Norway - through the lens of French conventions theory. Analysing focus group data, we compare how cultural food conventions as fluid and negotiable frameworks are (re-) shaped by concerns about natural resources and biodiversity. We identify tensions and conflicts in ever changing cultural worlds that influence food practices: the Domestic World, rooted in tradition and personal relationships with food producers; the Green World, focused on environmental sustainability and ethical consumption; and the Inspired World, where creativity and innovation drive food choices. Our comparative analysis shows that while these cultural worlds coexist, tensions often arise between traditional food practices and the demands of modern, market-driven food systems. The Italian consumers we interviewed emphasise the Domestic World, with strong ties to local food traditions and family-based practices, although the rise of ethical eating is gaining influence. Our German respondents are led by the Inspired World, with participants emphasising creativity and sustainability, particularly in minimising food waste. Meanwhile, the Norwegian consumers represent a mix of the Domestic and Green Worlds, where self-sufficiency and sustainability intersect with cultural identity, although reliance on food imports poses significant challenges. The findings highlight that the fluidity of bio-cultural diversity – understood as the relationship between food systems, cultural traditions, and ecological

sustainability – is not only central to understanding sustainable food practices, but also crucial to managing the tensions that arise between local traditions and globalised food systems. The paper concludes with recommendations to integrate both environmental and cultural dimensions, emphasizing the need to integrate the ever changing market forces with environmental stewardship.

3.1 Introduction

The relationship between nature and culture is manifested in the way we define, produce and consume 'good food'. Understanding this fluid and culturally specific relationship is essential to promoting sustainable food systems that integrate both environmental and cultural dimensions. The concept of bio-cultural diversity emphasises the complex interdependence between biological diversity (biodiversity) and cultural diversity. It highlights the ways in which changing cultural practices, beliefs and values both shape and are shaped by the natural environment. This interplay is particularly important in the context of globalised food systems. A bio-culturally diverse food system, characterised by a wide variety of crops, species and practices, not only supports environmental sustainability and food security, but also preserves cultural traditions and practices that are essential for resilient and adaptable food systems.

This paper explores the connections between eating culturally specific foods and the natural world. A particular focus is on how engaged eaters justify their food at critical moments in the relationship between cultural conventions and natural resources. We draw on the work of Boltanski and Thévenot (2006/1991) to examine critical moments of justification, or the 'conventions' that shape social interactions, economic institutions and the governance of food systems. Their theory of conventions provides a valuable analytical framework for studying the complex and ever-changing relationships between social norms, cultural values, economic practices and the use of natural resources within food systems (Ponte 2006). Conventions theory allows for an examination of the relationship between cultural norms related to 'good food' and the broader issue of biodiversity and natural resource use. The theory is also relevant for understanding how conventions evolve over time, leading to different modes of coordination between food chain actors and collective expectations about food quality.

We analyse data from focus groups with engaged eaters involved in food initiatives to compare the cultural conventions of eating in Italy, Norway and Germany and how these engaged eaters reflect broader concerns about natural resources and biodiversity. This paper aims to compare tensions and conflicts in consumer conventions of 'good food' to explore how these conventions shape and are shaped by the biological realities of food production. For example, while traditional meals in many European countries are culturally specific and often centred around meat, recent dietary trends such as the Planetary Health Diet challenge these conventions by promoting plant-based diets. Such changes in dietary habits may also be reflected in a shift towards increased cultivation of vegetables and legumes as alternative sources of proteins.

This paper seeks to answer the following question: How do engaged eaters justify their food cultures in relation to environmental realities of food production? By undertaking a comparative analysis of cultural conventions around eating in three national contexts, we seek to gain a deeper understanding of the linkages between nature and culture. This comparison provides insights into similarities and differences across Europe, and thus a basis for future research into how food consumption can be re-imagined as a process that contributes to both cultural and biological diversity.

3.2 Theoretical Framework: Conventions Theory

To analyse how engaged eaters navigate tensions and conflicts, we draw on French convention theory, a sociological framework that explores how people coordinate and justify actions in pluralistic societies. Conventions are not static norms or personal preferences, but dynamic, context-dependent frameworks that actors invoke to make sense of situations and legitimise their actions. Central to this approach is the notion of critical moments - situations marked by uncertainty, criticism or

disagreement - in which actors are forced to justify their behaviour or assess the legitimacy of others' actions (Evans, 2011). These moments of justification bring to the fore the presence of multiple, often conflicting, orders of value or worlds. Each world offers a particular logic of evaluation rooted in historically and socially constructed values. Rather than placing these worlds in a hierarchical order, conventions theory emphasises their co-existence and interdependence. Individuals and institutions draw on different conventions depending on the situation, and this plurality creates both opportunities for coordination and sources of tension (Boltanski & Thévenot, 2006/1991; Diaz-Bone, 2010; Diaz-Bone, 2018).

This perspective is particularly useful in the context of food systems, where actors are constantly negotiating what counts as valuable, ethical or desirable food. Conventions theory has been applied to analyse how different actors justify food practices in ways that reflect and contest broader institutional dynamics. For example, Andersen (2011) shows how the distribution of organic food is regularly challenged by economic pressures or demands for efficiency. Thorslund and Lassen (2017) show how justifications for meat consumption vary depending on the context and whether animal welfare is foregrounded. Similarly, convention theory has been applied to study the transformation of food systems through alternative retail formats and food networks, including community-supported agriculture and short supply chains (Forsell & Lankoski, 2017; Forsell & Lankoski, 2018; Andreola et al., 2021; Torjusen & Vittersø, 2023).

Building on this tradition, our paper adopts the typology of seven justification worlds originally identified by Boltanski and Thévenot: the domestic, market, industrial, civic, inspired, fame and green worlds (2006/1991; Thévenot et al., 2000; Diaz-Bone, 2018, for a detailed and comparative overview see table 4 below). Each world foregrounds a particular principle of legitimacy: personal trust and tradition in the domestic world, price and competition in the market world, efficiency and

standardisation in the industrial world, fairness and collective welfare in the civic world, creativity and authenticity in the inspired world, recognition and status in the world of fame , and ecological sustainability in the green world. Other worlds have been identified but we stick to the original 6 worlds developed by Boltanski and Thévenot (2006/ 1991) plus the green world (Thévenot et al. 2000). We do not for example consider the project world developed by Boltanski and Chiapello (2005), which responds to the rise of flexible, networked capitalism. Even though this logic is increasingly relevant to food systems, the focus on contexts such as food start-ups, mobile markets and digital platforms promoting alternative eating is less relevant to our research question.

Table 4 – Overview of the seven worlds (Boltanski/Thévenot, 2007/1991; Diaz-Bone, 2018; Ermann et al., 2018; Ponte, 2016)

Worlds	Worth	Description
Inspired	Cannot be measured and is uncontrollable, spontaneous	Enlightenment, passion, creativity, uniqueness are important aspects. Self-realization through the production or consumption of food.
Domestic	Worth is relational, visible in form of (hereditary) titles, authority, trust	Important characteristics are: tradition, hierarchy, continuity, consistency, loyalty, punctuality, courtesy, craftsmanship. Personal relationship to producers leads to loyalty.
Green	People who are committed to protecting the environment and live accordingly	Environmentally friendly production methods determine the value. Products are seen as healthier and environmentally friendly, as no chemical additives are used.
Civic	Worth has disembodied collective interests (e.g. states, trade unions) and their representatives	A fair price also expresses solidarity between actors, value creation should be anchored in the region, examples: Fair trade, solidarity agriculture

Industrial	Worth through functionality, professionalism, predictability, reliability	Order through (technical) efficiency, performance, professionalism, long-term planning, standardisation of raw materials, use of preservatives
Market	Worth through wealth, purchasing power	Competition as a coordination principle, orientation on product price, increase in production volume and turnover
Fame	Worth is dependent on the opinion of others	Fame, recognition from others, creating enthusiasm, production of luxury foods, self-expression through consumption (e.g. Kobe beef)

It is important to stress that these conventions should not be understood as characteristics of fixed social groups or national cultures. Rather, they function as situational logics of justification, invoked by individuals and institutions to make sense of action and coordination. In everyday food practices, people often draw on multiple conventions simultaneously. A consumer may support organic farming for environmental reasons (green world), while at the same time being concerned about fair wages for producers (civic world) and constrained by product price (market world). This juxtaposition of justifications can lead to synergies, but also to contradictions and frictions that require negotiation or compromise (Swaffield et al., 2018; Brandl et al., 2024).

As conventions are invoked and contested, they contribute to both stabilising and transforming the food system. Each world is in part a critique of another: the green world critiques the market world for prioritising efficiency over sustainability; the domestic world critiques the industrial world for eroding local knowledge and personal ties; the civic world resists the individualism implicit in the inspired or celebrity world. It is through these critiques and tensions that new compromises emerge - or fail to emerge - in institutional arrangements and everyday food choices. In this study, we use conventions theory as a framework to analyse how individuals justify their food practices and the values they attach to what is considered 'good food'. We examine how competing or overlapping

conventions shape consumer behaviour and contribute to broader debates about sustainability, fairness and quality in the food system.

3.3 Methodology

Focus group discussions (FGDs) were used (Halkier, 2008, 2010) to explore biocultural diversity and good food conventions. The discussions aimed to explore consumers' views and tensions on their food environments. The methodology was designed to provide in-depth insights into food supply and consumption patterns in different localities, and to contribute to a comparative understanding of different food practices. The FGDs were conducted in Italy, Norway and Germany. In each country, two focus groups were conducted with between 5 and 8 participants. Recruitment began by selecting individuals involved in local food networks, followed by snowball sampling for the subsequent focus group in the same geographical area, this time including consumers not involved in collective efforts. (Table 5 Overview of focus group participants).

The choice to focus on consumers already involved in food initiatives was made to better highlight the different worlds and the tensions involved in reconciling different conventions. However, the recruitment of other types of participants secured a heterogeneity that was critical to understand the synergies and trade-offs between food conventions in different modes of food consumption in the three countries (Stamer, 2018). Most participants had above average incomes and we had more female than male participants. A standardised protocol was followed for all focus groups in the three countries to ensure consistency in data collection. The protocol provided common guidelines to structure the discussions and encourage participant engagement. Each focus group session lasted approximately two hours and was moderated by a facilitator who guided the discussion using a set of core questions designed to explore key issues such as:

- Participants' perceptions and experiences of their local food environment
- The diversity and accessibility of organic and 'good food' in their communities
- Barriers and opportunities to developing diverse, sustainable diets and food consumption practices
- The social and cultural meanings attached to food in different local contexts.

Several techniques were used to facilitate rich discussions, including the use of mapping exercises where participants were asked to visualise and describe their local food environment. Visual material was also used as participants were asked to take pictures of two themes: Their 'typical' food basket and something that represented 'good food' to them. They were instructed that these photos should not show individuals and faces for privacy reasons. Ideally, the facilitator obtained prior consent from the participants to show such photos and discuss them with the rest of the group. The use of visual materials in focus groups has also been found to be valuable in other food-related research (Halkier et al., 2017). These methods helped to ground discussions in concrete experiences and provided a basis for comparative analysis. For the purposes of this paper, we focus on one section of the protocol that included a discussion of what constitutes good food. In line with convention theory, this elicited participants' explanations and justifications of what they experienced as 'good food' (Andersen, 2011). We also included other sections where appropriate, such as discussions about what was a typical food basket/daily food for the participants, as reflections on 'good food' also appeared there.

The focus groups were audio-recorded with participants' consent, and detailed notes were taken to capture non-verbal cues and discussion dynamics. The recordings were transcribed verbatim and analysed using thematic analysis, which involved coding the data for each country to identify patterns related to food consumption and its connection to the natural environment. After initial coding, we

compared similarities and differences across focus groups and countries to understand how food consumption relates to biocultural diversity.

Table 5 – Overview Focus groups

	The starting point to recruit participants were from alternative food networks
Italy 1	Invested in food through the involvement in a community supported agriculture (CSA) group
Italy 2	Snowball (acquaintances from the CSA group)
Norway 1	Invested in food through the involvement in a CSA group
Norway 2	Snowball (acquaintances from the CSA group)
Germany 1	Urban group of consumers interested in food being involved in a food policy council
Germany 2	Rural group that is active in the country woman association

3.4 Findings: Comparing Conventions of Bio-Cultural Diversity

In the results section, we elaborate on the three most prominent worlds that emerged from the focus groups in Germany, Italy and Norway, each reflecting different cultural conventions about 'good food'. While directly addressing broad issues such as resource use, ethical considerations and individual consumption practices, and touching on different aspects such as community, tradition, sustainability, creativity and reducing food waste, we will highlight the connection between these issues and biocultural diversity. A more detailed discussion follows in the 'Discussion' section.

3.4.1 Germany

In the German focus groups, participants articulated notions of 'good food' that were shaped by creativity, environmental awareness and tradition. Three justification worlds were most prominent: the Inspired World, the Domestic World and the Green World. These worlds often overlapped, but also revealed tensions between aspirations and constraints, between ideals and everyday compromises. Participants' reflections suggest that food practices in Germany are shaped by a strong desire for innovation and sustainability, but tempered by infrastructural, economic and social realities.

The Inspired World emerged as particularly central. Participants often framed good food as a matter of creativity, improvisation and personal fulfilment. Using leftovers, for example, was seen not only as an act of resourcefulness but also as a creative challenge: "*It's possible to make very tasty dishes out of leftovers that you might not have thought of otherwise*" (P1.3). These practices resonate with broader concerns about food waste and sustainability, but also highlight the role of aesthetic pleasure and autonomy in everyday food practices.

Creativity also allowed participants to navigate tensions between their ideals and everyday pressures. One participant described a typical Saturday night: lounging on the sofa with snacks and sweets, acknowledging the joy and indulgence of the moment despite its distance from more considered food values. "*For me, that's part of good food, just once in a while*" (P1.1). This illustrates how the Inspired World can act as a release valve when other conventions - particularly those related to sustainability or domestic effort - become too constraining.



Figure 5 – occasional 'good food' (P1.1)

In addition, creative practices were often gendered and context-specific. For example, some participants described engaging in elaborate meal preparation for family or guests, while at other times relying on convenience foods or simplified routines. These moments show how the Inspired World can act as a reconciling force, allowing participants to navigate conflicting values without abandoning them.

The domestic world featured prominently, often linked to practices of home cooking, preservation and relationships with trusted producers. Participants valued the ability to control food quality and ingredients: "*I can do a lot myself and know what is in it*" (P1.5). Activities such as baking bread from home-ground flour or growing vegetables in the garden reinforced a sense of agency and craftsmanship.

These practices were not only about personal satisfaction, but also about maintaining food traditions that carry emotional and historical weight. For example, participants described making soups with organic chicken sourced from trusted farmers, echoing past family routines while integrating contemporary ethical considerations. The domestic world in Germany was thus strongly

anchored in trust, care and control, although it was often in tension with the industrial and market systems that dominate food provision.

In some cases, the domestic world revealed interpersonal tensions. For example, one woman negotiated her vegetarian tendencies with her husband's more meat-centred expectations, rooted in his upbringing in a butcher's household. Such moments illustrate how personal relationships and gender dynamics shape food practices, and how domestic norms can both support and constrain change.



Figure 6 – The 'best' food – selfgrown from the garden (P2.3)

The Green World was also prominent, particularly in relation to eating seasonally, reducing food waste and favouring local, organic produce. Participants showed a strong awareness of the environmental impact of their food choices and tried to manage their consumption accordingly. Avoiding imported goods such as avocados or bananas, preferring cosmetically imperfect vegetables and preserving seasonal fruit were all seen as acts of environmental responsibility.

However, tensions within the Green World often surfaced. For example, some participants debated whether it was more sustainable to eat locally produced and stored apples or imported organic ones. Others highlighted the energy costs of refrigerating local produce. These reflections show that acting according to green values requires complex judgements and negotiations, especially when infrastructure, availability and transparency are lacking.

One participant remarked: "*I always try to buy organic, but if there are only organic apples from New Zealand and the conventional ones are from Germany, then I prefer to take the German apples*" (P1.1). Here, environmental values (transport emissions) trump organic certification, but the lack of clear information about origin, storage or production makes such decisions difficult. These tensions show that food choices are rarely pure expressions of a single convention, but are situated, strategic and sometimes contradictory.

Participants also discussed the challenge of reconciling green values with living conditions. Long working hours, limited access to markets or the need to travel to certain stores limited their ability to shop in line with ecological ideals. One participant explained: "*Sometimes I don't have the time or the capacity to go to the farmer's market... Then I just go to EDEKA and buy the pre-packed organic tomatoes*" (P1.1). Infrastructural and logistical constraints - often linked to wider patterns of industrial food systems - make it difficult to fully realise green commitments.

The German discussions also revealed tensions between the worlds, as well as within them. Participants often had to reconcile inspired pleasure with environmental guilt, or domestic traditions with civic or green ideals. For example, one participant, once a passionate fish eater, now avoids seafood because of concerns about radiation and contamination, switching to local trout when possible, a compromise that balances inspired enjoyment with environmental caution and domestic confidence.



Figure 7 – Food sharing collection from a farmers' market (P1.1)

Another recurring pattern was the way participants 'ranked' their values contextually, choosing between organic and local depending on the product, or prioritizing less packaging over lower transport emissions. These practices were often described in terms of 'rules of thumb' or flexible strategies rather than fixed principles, revealing a pragmatic orientation towards ethical eating.

Crucially, the Inspired World often served to resolve tensions. Creativity in food preparation, baking with local grains or experimenting with preservation techniques allowed participants to integrate green and home values in new, personally meaningful ways. The joy of creating something from scratch often bridged the gap between tradition and innovation, or between sustainability and convenience.

3.4.2 Italy

In the Italian focus groups a significant proportion of the statements can be categorised as belonging to the Domestic World. Participants emphasised trust, personal relationships, tradition and the authenticity of local and handmade products. One participant remarked: "*Good products are those where you know the producers, like the meat from Anege Taneghe (CSA producer)*" (P1.3). Another

participant stressed the importance of simplicity, trust and local control in homemade food: "*For me, good food is dough, essential without salt. I make about three kilos of bread a week and I also make pizza. I like to make my own dough. I trust others, but I prefer to check when it suits me (...) Simple food is the best*". (P1.4).

Selective buying habits, rooted in family traditions and direct relationships with producers, were also highlighted: "*I would start with arrosticini; I don't eat much meat, but for an Abruzzese, they are inevitable. When I go south, there's always an arrosticini moment... My family is very selective, even if unconsciously, when it comes to food. My grandparents are also very careful about what they buy, although they are not so conscious in the 'modern' sense. They don't just go to the supermarket, they prefer certain producers who are known for their farming methods*" (P1.2).



Figure 8 – Memories of good food: arrosticini (P1.2)

These reflections underscore a deep attachment to food practices grounded in familial continuity and producer familiarity—hallmarks of the Domestic World—while also expressing a critical distance from the logics of impersonal, standardized, or celebrity-endorsed consumption, typical of the Industrial and Fame Worlds.

Conviviality emerged as a recurring theme across the focus groups. One participant highlighted the communal dimension of good food, stating: "*For me, good food is food that is eaten together [...]*

For me, good food is paying more attention to care, to local products... so for me, good food has an aspect of community and sharing that is inescapable and that goes beyond eating good things" (P1.7).

Similarly, another participant reflected: *"...good food in the sense of being together with all my friends. It was very nice; we prepared things together" (P2.4).*



Figure 9 – Conviviality (P1.7)

Meat often features in these convivial moments, though its ethical implications are not ignored. As one participant acknowledged: *"The barbecue is unfortunately something that is done from time to time. We know it is ethically questionable, but it is always a moment of gathering" (P1.1).*

These narratives reflect a powerful intertwining of the Domestic World, where food is tied to tradition, family practices, and interpersonal trust, and the Civic World, which values collective well-being and the social dimension of food. Shared meals and collective preparation are not merely acts of nourishment but expressions of community care and social cohesion. At the same time, these practices bring participants into a zone of moral and political ambivalence: convivial traditions involving meat consumption sit uneasily with the ethical and ecological concerns associated with the Green World, as well as with the standardized, efficiency-driven logic of the Industrial World. Thus, conviviality becomes a space of both affirmation and tension—where meaningful social bonds are forged, but also where contradictions between values are negotiated.

Some participants' statements reflect the Inspired World, emphasising creativity, passion and an appreciation of the culinary arts. One participant shared: *"My partner and I are both into food and wine. We both believe that money well spent is money well spent on food and so we often indulge in going out and we prefer to go out less often but to good places"* (P1.2). Another participant echoed this sentiment, expressing a love of discovering unique dining experiences (P1.1).



Figure 10 – Slow Food dish (P1.1)

This passion for culinary discovery extends beyond prestige dining. One participant conveyed the excitement of exploring vegan cuisine: *"Right now, for me, good food is vegan food: (...) there's always a lot of new flavours to discover and it makes me feel good from so many points of view, both ethically and in terms of taste..."* (P1.6). Another described the satisfaction of cultivating her own food and preparing meals with it, illustrating a personal and creative connection to nature: *"This is my newly planted vegetable garden. For me, good food comes from here because I'm lucky to have a garden. I like to show the children the tomatoes hidden under the leaves (...). In summer, it's wonderful to come home for lunch and pick cherry tomatoes and cucumbers for a fresh salad. It gives me great satisfaction"*. (P2.3).

Taken together, these accounts highlight the Inspired World's emphasis on culinary exploration, aesthetic pleasure, and the joy of creating and experiencing exceptional food. This world values food not only as sustenance but as an expressive and transformative practice. In some cases, such as prestige

dining, this aligns with the World of Fame, where recognition and exclusivity are central. In others, such as home gardening or foraging, the Inspired World runs counter to the values of social distinction, aligning more closely with simplicity and local embeddedness. These practices often challenge the Industrial World, resisting standardized, efficiency-driven food systems in favor of slow, intentional, and sensory-rich alternatives.

Some narratives also strongly reflect the Green World, where sustainability, naturalness, and an ecological ethos are paramount. One participant emphasized his commitment to untreated, seasonal produce: *"First of all, for me, good food is synonymous with natural, which means that food doesn't have any kind of treatment: it comes as nature creates it! These are my apples, for example: they're small because I don't use any kind of external input [...] We're used to eating pulses at least one, two, three times a week, either as a substitute or even as a supplement... lentils, beans, chickpeas"* (P2.5).

His dietary choices, including the regular consumption of legumes, further illustrate sustainable eating practices. Another informant illustrates a personal connection to nature through her foraging activities in the alpine pastures, where she picks herbs for cooking: *"I like to pick herbs when I find them, so especially in this season I always go to the alpine pasture to pick herbs and cook them. I usually make omelettes with the famous 'happy eggs' or gnocchi. Maybe because I've picked them, because I know where they come from, because it's also a satisfaction... the time it takes... I should say that I never throw them away... In fact, when I harvest, even if I am invited to a pizza, I stay home because I have to eat my herbs"* (P2.1).

Her careful use of ethically sourced ingredients and her practice of preserving what she gathers point to a respectful and circular approach to food, rooted in both ecological awareness and traditional know-how.

Overall, the Italian focus group participants strongly express the values of the Domestic World: tradition, family ties, and trust-based relationships with local producers. Homemade foods, regionally rooted specialties, and selective buying based on long-standing habits are all central. Conviviality further reinforces this orientation, linking food to moments of togetherness and care, while also surfacing ethical reflections on meat consumption.

At the same time, other worlds coexist and complicate this picture. The Inspired World brings in notions of creativity, experimentation, and sensory pleasure; the Green World foregrounds sustainability and ecological responsibility; the Civic World appears in practices of sharing and collective responsibility; the World of Fame emerges in aspirations for prestige dining; and the Industrial World is present as a foil, representing what participants often resist in their everyday choices.

These overlapping perspectives reveal the complex negotiations people undertake in defining good food today. They show how ethical, aesthetic, and relational dimensions intertwine, producing a multifaceted food culture where tradition and innovation, sustainability and pleasure, personal ethics and social ties are continuously in dialogue. In this way, Italian participants engage with contemporary food challenges not as passive consumers, but as situated actors navigating a diverse and often contradictory moral landscape, one shaped as much by bio-cultural heritage as by evolving values and new possibilities.

3.4.3 Norway

In the Norwegian focus groups, statements related to the Domestic, Green and Inspired worlds were central to how participants defined 'good food', with a strong emphasis on self-sufficiency, foraging and locally produced food (domestic), sustainability and environmental protection (green)

and learning new cooking skills, experimenting with different types of food, and creating aesthetic dishes and table settings (inspired).

Conventions relating to the domestic world were often justified by food safety and quality, for example when participants discussed the importance of knowing where their food come from, with one participant stating: "*Good basic ingredients that I know the origin of and preferably something we made ourselves*" (P1.1).

Other stories of ‘good food’ related to origin also included the enjoyment of being outdoors and eating: "*There is a photo of a cup of coffee and blackberries (...) Because I have picked them myself in the garden and walked around picking and eating them just the way that they are with a cup of coffee and enjoyed myself. (...) when it comes from one’s own garden, to me that is absolutely fantastic. Then it tastes even better.*" (P.2.1)

In addition, simple cooking with pure Norwegian ingredients were also highlighted by this participant:

"Here, I have simply cooked pork meat – Norwegian pork meat, asparagus beans, carrots and bell pepper in a wok. (...) To me, this is something of the best I can eat. Pure ingredients, meat from Norway, some vegetables which are also produced in Norway if possible." (P2.1)



Figure 11 – Origin. Wok with Norwegian ingredients

All three statements emphasise the value of knowing the origin of food, or even better, self-made products and pure ingredients preferably eaten outdoors. The last participant regretted that Norwegian vegetables are hard to get hold of, especially in the winter season and reflects a notion that domestically produced food has a better quality, especially regarding food safety, than imported food. These quotes reveals a tension between a need to ensure safe and good quality food for the family (domestic world) and a dissatisfaction or even distrust with the foods they find in ordinary retail stores (market world). These quotes strongly mimic the public discourse in Norway, also influenced by the food and agricultural policy, that depicts Norwegian agriculture production as more safe, natural and environmental friendly.

However, family care (domestic) does not only relate to the quality or safety aspects of the food but also to the social dimension of sharing meals, especially in families with children. In some situations, tensions between these social dimensions and conventions related to healthy or nutritious food occurred. One of the participants in the second focus group shared a picture of a dish with only white rice and no other side dishes like fish, meat or vegetables. She explained why this was good food to her in this particular context: *“That one [photograph] down to the right. It's just... well, it's rice. We were at "Sabrura" (a restaurant) and had sushi. And then our oldest asked to get some rice,*

because she wanted rice and soy sauce.” (P2.2) “Did she get some rice?” (P2.3) “She got some rice, yes. (...) I said a little, because she doesn't eat that much, but they brought that [a large portion], so.” (P2.2)

The valuation of a dish of rice as good food opposes the conventional notion of a proper meal including a variety of ingredients such as vegetables, fish or meat. It exemplifies the tensions in everyday life between moral norms of family care, in this case inclusion of children in a family gathering at a restaurant, belonging to the domestic world and other values such as health belonging to the civic world.



Figure 12 – Close to nature. Foraging a quality in itself (P1.5)

However, the Green World played a significant role, especially among the participants from the CSA. For them organic food was strongly associated with good food and in opposition to conventional food grown with harmful chemicals (Industrial World). *“It is organic that matters to us, we rarely buy anything else”* (P1.4). Gathering food from the garden or directly from nature was also highly valued in both groups, exemplified by a participant who brought a photo of mushrooms she had picked in the forest: *“...I wanted to illustrate that foraging, that is a quality in itself.”* (P1.5)

However, tensions arose between the ideals of the Green World and the realities of the Norwegian food system. One participant from the CSA-group who was highly invested in organic

food, both as a consumer and a producer, described how she found it hard to stick to only buying organic apples from the local grocery store at winter time, when they had run out of their own apples. She revealed that she actually preferred the taste and texture of one of the several apple varieties that were available from conventional production [Pink Lady], compared with the single variety that was available from organic production. Her favourite apple variety is ‘Gravenstein’: “*when that [variety] arrives, then that is the best one*”. However, at winter-time there is often only one organic variety available, which is not to her liking: “*six such apples in that package – organic, but they're not that pretty and they're not that good (laughter) really.*” And then she sometimes resorts to buying conventionally grown apples: “*It's absolutely terrible, but (...) I have a soft spot for Pink Lady (laughter). It's just so good, and it's so fresh, and it's ..(...) I don't know where they come from.*” (P1.3)

This dilemma is created by the limited diversity of organic apples in the retail assortment (Industrial), and her occasional buying of conventional apples is in opposition to her expressed sustainability values (Green). Norway's reliance on imported food, particularly during the winter months, was a source of frustration for participants who wanted to support organic food and local food systems but found it difficult to do so consistently.

Synergies and tensions between worlds contributed to both enhancement and neglect of bio-cultural diversity. One example is the Ringerike potato, a variety grown in the local district for more than 150 years. For many the potato is “a must” in traditional dishes and especially popular around the Christmas season, thus, relating not only to the domestic, but also to the World of Fame. However, the Ringerike potato, and other local food products as well as organic food products were in general hard to find due to standardization of the assortment of fruit and vegetables in the retail chains (Industrial and Market Worlds).

The Inspired World was also present in the Norwegian focus groups. Participants expressed enjoyment in learning new cooking skills and experimenting with different types of food, especially when these practices were linked to sustainability. One participant described how he had started baking flat bread at home with his wife, explaining that this had become a rewarding shared activity which was *‘more enjoyable than watching Netflix’* (P2.3).

“We have started baking flatbread ourselves. (...) It beats Netflix and whatever it may be a hundred times, that is. It’s so much more fun. So, we have a joint session, yes, about every three months, where we bake a double portion. It takes two hours to bake” (P2.3).

This reflects the personal fulfilment that many participants derived from engaging with food in creative and sustainable ways, where the process of making food was as important as the food itself. The change of starting baking home-made flatbread was motivated by dissatisfaction with the flatbread he used to buy [Røros flatbrød] from the regular food store. He described how he could sense that something had changed, referring to the taste and texture, and speculated that there had been a change in baking method. Baking in his own kitchen, he sourced organically grown heritage grain (spelt, wholemeal), processed at a local mill [Sigdal Mølle: farmer-owned, craftsmanship, small-scale], and utilised a traditional baking method [takke]. This shift from buying a relatively standardized flatbread in the ordinary food store (Industrial World), to making it at home with artisanal flour produced and milled by someone he knew about (Domestic World) had also resulted in a new food habit that resonated with multiple values that he had described as important to him: Joy and creativity from the baking, and joy of eating the desired quality of flatbread [Inspired], organic production, contribution to biodiversity by heritage grain, local distribution [Green], as well as providing his household with a product suitable for a number of traditional food dishes, and supporting his priority of eating healthy. This experience resembles some of the Italian and German examples

above where creativity belonging to the inspired world “dissolve” tensions, in this case between domestic and green conventions on the one hand and market and industrial conventions on the other hand, that subsequently were leading to new, transformative food practices.



Figure 13 – Good food inspiration: Home-made flat bread (P2.3)

The overlap between the Domestic, Green and Inspired worlds was particularly evident in how participants talked about food practices that combined elements of all three worlds. For example, several participants described how they foraged for herbs or berries and then used these ingredients to create new, innovative dishes at home. This combination of sustainability, creativity and personal responsibility illustrates how food practices in the Norwegian focus groups were shaped by multiple cultural conventions that often intersected in complex ways. However, tensions between these ideals and the realities of the Norwegian food market, in particular how imports often displace domestically produced vegetables and fruit, create challenges for consumers seeking to maintain sustainable food practices.

3.5 Discussion

When analysed through convention theory, the exploration of specific interpretations of 'good food' in Italy, Germany, and Norway reveals similarities and differences. All three countries emphasize the same dominant worlds - domestic, inspired, and green - but their meanings and interpretations diverge, reflecting different cultural and contextual nuances. This comparative discussion will explore these differences and offer insights into how focus group participants in Italy, Germany, and Norway reconcile their food values and practices within their broader food landscapes.

3.5.1 Domestic World

The domestic world significantly influences the perception of "good food" in focus groups in Italy, Germany and Norway, although its influence varies from country to country. Among participants in Italy and Norway, the domestic world was crucial, while in Germany the inspired world was more central. In all three countries, there was a common appreciation for local products, tradition and craftsmanship. Participants expressed a common preference for handmade and locally produced food, reflecting a deep respect for authenticity and a personal connection to producers. In Italy, this connection often evoked a strong sense of home and regional identity, with traditional food practices linked, often unconsciously, to sustainability, such as the appreciation and preservation of traditional varieties. This demonstrates the intertwining of cultural traditions and environmental sustainability. The focus on dishes such as arrostitini was accompanied by a commitment to ingredient selection and building trust with local traders and producers, reflecting this commitment to cultural values and natural resources. This was in contrast to German participants' descriptions of how "new dishes" emerged from the practice of using leftovers, which emphasizes the value of resourcefulness over making dishes that require specific ingredients. Germany, on the other hand, emphasises trust in producers and the quality of products rather than regional identity. A common feature is the value placed on personal contact with producers, where 'good products are those you know'.

Food habits showed significant differences. In Norway, the emphasis was on growing one's own food, reflecting a connection to nature and self-sufficiency. In Germany, although some participants grow their own food, this practice was less central to the household. In Italy, there was less emphasis on own production and more on traditional and local foods, with meat remaining central to many dishes, although veganism is becoming more popular due to contemporary values and environmental concerns. Health considerations also vary. In Germany, some emphasis was placed on the relationship between food and well-being. This focus was less pronounced in Italy and Norway. In Italy, food was more about conviviality, tradition and authenticity, reflecting cultural values and shared experiences rather than health concerns. In Norway, on the other hand, the participants prioritised the emotional and family aspects of food, where food should ideally have high nutritional value while meeting the expectations and food preferences of children. Home cooking was a crucial aspect of the domestic world as it provides control over ingredients and a sense of security and trust, which seems to be relevant in the German cases. In Italy, simplicity was emphasized, with a focus on traditional, authentic dishes.

3.5.2 Inspired World

The Inspired World, characterised by creativity, passion and appreciation for the culinary arts, played a different role in each country. It is most dominant in Germany, significant in Norway, and present to a lesser extent in Italy, where the Domestic World predominates. In both Germany and Italy, personal preparation, creativity and cooking skills were central, with an emphasis on homemade food using home-grown or local ingredients. In Germany, however, the creativity of the Inspired World was closely linked to sustainability, with participants frequently mentioning the use of leftovers and second-rate ingredients to create good meals. This sustainable practice is a unique feature of the Inspired World, where ingenuity was not only about cooking well, but doing so in a way that

minimizes waste. In Italy, the Inspired World extended beyond the domestic sphere to dining out, with participants also exploring new restaurants and different cuisines as part of their definition of good food. This emphasis on dining out and culinary exploration was less pronounced in Germany, where the focus remains on the home kitchen. The Italian respondents' enthusiasm for preparing meals and discovering unique dining experiences reflected a broader concept of the Inspired World, which encompasses both the home and external food environments.

Conviviality and eating together with family and friends was another common characteristic of the Inspired World in Germany and Italy. In both countries, preparing and sharing food was closely associated with notions of caring, community and celebration. This sense of togetherness reinforces the perception of food as "good". It highlights how culinary inspiration is not limited to the food itself, but extends to the social and relational aspects of eating. In Italy, however, this connection to conviviality was often coded within the domestic world, indicating the fluidity between these two conventions. The Norwegian focus groups stand out by mentioning that learning new cooking skills increases participants' self-confidence and makes cooking more enjoyable. This emphasis on self-improvement and personal growth was less prevalent in Germany and Italy, where the Inspired World focused on creativity and enjoyment rather than skill building.

There was a notable connection between the Inspired and Domestic Worlds in Germany and Italy, as participants used homemade or locally sourced ingredients to create dishes that are both innovative and rooted in tradition. This connection was particularly evident in Italy, where participants enjoyed exploring new culinary techniques while maintaining a strong connection to their roots. Special diets also showed enthusiasm within the Inspired World. In Germany, participants were interested in meatless or vegan diets, reflecting a passion for discovering new flavors and health-conscious eating. Similarly, in Italy, vegan cuisine is a growing trend, with participants expressing

excitement about exploring new plant-based flavors and ethical considerations. These dietary preferences demonstrate the Inspired World's openness to new ideas and its role in pushing the boundaries of traditional food practices.

3.5.3 *Green World*

The Green World, characterised by environmental awareness, sustainability and a deep connection to nature, is the least prominent of the three primary worlds. However, despite its relatively minor role, it still has significant meaning in all three countries, with participants associating good food with sustainability, naturalness, and environmentally responsible practices (see also Vittersø, et al., 2024). All three countries share a strong emphasis on environmental awareness and sustainability in food choices. In Italy, this is reflected in a preference for untreated, seasonal and ethically produced foods. The emphasis on natural, untreated apples or ingredients with minimal external inputs illustrates the importance of sustainable and natural products among Italian participants. In Norway and Germany, organic foods are highlighted, reflecting a shared commitment to environmentally friendly agricultural practices among focus group participants in these countries. This focus on sustainable food consumption indicates a growing concern about the environmental impact of food production. German participants' avoidance of imported foods, such as bananas and avocados, highlights their desire to reduce the environmental impact of long-distance food transportation. This connection between sustainability and food waste reduction is distinct from the practices in Italy where this concern is less prominent. Integrating environmental awareness with social responsibility in Germany adds a civic dimension to the Green World, showing how environmental concerns can be intertwined with solidarity for producers and less fortunate people.

In Italy, the Green World is connected to nature through activities such as foraging for herbs and making homemade preserves, reflecting participants' deep connection to the environment, where

a sense of satisfaction comes from gathering and preserving food directly from the land. This connection to nature is less explicitly discussed in Germany, although some participants mention preserving home-grown food or using food obtained through food-sharing initiatives. In Norway, the green world is also closely associated with nature, expressed through activities such as picking berries, mushrooms and hunting. Involvement with nature seems to revolve around the practical relationship between land and food, although less explicitly than in Italy. Avoiding food waste is a central theme in Germany and Norway, where participants emphasise the importance of minimising waste as part of their sustainable food practices. This is particularly pronounced in Germany, where creative approaches to reducing food waste are a key element of the Green World. Practices such as food sharing, cooking with leftovers, and adopting second-class food are prominent ways in which German participants align their food practices with environmental sustainability. This is further linked to the Civic World where environmental and social responsibility intersect, particularly in initiatives such as food sharing that combine waste reduction with civic engagement. Animal welfare emerges as aspect of the Green World in Norway. Norwegian participants emphasise caring for animals, reflecting a broader concern for animal welfare that participants in Germany or Italy do not explicitly mention. This focus may suggest that in the Norwegian focus groups, the Green World encompasses a more comprehensive ethical consideration that includes treating animals as part of the broader ecosystem.

3.5.4 Navigating tensions: balancing tradition, innovation, and sustainability in contemporary food practices

Across the three national contexts, food practices are shaped not only by cultural preferences or ethical commitments, but also by the tensions that arise when different justification logics intersect. These tensions are not personal inconsistencies, but reflect the plurality of conventions within which

food choices are made. Convention theory helps us to understand these frictions as conflicts between orders of value - between the value of local tradition (Domestic World), the imperative of ecological responsibility (Green World), and the desire for creativity and pleasure (Inspired World), all under pressure from market and industrial logics.

Participants often encounter situations where one world criticises or undermines another. In Germany, for example, the Green World's call for seasonal and organic food is challenged by infrastructural constraints shaped by the Industrial and Market Worlds: supermarket routines, packaging norms and time constraints. In Italy, reverence for tradition and taste (Domestic World) sometimes conflicts with ecological ideals when local products are not produced sustainably. In Norway, participants struggle to reconcile civic or environmental concerns with social norms around meat or convenience, demonstrating that conventions are not just external structures but internalised repertoires that are negotiated in everyday life.

One of the most striking findings is how the Inspired World often mediates these tensions. Creativity and personal fulfilment allow participants to resolve contradictions - whether by making something from leftovers, preserving home-grown produce, or finding satisfaction in occasional indulgences that deviate from strict sustainability norms. The Inspired World thus plays a strategic role in bridging worlds that might otherwise seem incompatible, offering a form of resolution that is flexible and emotionally resonant.

However, tensions are not always resolved. Participants often articulate ambivalence, where no convention fully satisfies the competing demands of ethics, tradition, practicality and pleasure. Rather than seeing these compromises as failures, convention theory invites us to see them as critical moments that expose the limits of existing food systems. They reveal that what counts as 'good food' is contingent, situated and collectively negotiated, not simply chosen.

Understanding these tensions has wider implications. It highlights that transformation towards more sustainable and inclusive food systems cannot rely on promoting one value - such as environmental responsibility - at the expense of others. Instead, change requires reconciling multiple orders of value, creating infrastructures and narratives that accommodate complexity and enable cooperation across differences. This recognition invites scholars and policymakers alike to move beyond linear models of behaviour and to engage with the moral and cultural pluralism that characterises food practices today. In this sense, tensions are not obstacles to be removed, but windows into the value systems that must be aligned to support meaningful and inclusive food transitions.

3.6 Conclusion

This paper has explored how engaged eaters in three European contexts - Germany, Italy and Norway - justify their eating in relation to environmental, cultural and personal concerns. Drawing on the French theory of conventions, we have shown that food choices are not governed by a single normative logic, but by multiple and often competing orders of justification. These conventions - domestic, green, inspired and others - are activated in practice as people navigate dilemmas, defend actions and adapt to constraints. Our analysis shows that tensions between conventions are not signs of inconsistency, but markers of plural value systems coexisting within everyday food cultures. These tensions - between sustainability and convenience, tradition and innovation, or ecological ideals and market infrastructure - highlight the deeply situated and often ambivalent nature of ethical food practices.

Crucially, these dynamics need to be understood within the broader framework of biocultural diversity. Our findings suggest that people's justifications are shaped not only by social structures and

individual preferences, but also by the ecological conditions and cultural histories of places. For example, the prominence of certain conventions in Italy reflects a cultural legacy of domestic embeddedness; in Norway, environmental justification is linked to landscape and regulation; in Germany, creative practices emerge as a means of reconciling multiple demands. Recognising bio-cultural diversity thus allows us to understand how food systems are both ecologically and culturally embedded, and how this embeddedness conditions what is seen as legitimate or 'good' food.

A key insight from this study is that people engage in situated moral improvisation, rather than adherence to fixed values. Conventions function as practical repertoires that are adapted and reconfigured in response to specific social, material and infrastructural realities. This reinforces the utility of convention theory not just as a lens on institutional order, but as a method for understanding everyday ethical complexity. Returning to the idea of bio-cultural diversity, we argue that cultural and ecological specificity is not a barrier to transformation - it is a precondition for sustainable change. Rather than universalising food ethics, it is more productive to build on the ways in which people already negotiate values within their contexts. Supporting diverse pathways that allow different worlds of justification to translate, align, or coexist is essential for fostering cooperation and legitimacy in food transitions.

Finally, this paper suggests several avenues for future research. First, further studies could explore how tensions between conventions unfold not only at the level of individuals, but also within policy design, food marketing, or civic activism. Second, longitudinal or ethnographic studies could explore how justifications evolve over time, particularly in response to crises, policy shifts or technological change. Third, more comparative work is needed beyond Europe, particularly in the Global South, to understand how bio-cultural diversity plays out under different agro-ecological and socio-political conditions. Finally, more attention should be paid to infrastructural enablers and

barriers - such as access, time or transparency - that often determine which conventions can be realised in practice. In this sense, tensions are not obstacles but productive sites of reflection and innovation. They reveal the moral grammars, social infrastructures and ecological entanglements that shape food practices today - and offer insights into how a more sustainable, culturally attuned food future might emerge.

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CHAPTER 4. (UN)SUCCESSFUL ALTERNATIVES: BRIDGING PRACTICES AND SYSTEMIC CHALLENGES IN COMMUNITY-SUPPORTED AGRICULTURE

Mattia Andreola

Abstract

The vulnerabilities of global food systems, exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic, highlight the need for sustainable transformation. Community-Supported Agriculture (CSA) presents a promising alternative, yet its scalability remains challenging. Although existing research has recognised the barriers to CSA growth, a deeper examination of the specific elements embedded in practices and regimes that hinder success is lacking. This study examines "NaturalMente in Trentino," a CSA initiative in Trento, Italy, adopting a zooming in and out approach to identify the structural and behavioral lock-in points.

Drawing on three years of ethnographic research — including participant observation, in-depth interviews and quantitative data analysis — this study integrates the Multi-Level Perspective (MLP) and Social Practice Theory (SPT) to assess the interplay between socio-technical regimes and everyday consumption practices, revealing multiple lock-in points.

These findings suggest that overcoming CSA constraints is linked as much to organizational changes in CSA as to less visible mechanisms. These are related to cultural and behavioral characteristics embedded in the habits of producers and consumers, as well as to rigid institutional frameworks and influential player patterns in the sector. By identifying both barriers and possible solutions, this research provides both actionable recommendations and policy interventions to support the transition to more resilient and equitable food systems.

4.1 Introduction

The debate on ecological innovation and sustainable transformation has grown across fields, engaging political actors, scholars, and citizens. In response to environmental challenges, efforts focus on rethinking practices, technologies, and systems to align with sustainability and societal well-being, requiring technological advances, behavioral shifts, and new governance and economic models.

The food sector, a major driver of environmental degradation, has stimulated consumer awareness about the need for change, leading to a preference for sustainable production and the emergence of alternative food networks (AFNs) (Savarese et al., 2020). These shifts align with the United Nations Sustainable Development Goal 12, which emphasizes responsible consumption and production patterns as essential for achieving sustainability. Moreover, COVID-19 pandemic has further exposed vulnerabilities in global food supply chains, emphasizing the critical importance of exploring resilient and sustainable alternatives (Paul et al., 2021; Kumareswaran & Jayasinghe, 2022).

Community Supported Agriculture (CSA) has emerged as a prominent AFN model, providing a collaborative platform for sustainable, socially responsible food production, distribution, and consumption. Through farmer-consumer partnerships, CSAs foster grassroots innovation and knowledge exchange (Henderson, 2003) and present a potential pathway for building more sustainable and equitable food systems (Pansera and Fressoli, 2021), , aiming to reduce food waste, promote local economies and improve food security (Adam, 2006; Savarese et al., 2020). On the other hand, due to its niche status, CSA is often considered limited in terms of its scalability and social accessibility (Bonfert, 2022). Although the existing literature acknowledges some of the barriers to CSA expansion, there is still a lack of in-depth investigation of the specific mechanisms within practices and socio-technical regimes that limit their success.

This article aims to fill this gap by focusing on a single case study of the CSA "NaturalMente in Trentino" initiative established during the pandemic and studied from its inception for over three years. The stated objectives of this project are to create a fair, ecological and community-based local food system that provides consumers in the city of Trento and surrounding areas with quality, seasonal and sustainably produced local food. Despite an encouraging start in May 2021, the number of purchases gradually decreased to very marginal quantities. This trajectory underscores the need to critically examine the socio-technical and behavioral dynamics that shape CSA implementation and scalability. While most research emphasizes successful social innovations, this study seeks to address a critical gap by examining the factors contributing to the failure or disruption of grassroots initiatives (Feola & Nunes, 2014). Developing a balanced understanding of success and failure cases is vital to comprehensively assess the potential of grassroots innovations in fostering sustainable change and to learn replicable lessons.

To shed light on this evolution, this study applies an integrated approach that combines the Multi-Level Perspective (MLP) and Social Practice Theory (SPT). While these frameworks were previously perceived as divergent, a new wave of recent literature highlights their potential synergy. By reframing MLP's hierarchical levels as degrees of structuration and aligning them with SPT's flat ontology, this integrated approach reveals how interconnected practices stabilize or disrupt systems. These frameworks collectively offer robust tools for evaluating sustainable innovations across diverse contexts (Keller, 2022).

Through the iteration between data analysis and a systematic literature review on socio-technical transition, this study highlights the intersections between established agricultural regimes and everyday practices within the CSA niche. Therefore, this study applies an integrated SPT-MLP lens

to investigate the following research question: how do intersections between socio-technical regimes and everyday practices influence CSA sustainability?

Highlighting these intersections not only enriches the literature on CSAs and AFNs, but also exposes the systemic lock-in dynamics that prevent transformative change proposed by grassroots innovation. The findings provide useful insights into addressing these barriers, offering demonstrable solutions to promote sustainable agricultural practices and create a more resilient local agri-food system.

This paper is organized as follows: Section 2 outlines the theoretical frameworks guiding the analysis, situating them within the broader academic discourse. Section 3 describes the methodology employed and provides an overview of the case study. Section 4 presents the key findings, while Section 5 delves into the discussion, highlighting the benefits and insights gained from the combined theoretical approach. Finally, the conclusion outlines the potential implications of this approach for future research and practice.

4.2 Theoretical Framework

The Multi-Level Perspective (MLP) and Social Practice Theory (SPT) have emerged as two leading frameworks in sustainability transitions research. While historically applied independently, recent scholarship has increasingly highlighted their potential complementarity, recognizing how MLP's macro-level focus on structural and systemic dynamics can intersect with SPT's granular attention to everyday practices. This integration offers valuable tools for understanding the complex, multi-scalar processes involved in transitions, particularly in the context of entrenched socio-technical regimes and emerging grassroots innovations.

The purpose of this section is not to provide an exhaustive account of all scholarly contributions within these theoretical strands. Instead, it aims to highlight their heuristic value in preparing the ground for the analysis of grassroots innovations, such as Community-Supported Agriculture (CSA), within the broader context of agri-food system transformation. By bridging these frameworks, this study focuses on their application to identify structural barriers, behavioral lock-ins, and potential pathways for fostering systemic change.

4.2.1 Multi-Level Perspective and Social Practice Theory

MLP views transitions as non-linear processes driven by interactions across three levels: niches (micro), regimes (meso), and landscapes (macro). Niches serve as spaces for radical innovations and small-scale experimentation, while regimes represent established socio-technical systems stabilized by actors, resources, and practices. Landscapes encompass broader external forces such as trends and events, for instance pandemics, or climate change or elements such as paradigms, cultural changes, natural infrastructures and global resources (Geels, 2011; Falcone et al. 2020). The regime embodies the current status quo, but pressures from niche actors and the broader landscape can spark innovation, challenge stability, and potentially usher in a new dominant system (Errichiello et al., 2025).

Initially applied to strictly technological transitions (Geels, 2002), MLP has been extended to sustainability transitions and grassroots innovations (Shove & Walker, 2008; Seyfang & Smith, 2007). The success of this theoretical framework lies in its notable heuristic utility, which effectively identifies the various dynamics through which regime-level structures impede the adoption of niche innovations. This has facilitated its application across diverse fields and sectors, such as financial, industrial and forestry sector, revealing the interplay between technology, power, legislation, economics, influential players and public sentiment. (Falcone et al., 2020). However, it has also faced criticism for its mechanistic approach to social change and its limited focus on how everyday practices

reproduce or hinder transitions (Shove & Walker, 2010). This gap underscores the relevance of SPT for understanding the horizontal dimensions of change within daily life.

A social practice is a complex, interconnected routinized behavior encompassing bodily activities, mental activities, background knowledge, emotional states, and motivation (Reckwitz, 2002). SPT conceptualizes practices as routinized behaviors formed by the integration of understandings (knowledge and skills), procedures (rules and norms), and engagements (motivations, beliefs, and emotions) (Warde, 2005). Practices are dynamic and evolve through repetition, adaptation, and the circulation of their elements across contexts, which can lead to innovation or dissolution (Shove et al., 2012). Everyday life, shaped by time, space, and modality, provides the physical and social settings for practices, offering opportunities to disrupt and transform established norms (Halkier, 2016; Torkkeli et al., 2020; Forno et al. 2022).

SPT's emphasis on the relational and performative aspects of practices highlights how material arrangements, cultural discourses, and social routines interact to sustain or challenge established systems. It provides a valuable lens for examining how changes at the practice level intersect with broader systemic dynamics.

4.2.2 Integrating MLP and SPT: Crossovers and Intersections

It is crucial to avoid merging MLP and SPT into a universal theory, focusing instead on their 'crossovers' to leverage their respective strengths while preserving their distinct contributions (Geels, 2010). Both theories address transitions and sustainability by exploring complexity beyond individual or technological solutions. They emphasize the role of rules and routines in guiding social action and consider the interplay of elements within and between practices or systems crucial for understanding change.

MLP and SPT adopt a multi-actor approach, emphasizing a socio-material perspective where agency is embedded in broader structures (Geels et al., 2015; Avelino et al., 2017). While MLP highlights agency's distributed nature across social levels, SPT focuses on its emergence from the interplay of material, cognitive, and social elements (Geels, 2011; Warde, 2005). Both frameworks share a relational view of agency, considering it shaped through interactions within systems.

The ontological differences between the two approaches are often emphasised by scholars: the vertical ontology of MLP organizes transitions in a hierarchical manner, whereas the flat ontology of SPT involve a nexus of practices, with no hierarchy between practices or practice elements (Keller et al., 2022). However, new developments in the debate need to be taken into account: large-scale phenomena can be seen as assemblages of interconnected practices shaped by their density and expansion rather than distinct entities. This view challenges traditional macro-micro distinctions, framing scale as the outcome of dense, extended interactions (Nicolini, 2016).

Scholars such as Geels (2011) bridge these differences by interpreting MLP levels as degrees of structuration rather than a strict hierarchy, aligning more closely with SPT's flat ontology. Welch and Warde (2015) similarly reinterpret MLP by emphasizing stability and structuration within interactions over time and space. Likewise, Smith et al. (2010) argue that SPT already reflects a 'vertical' dimension through variations in practices' stability.

Finally, Keller et al. (2022) integrate both vertical and horizontal analyses to explore intersections between practices, niches, regimes, and landscapes. By reframing MLP's vertical dimension as degrees of structuration, they align it with SPT's flat ontology, highlighting how interconnected practices stabilize or disrupt systems. This perspective identifies resistant 'lock-ins' where entrenched practices hinder new proto-practices (Julsrud & Farstad, 2020). The framework addresses stability and reconfiguration across scales, transcending technological innovations to

emphasize everyday practices as critical sites of systemic transformation. It serves as a heuristic tool for analyzing CSA, identifying intersections where interventions can overcome lock-ins and catalyze change (Hargreaves, 2013; Gismondi et al., 2015; O'Neill et al., 2019; Gazull et al., 2019).

4.3 Case and Methodology

4.3.1 Contextualizing the Case Study

Emerging in the 1960s and 70s, CSAs are Alternative Food Network (AFN) models that emphasize small-scale production, local engagement, high food quality, ethical standards, sustainability, and respect for nature (Savarese et al., 2020). They foster direct producer-consumer relationships, shared risks, and commitments to environmental and social equity, promoting sustainable food systems (Adam, 2006). CSAs have spread globally, with diverse models in different regions.

As grassroots innovations, CSAs focus on community-driven sustainability and collective interests (Axon et al., 2018; Seyfang & Smith, 2007). They prioritize organic farming, reduced chemical use, biodiversity, and closed-loop systems, along with lower fossil fuel reliance, shorter food transport, and water recycling (Forbes & Harmon, 2008; Yang & Campbell, 2017). Participatory governance is also key, with decisions made through consensus between farmers and community members (Medici et al., 2021). However, challenges such as product uncertainties, unfamiliar items, seasonal availability, and logistical issues hinder widespread participation (Landis, 2010; Galt et al., 2012; Kump & Fikar, 2021).

The NaturalMente in Trentino CSA, located in the Autonomous Province of Trento, Italy, was established in 2020 with the support of the Municipality and the University of Trento to help local producers after the closure of farmers' markets due to the COVID-19 pandemic. The goal was to create a platform for selling local agricultural products and supporting sustainable food practices based on the principles of agroecology. Officially launched in 2021, the CSA offers a range of products, including fruit, vegetables, meat, cheese, milk, yogurt, and wine, from 12 local producers. The initiative involves 34 households, who use a simple digital platform to facilitate product ordering and selection. However, despite initial success, participation has steadily declined since the first year. This decline is reflected in Figure 14, which tracks the monthly economic turnover from May 2021 to November 2022, highlighting the challenges the CSA faces in maintaining consumer engagement and adapting to their evolving needs.

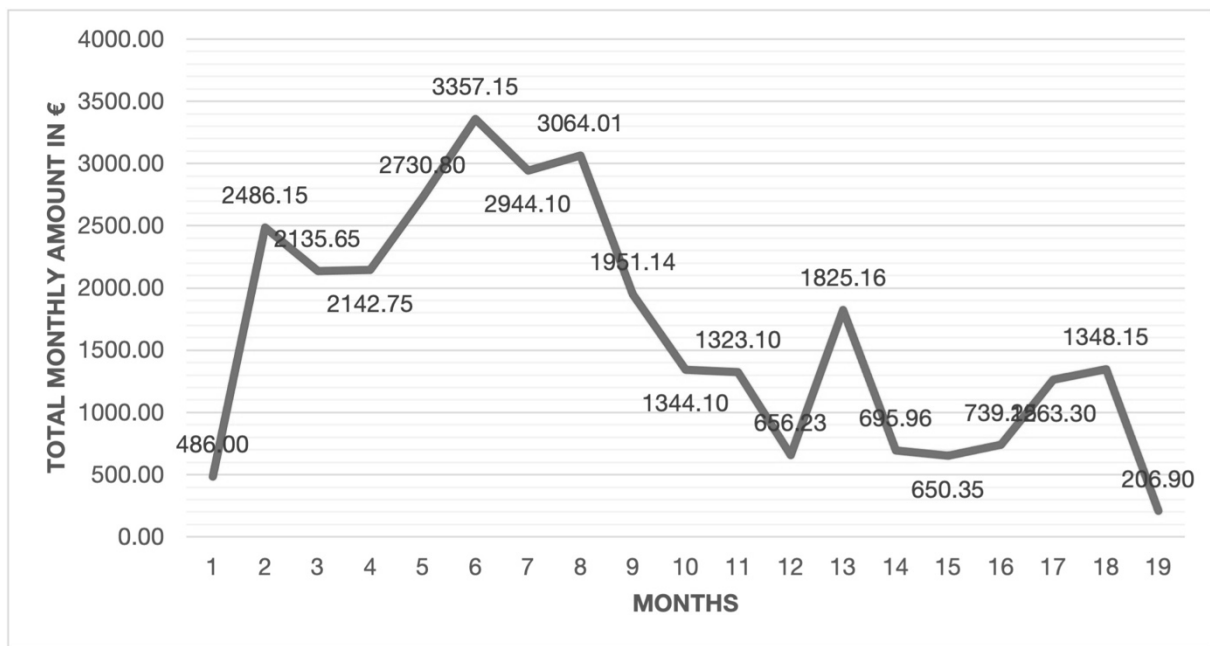


Figure 14 – Monthly economic turnover in €, CSA NaturalMente in Trentino

4.3.2 Organizational ethnography

This study adopted organizational ethnography as a methodological framework, integrating qualitative and quantitative data to provide a multidimensional analysis of the CSA model (See Appendix A for a graphic overview of the methods applied). Organizational ethnography enables researchers to explore the practices, cultures, and dynamics shaping organizational life in nuanced ways (Ybema et al., 2009; Vincett, 2024). Through immersive observation, this approach offered insights into the initiative’s operational processes and their evolution, with appropriate emphasis on the importance of context (Vincett, 2024). The study was conducted over a period of 36 months (Fig. 15), from August 2020 to August 2023, through a mixed method approach, allowing for a comprehensive longitudinal analysis of the CSA's development and sustainability and providing a deeper understanding of the CSA's decision-making processes, challenges, and interactions.

The research also considered external factors focusing on local socio-economic conditions and institutional dynamics that characterize the region. This included demographic data, economic indicators, and reports on local policies and institutional frameworks that shape the CSA's environment.

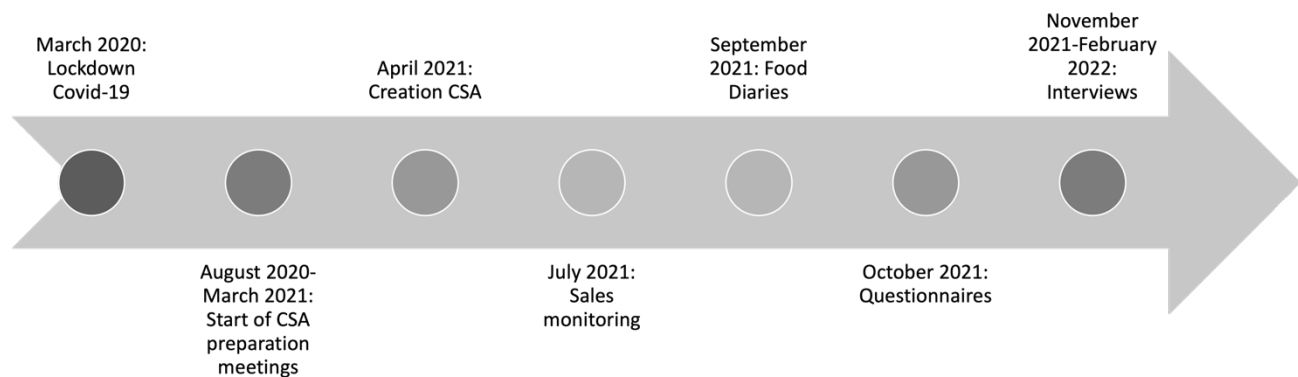


Figure 15 – Timeline of CSA research

Qualitative data collection through participant observation began at the inception of the CSA in August 2020, enabling close monitoring and understanding of its early stages, attending board meetings and engaging with producers and consumers. A total of 32 board meetings were observed, with detailed field notes and meeting minutes systematically collected to document the initiative's development and identify factors that influenced its sustainability. In-depth semi-structured interviews were conducted between 17 November 2021 and 12 February 2022, involving 27 households and 9 farms, representing 79% and 75% of the total membership, respectively (see Appendix B). They lasted between 45 and 90 minutes, and were conducted in person or via video conferencing to accommodate participants' preferences. The interviews explored participants' motivations for joining the CSA, their food consumption habits, purchasing behaviors, and perceptions of the CSA model, including aspects such as trust relations, preference for local and sustainable food. These interviews were analyzed thematically, drawing on the Multi-Level Perspective (MLP) framework (landscape, regime, niche) and Social Practice Theory (SPT), with a focus on the three key elements identified by Alan Warde: engagement, understanding, and procedures. Thematic analysis was conducted using NVivo software, which facilitated the coding and categorization of interview transcripts into recurring themes and patterns.

The quantitative aspect of the research, which began on 1 July 2021, aimed to triangulate qualitative findings with additional data sources. Four primary survey tools were employed: 1) Monitoring of sales and purchase volumes, which began on 7 July 2021 and continued thereafter, with data analyzed through January 2023, as trends stabilized. Sales data were collected monthly to identify seasonal variations and long-term trends. 2) A food diary was distributed between 4 and 18 October 2021. Participants were asked to record their daily food consumption, including the source of each item (CSA or external), to assess the CSA's role in their dietary habits. 3) A questionnaire survey

conducted from 22 October to 5 November 2021 collected responses from 28 consumer households and 11 farmers (82% and 92% of the total respondents, respectively). The questionnaire included both closed-ended and open-ended questions, covering topics such as satisfaction with the CSA, perceived benefits, and challenges faced. 4) Secondary data sources, including government publications, regional development reports, and academic studies on sustainable agriculture in the area, ensuring a robust contextual understanding of the CSA's operational landscape.

However, the research faces limitations in generalizability due to its focus on one region-specific CSA, potential observer bias from participant observation, and a reliance on time-intensive methods and self-reported data, which may introduce inaccuracies; additionally, the brief duration of quantitative tools contrasts with the longitudinal qualitative approach, potentially skewing findings, while an emphasis on local context may overshadow wider theoretical contributions (See Appendix C for a graphical overview of the strengths and limitations of the applied methodology).

4.4 Findings

This section presents the key findings from the analysis, providing a parallel examination of the local food regime and agro-food practices. To reconstruct the evolution of the CSA and its interactions with the local context, Section 4.1 employs an MLP framework, drawing on both data from the local context and information gathered from questionnaires and interviews with CSA participants. Specifically, this section will focus on the dynamics of regime and niche during a period marked by rapid disruption in the landscape. In contrast, Section 4.2 will explore practices, examining both existing and potentially emerging agri-food practices from the perspective of CSA users.

4.4.1 Local Agri-Food Regime and Niche Dynamics: Interactions and Disruptions

The local agri-food regime in Trentino has traditionally exhibited high levels of stability, with established agricultural practices and market structures that have remained resistant to change. However, recent landscape pressures, particularly the COVID-19 pandemic, have created a window of opportunity for niche innovations such as Community-Supported Agriculture (CSA), aim to reconfigure the local agri-food system by offering alternative, sustainable models of food production and distribution.

4.4.1.1 Landscape Pressure

In 2020, the Covid-19 pandemic profoundly impacted Italy, making it the first Western country to face widespread outbreaks. In response, the Italian government enforced a nationwide lockdown from March to May 2020, followed by a phased reopening over the summer months. The lockdown led to severe economic consequences across multiple sectors, with over 70% of Italian companies reporting significant revenue declines by the end of the lockdown period. Projections indicated that the pandemic would have long-lasting effects on the production system, with some industries expecting disruptions to continue in the medium to long term (Euricse 2021).

In Trentino, the pandemic triggered notable demographic and economic shifts. The region experienced a decline in population, and its GDP fell by 9.8%, a sharper contraction compared to the national average of 8.7% (Autonomous Province of Trento, 2021). The tourism sector, a crucial pillar of the local economy, was especially hard-hit, with a 31% reduction in activity. In contrast, other sectors, including wholesale trade, business services, and construction, saw only modest declines, partially cushioned by government support measures.

These economic changes, driven by the pandemic, highlight the significant disruptions faced by the local economy. While some sectors, like agriculture, were less directly affected, the overall shift in economic activity underscored the vulnerabilities of the region's dependence on tourism and industrial models. The crisis created a moment of instability that led to re-evaluations of established systems, especially in areas such as food production, consumption patterns, and local economies (Cohen 2020; Jribi et al. 2020).

4.4.1.2 Niche Dynamics: The Rise and Setbacks of CSA in Trentino

The Covid-19 pandemic presented a unique opportunity for the emergence of sustainable innovations, including initiatives like community-supported agriculture (CSA), which have seen notable uptake in recent years. The lockdown period heightened consumer awareness of the need to change local food systems towards greater sustainability. CSAs, such as NaturalMente in Trentino, are socio-technical experiments that challenge traditional food systems by promoting fair, sustainable production over profit-driven models (Verheul and Vergragt, 1995; Hargreaves, 2013).

In Trentino, the CSA model involved local farmers engaged in small-scale agro-ecological production while fostering alternative marketing practices. Many CSA farmers operated family-run farms, focusing on direct sales and sustainable farming techniques. NaturalMente's consumer base was largely educated, with university graduates (60%) and civil servants (34%) making up a significant share of participants. This demographic demonstrated strong concern for the environmental impacts of food production and a clear preference for healthier, more sustainable products.

Early CSA efforts included organizing events to engage members and the wider community, facilitating the exchange of good practices and promoting local and sustainable consumption. Despite these initiatives, however, the development of CSA in Trentino remained fragmented and

disorganized, hindering its ability to fully capitalize on the opportunities presented by the landscape pressures. While some members initially embraced innovative approaches—such as online ordering and alternative delivery methods—these were short-lived and did not foster lasting shifts in consumption patterns or lifestyle. As the immediate health crisis faded, most members reverted to more familiar and convenient food procurement methods, such as solidarity purchasing groups (GAS), farmers' markets, and supermarkets.

Although the pandemic undeniably created a temporary window for the adoption of sustainable food practices like CSAs, the case of NaturalMente in Trentino demonstrates that the potential for long-term change was not fully realized. Despite the initial momentum, consumer behavior shifted back to traditional food systems once the crisis subsided, suggesting that while landscape pressures can provide openings for niche innovations, deeper structural factors need to be addressed for lasting transformation.

4.4.1.3 The Regime

Despite the broader economic challenges, the agricultural sector in Trentino, particularly the region's dominant cooperatives, remained largely unaffected by the immediate impacts of the pandemic (ISTAT, 2019; Euricse, 2021). This resilience highlights the stability of the existing agri-food regime, which has demonstrated an ability to adapt during crises. However, this stability also reflects deeper structural factors that inhibit the widespread adoption of alternative models like Community-Supported Agriculture (CSA).

The local agri-food regime in Trentino is characterized by a high degree of stability, with entrenched structural factors that inhibit the widespread adoption of alternative models like CSAs. One major feature of the regime is land fragmentation, with 63.5% of the local farms covering less

than 2 hectares, a trend exacerbated by part-time farming, particularly among older populations (PSR, 2023). These factors create an environment in which small, diversified CSA operations struggle to compete with the dominant monoculture model.

Trentino's agri-food regime is particularly resistant to change due to the dominance of monocultural crops like apples, which account for 82% of the sector's Gross Saleable Production (GSP). Similarly, viticulture and animal husbandry are key components of the region's agricultural output. This focus on high-output, monocultural farming stabilizes the regime by aligning farmer practices, market infrastructure, and policy support, leaving limited space for niche innovations like CSAs that promote diversity and community-based practices.

A central feature of the regime is the cooperative model, which controls over 90% of agricultural production. While these cooperatives have shown resilience, even thriving during the 2008-2009 financial crisis and the COVID-19 pandemic, their focus on modernization and market efficiency has resulted in a shift toward market conformity that reinforces regime stability (Andreola et al., 2021; Forno et al., 2022; Nemes et al., 2021). This model limits the ability of alternative practices, such as those proposed by CSAs, to integrate into the mainstream agri-food system. As one farmer noted, *"if a farmer joins a cooperative, they no longer have control over their field... there is a one-size-fits-all, broad-spectrum solution"* (P3).

In summary, the stability of the local agri-food regime in Trentino, marked by monoculture, land fragmentation, and cooperative dominance, presents significant barriers to the scaling of alternative food systems like CSAs. While the landscape pressures created by the pandemic opened a window of opportunity for niche developments, the entrenched structures of the regime have limited the CSA's potential to fully integrate into the broader agri-food system.

4.4.2 Dynamics Between Established and Emerging Consumer Practices

Although, as mentioned above, the CSA initially showed promise, it encountered difficulties in sustaining business and community involvement. Currently, it struggles with both participant engagement and revenue, limiting its ability to expand. To understand why this grassroots innovation has stalled, the analysis explores both the cognitive and non-cognitive factors that influence everyday procurement practices, with a focus on those shaping the core components of CSA engagement.

4.4.2.1 Engagements

CSA participants exhibit distinct emotional and normative motivations for their involvement. Producers emphasized tangible local impact (27%), environmental sustainability (18%), and fairness (18%). Consumers prioritized paying a fair price for quality food (37%), supporting environmentally conscious producers (26%), and valuing product origin (15%). These findings align with the view that CSA participation enhances trust in producers and their practices (Giovannini et al., 2024). It is frequently emphasised that direct engagement with producers fosters the sharing of principles such as trust, care and community.

“With CSA I feel a little more confident in the purchase, meaning that I know where it comes from, I know it is cultivated in a certain way” (M13)

“We met a lot of people. Because we bring products and maybe exchange experiences or if you have problems you can confront each other.” (P7)

However, community-building motivations were less evident among consumers, who were more interested in learning about gardening methods and product details. These self-cultivation practices, as explored in section 5.1.1, conflicted with CSA engagement, as noted by one participant:

“I got interested to find out how to start growing my vegetable garden better. I am interested in knowing how they grow, what methods they use, and understand why certain methods that you assume are normal (such as fertilizing or giving certain products to plants) are wrong” (M27)

4.4.2.2 Understandings

Understanding encompasses the knowledge and know-how embedded in how practices are performed (Warde, 2005). Interviews revealed a shared perception of "good food" centered around sustainability. This includes organic cultivation methods, minimizing transportation distances, and reducing plastic usage. One participant highlighted:

“I give local producers the opportunity to sell their things, not having to pack them and perhaps send them miles away” (M16)

Proximity was emphasized by 22 of 27 consumers, who valued locally produced items that supported the local economy and reduced environmental impact. Health was also a significant concern, with 18 interviewees associating healthy eating with sustainability:

“I've always talked about a sustainable and healthy meal. Healthy is very important because I believe that the first part of one's resistance to diseases starts with how you eat” (M1)

Despite a common agreement on what defines "good food", tensions arose around organic practices. Farmers expressed varying views on sustainability, with one stating:

“Producing organic, in my opinion, is not so sustainable at the level of not polluting the earth. Because you use copper anyway. Copper is natural, but it's not natural in the amounts used in organic farming” (P9)

These differing views on sustainability and organic farming create friction between CSA practices and broader agri-food regimes, hindering the broader adoption of CSA models.

4.4.2.3 Procedures

Procedures define the rules for performing a practice (Halkier, 2016). In the CSA, strict regulations govern ordering, pickup logistics, and pre-financing. However, in "NaturalMente in Trentino", members are asked to pay a small fixed sum as a pledge for regular purchases, rather than risk-sharing or crop damage compensation. This lack of financial support for farmers, combined with insufficient communication during enrollment, has contributed to the CSA's challenges.

The CSA's ordering platform, criticized by 11 of 27 consumers for being complex and inconvenient, also clashes with emerging consumer preferences, such as mobile shopping. One participant shared:

“It's ugly, it's not clear, it's not agile. I would need the visual part to understand the amount I am taking, at least an idea” (M25)

The platform's lack of smartphone compatibility and technical issues, such as double charges and misaligned orders, further disrupt communication between producers and consumers. Additionally, the fixed delivery schedule and collection point on the city's outskirts pose logistical challenges for participants, highlighting a mismatch with their daily routines.

These procedural challenges, combined with issues around platform functionality and delivery logistics, exacerbate the difficulties facing the CSA initiative.

4.5 Discussion: Intersections between systems of Regimes and Practices

In the previous section, the research findings were analyzed separately within the analytical frameworks of the MLP and SPT. In this discussion, we will explore the intersections where (a) transitions within regimes face obstacles from entrenched practices, and (b) transitions within practices encounter resistance from existing regimes. By identifying these intersections, we can develop a more detailed understanding of new perspectives and opportunities for change. This analysis, which will be further addressed in the concluding section, could provide valuable insights for policymakers and stakeholders, helping them transform critical challenges into opportunities to drive transitions toward sustainability.

4.5.1 *Regime Transitions: The Added-Value of Social Practice Analysis*

As frequently noted in the literature, community-supported agriculture (CSA) initiatives struggle to scale due to resistance to change within the existing regime. A combination of economic, cultural, regulatory, and political barriers stifles innovation, and competition from industrial agriculture further complicates the ability of CSAs to achieve profitability on a larger scale. However, when CSA members are asked about this, they also highlight other interconnected crucial factors that hinder their initiatives, particularly those related to cultivation, purchasing, and cooking practices.

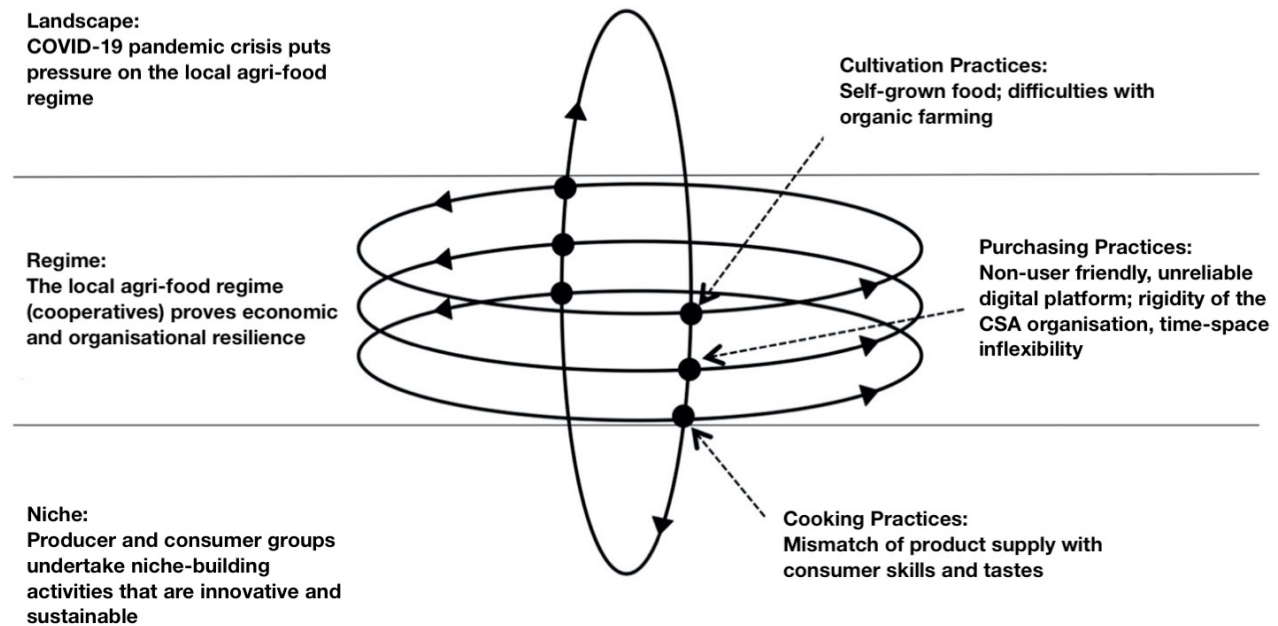


Figure 16 – Intersecting regimes and practices (adapted from Hargreaves et al., 2013)

4.5.1.1 Intersections with Cultivation Practices

The conventional agri-food system relies heavily on intensive farming methods, monocultures and the externalisation of global production. In contrast, alternative niches such as Community-Supported Agriculture (CSA) focus on the relocation and resocialisation (Brunori et al., 2011) of sustainable and biodiverse agricultural practices. In this regard, much of the literature on the economic viability of alternative food networks (AFNs) highlights as a critical issue the challenges related to higher production costs and limited access to credit (Bruce & Som Castellano, 2017; Kump & Fikar, 2021), which make it difficult for more producers to engage in sustainable agricultural practices (Cranfield et al., 2010). This study corroborates these findings.

While economic barriers remain a widely recognised limitation in the expansion of CSA, our study identifies the barriers posed by current alternative farming techniques and methodologies for a

scaling deep of the CSA model (Laamanen et al., 2023). In fact, some members consider the organic method insufficient:

“The discourse of good food is to go beyond organic. That includes a discourse of ethicality and actual environmental impact. (...) Because even a supermarket product may be organic but you don't know where it comes from, how it was transported, under what conditions, rather I prefer a lightly processed but local product, bought direct with a payment that goes directly to the producer” (M1)

“Organic no longer fully corresponds to our way of farming, in the sense that we go beyond organic” (P6)

On the other hand, producers express frustration at the limited availability of research and support to optimise organic techniques. This creates uncertainty about the viability of organic farming, as stressed by two producers:

“I would like to see more research into organic farming to reduce treatments. Unfortunately, there is still little knowledge (...) With the little land I have to cultivate, I cannot afford to produce less than I do now” (P4)

“Stefania's organic farming is good in the sense that she takes what the land gives her, but I don't know how sustainable her production is for her family. I don't know if she lives off it” (P9)

This aligns with studies emphasizing the need for continuous innovation in agroecological practices (Méndez et al., 2013; Altieri & Nicholls, 2017). Unlike previous research, which primarily frames organic certification as a market-access issue (Guthman, 2004), our findings highlight producers' frustration with the lack of scientific advancements supporting organic techniques to make them a viable alternative.

These challenges reflect the entrenched constraints within the agri-food regime, where established practices, systems and structures perpetuate conventional agricultural practices (Geels, 2011). This systemic inertia limits the scaling potential of initiatives such as CSA within the regime, as transition requires not only financial resources but also technical and informational support, which is currently lacking.

Furthermore, the literature on AFNs has largely focused on external barriers such as policy restrictions or supply chain limitations (Goodman et al., 2012), but our findings suggest that internal market dynamics—such as competing with informal production systems—present an additional challenge. The major competition from private gardens, which are widespread in the province of Trento, leads to disengagement from CSA and shows horizontal friction between the CSA niche and pre-existing consumption practices. Among the respondents, 20 out of 27 stated that they rely on private or communal gardens during the summer period.

“In the summer I am mostly supplied by my dad who has a very rich garden so I never buy anything from June to the beginning of September. He has tomatoes, courgettes, cucumbers, a bit of everything” (M5)

“Producers told me that it is critical for them actually in the summer because people many times have a small garden so they have a chance to take some produce, and they have surpluses, and so they probably “drop” me some really overripe tomatoes” (M3)

This highlights a critical research gap, suggesting the need to explore how seasonal household food self-sufficiency influences consumer participation in AFNs.

Furthermore, this overproduction often results in lower incomes for producers and surplus stocks that go to waste.

Aligning with the literature on the transition of food-related practices and AFNs, which emphasizes consumer education (Morone et al., 2018; Brinkley, 2018), CSA can become a vector for changes in these food sharing practices, which require specific knowledge and skills, such as food literacy, household food supply and conservation skills (Morone et al., 2018).

Regarding the other issues that emerged, previous scholars suggest financial interventions such as grants and low-interest loans for small-scale farmers (Lamine et al., 2019), an approach that could be further refined to account for the specific constraints faced by CSA initiatives. Furthermore, our results confirm the need for partnerships between local actors in the creation of so-called common-pool resources. The strength of these new alternative models lies in its strong rootedness in these common-pool resources (van der Ploeg et al., 2019). In the specific case of this CSA it can be substantiated in the localised research partnerships between agricultural institutes and alternative niches to develop alternative cultivation methods adapted to specific regional conditions.

Finally, our study suggests that rethinking CSA product offerings could mitigate competition with private gardens by highlighting the potential of strategic crop selection and value-added processing (e.g., sauces, preserves) to maintain consumer engagement even in high-yield seasons. This aligns with work by Seyfang (2006), who argues that niche sustainability initiatives must adapt their models to fit evolving consumer behaviors.

4.5.1.2 Intersections with Purchasing Practices

Engaging consumers in AFNs, such as CSA, presents numerous challenges related to purchasing and selling systems. The literature has highlighted several barriers in this area, including price (Blumberg, 2018), variety (ibid.), trust (Poças Ribeiro et al., 2021), and issues related to time and

geography (Bruce & Som Castellano, 2017). This study confirms that entrenched purchasing practices create significant friction points.

AFNs often require frugality, which conflicts with the convenience offered by large retailers. A notable challenge is the organizational structure of CSA delivery systems, which is not aligned with traditional shopping habits. Prior research has demonstrated that fixed CSA delivery schedules can be a key deterrent for potential members (Hinrichs, 2014), which our findings corroborate. Efforts to adapt the delivery model to consumers' needs, such as offering a single delivery day and location, have not been universally successful. For example, 54% of respondents found the rigid delivery schedule inconvenient: *“We should organize ourselves differently, but sometimes we can't because five-thirty to seven-thirty is full work time for us”* (M25), and *“It's inconvenient for me because it's when the children have their activities”* (M20). These findings align with previous work highlighting time constraints as a major barrier to AFN participation (Renting et al., 2003).

Furthermore, alternative procurement systems often require consumers to buy minimum quantities, leading to waste: *“Sometimes they force you to buy a kilo of salad”* (M19). Producers also face issues with inadequate order quantities, making it hard to justify the time and effort required for transport: *“I happen to go to the delivery point for a bunch of herbs for 3 euros. Even just moving from home for 5 or 10 euros is already a loss”* (P1). These findings highlight the resistance of consumers' established routines and preferences rooted in traditional retail practices. The problem of AFNs failing to consider the small size of households and the different consumption patterns of urban consumers underlines the need for CSA models to adapt to the logistical and economic realities of consumers and producers, a point taken up by Goodman et al. (2012) in their critique of the scalability of AFNs.

However, the friction between CSA practices and conventional methods also extends to digital platforms. While the literature initially explored the potential synergies between AFN and digital tools (Viciunaite, 2023), there is growing interest in examining how the functioning of digital food platforms often clashes with consumer expectations shaped by traditional shopping experiences (Forno et al., 2024). In the case of the analysed experience, the platform used to order food products was a source of frustration for many users due to its outdated and confusing layout and lack of product information:

“It looks like the style of those old management apps from 2005. Today's apps are much nicer and more intuitive” (M1).

Moreover, the lack of detailed product information on CSA platforms exacerbates trust issues, a recurring theme in AFN literature (Poças Ribeiro et al., 2021). Consumers reported difficulties in making informed choices, which undermines the transparency and accountability that AFNs strive to promote. Furthermore, the platform's lack of compatibility with smartphones, a key tool for modern shopping, further hindered its adoption.

The study emphasises that barriers to CSA adoption go beyond the resistance of the agri-food regime and include work and family routines. This insight is crucial for practitioners and policymakers seeking to drive strategic actions for system change. In order to advance agri-food innovations and promote stronger connections between producers and consumers, it is necessary to create functioning logistics systems:

“I happen to go to the delivery point for a bunch of herbs for EUR 3. Even just travelling from home for 5 or 10 euro is already a loss” (P1)

The rigid organizational structure of CSA deliveries therefore conflicts with consumers' traditional preferences for convenience and flexibility in shopping times. Consumers, particularly those with busy work and family schedules, struggle to adapt to the fixed delivery windows offered by CSA:

“We should organize ourselves differently, but sometimes we can't because five-thirty to seven-thirty is full working hours” (M25)

“For me it is a bit inconvenient because it is a time when the children have their own activities”(M20)

To address these issues, several interventions could be implemented. First, flexible delivery systems should be introduced, such as offering multiple time slots or delivery locations, including workplace drop-offs or home deliveries. This approach could align better with diverse consumer schedules and reduce logistical burdens. Additional costs for expanded delivery options could be covered by a small surcharge, as many consumers (59%) are willing to pay extra for added convenience, an approach in line with suggestions made in the literature for similar cases (Jarosz, 2008). CSAs could also implement a rotating delivery system among members, as already happens in many similar initiatives. Participants share delivery responsibilities on a volunteer basis, fostering community involvement while reducing operational costs (Novelli & Corsi, 2018).

On the digital front, investing in user-friendly platforms compatible with smartphones is essential. Platforms should include intuitive interfaces, clear product descriptions, and real-time tracking to enhance user experience and trust. Collaborations with local tech developers or e-commerce platforms may help modernize CSA digital tools. Additionally, integrating payment

flexibility—such as pay-as-you-go options or installment plans—could address concerns about upfront costs, making CSA participation more accessible to a broader demographic.

4.5.1.3 Intersections with Cooking Practices

The sale of products within AFNs typically follows two approaches: the first allows consumers to freely choose products from different farms. The second option, on the other hand, involves a pre-packaged box with a fixed selection of seasonal products. This dual strategy aims to simplify delivery and encourage a different approach to consumption, emphasising traditional flavours and ingredients sidelined by large retailers in favour of standardised and less diverse varieties.

However, this approach intersects with prevailing culinary practices, creating friction points that hinder the expansion of Community Supported Agriculture (CSA) among both current households and potential new members. In fact, a significant barrier to CSA adoption lies in the misalignment between the products provided and consumers' culinary habits. As Galt et al. (2019) note, CSA models often require consumers to adapt their cooking practices to incorporate unfamiliar or seasonal ingredients, which can be challenging for those accustomed to the convenience and predictability of conventional retail systems. This study corroborates these findings, revealing that while some consumers enjoy experimenting with new recipes, others struggle to integrate unfamiliar products into their diets due to family preferences, lack of culinary creativity, or limited knowledge of ingredients.

“Because sometimes I don't have ideas, ideas... and so I say: OK, today it's pasta in bianco. I really need someone to tell me what to do” (M14)

“Often there are vegetables that I've never seen or never tried and I can try them” (M17).

These findings align with Kump and Fikar (2021), who highlight the material, cultural-discursive, and social arrangements that shape cooking practices. Materially, unfamiliar vegetables often require specific preparation skills that consumers may lack. Culturally, the absence of recipes or food knowledge can deter experimentation, while socially, household routines centered on convenience foods resist the integration of CSA products (Kemmis et al., 2014). Nicolini (2016) further emphasizes that cooking practices are not isolated but are deeply embedded in a web of interconnected practices, including procurement, meal planning, culinary knowledge and routines. This interdependence underscores the complexity of shifting consumer behavior toward CSA models.

This study's findings highlight key challenges for CSA operators aiming to boost consumer engagement. First, providing tools like recipe books, ingredient advice, and workshops on processing skills could address consumer knowledge gaps. These align with Galt et al. (2019), who suggest CSA models should support adaptation to seasonal, unfamiliar products.

Second, peer-to-peer learning within CSA communities could enhance culinary confidence. Members sharing tips, recipes, or hosting demonstrations at events echoes Wenger's (1998) "communities of practice," where collective learning strengthens ties and adoption of practices. Collaborations with local chefs or cooking schools for classes or tutorials could further build skills and encourage experimentation.

Finally, integrating recipe suggestions and cooking tips into digital platforms could boost engagement. Personalized recommendations based on box contents, preferences, and skill levels could tackle cultural-discursive barriers noted by Kump and Fikar (2021). This would improve platform usability and meet digitally savvy consumers' expectations (Forno et al., 2024).

4.5.2 Social Practice Transitions: The Added-Value of Regime-Analysis

Community-Supported Agriculture (CSA) initiatives like NaturalMente in Trentino aim to challenge and transform conventional agri-food practices. However, as practice theory suggests, deeply ingrained routines and habits are difficult to change. Despite efforts to disrupt these established routines, dominant regimes have so far succeeded in preserving the status quo, limiting opportunities for transformation.

The MLP framework proves valuable in identifying key regimes—understood as pervasive and structured systems—that reinforce existing practices. As shown in Figure 17, this analysis specifically examines two interlinked regimes and their intersections: (a) the agricultural sector and (b) the retail sector, both of which are central to the overarching agri-food system.

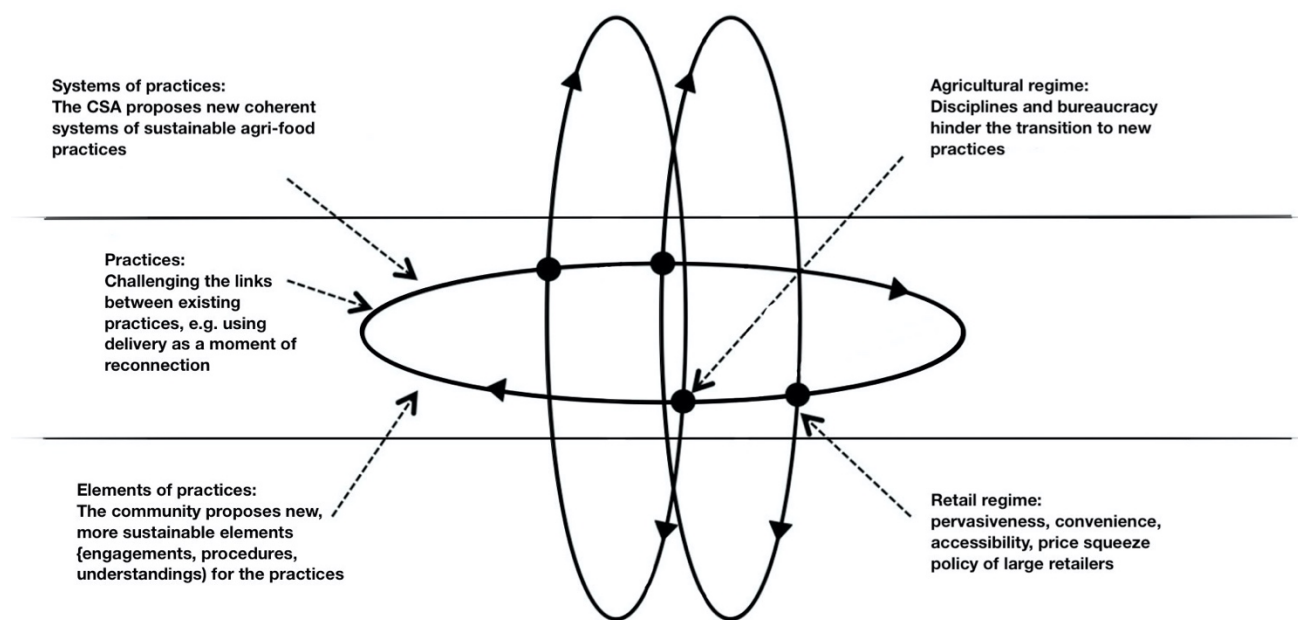


Figure 17 – Intersecting practices with regimes (adapted from Hargreaves et al., 2013)

4.5.2.1 Intersections with the Agricultural Regime

Community Supported Agriculture (CSA) initiatives actively engage in extensive experimentation with crop varieties and cultivation methods, often challenging the conventions of the

broader agricultural regime (Galt et al., 2012). However, this drive for innovation creates significant friction between CSAs and established agricultural practices, particularly within the cooperative system examined. These tensions hinder experimentation with innovative approaches and the renovation of agricultural knowledge (understanding), the specifications governing the methods applied (procedures) and the orientation of participants (engagement).

As reported by interviewees, the rigid specifications of the Trento DOC² system often exclude innovative approaches, such as the use of resistant crop varieties that require fewer chemical treatments. For example, one producer noted:

“Since we are in the Trento DOC specifications, some varieties are not even recognised. The idea would be to also try to work with resistant varieties in order to do as little treatment as possible”(P4)

This clash of production practices reflects Geels' (2011) idea of a hierarchy based on the stability differences between regime practices and innovation niches. The dual involvement of some CSA producers in local agricultural cooperatives can inhibit experimentation and adaptation within the agricultural landscape. The Trentino cooperative system, for instance, strongly advocates for reliable, productivist practices, which have historically favored economic prosperity through the extensive use of agrochemicals (Fonte & Cucco, 2017).

However, this focus on economic efficiency often sidelines broader community and environmental concerns, creating lock-in effects that hinder long-term innovation (Magnani & Osti, 2016). For example, ISPRA (2018) data show that Trentino ranks second in Italy for pesticide use, highlighting a systemic shift away from organic and low-input farming methods. As Gios and Santuari

² Denominazione di Origine Controllata: Denomination of Controlled Origin

(2002) argue, the cooperative model's emphasis on economic stability can stifle the adoption of sustainable practices, reinforcing resistance to change within the regime.

Another significant barrier to CSA adoption is the bureaucratic complexity of organic certification. Many producers face substantial administrative and financial burdens, which discourage participation in certified organic farming. As one producer explained:

“Organic certification is a significant bureaucratic burden that greatly impacts our lives. Over the years, I’ve had to redo labels, logos, and authorization numbers countless times. It’s a hassle, especially for direct sellers. I’m relieved to be out of the process and would have left sooner if I had the chance” (P6)

This finding resonates with studies by Laforge et al. (2017) and Slavuj Borčić (2020), who highlight the administrative challenges of organic certification as a major obstacle for small-scale producers. Indeed, the responsibility for control and bureaucratic procedures—such as maintaining detailed records of all agricultural activities and keeping invoices and purchase notes for the products used—is entrusted to farms rather than to government oversight and support bodies. This burden poses a greater challenge for small independent farmers engaged in niche innovations compared to large players in the agri-food sector, such as the Trentino cooperatives.

To address these challenges, several strategies could be implemented. First, independent local certification systems could provide a less bureaucratic and region-specific alternative to national organic certification. Such systems, as explored by Kaufmann et al. 2023, could maintain high sustainability standards while reducing the administrative and economic burdens on producers. Second, cooperative models could integrate more flexible policies that accommodate diverse agricultural practices. For example, pilot projects within cooperatives could test low-input farming

methods, allowing for incremental innovation without disrupting existing structures. This approach aligns with Andreola et al. (2021) and Forno and Andreola (2022), who advocate for adaptive governance models that balance economic efficiency with environmental sustainability.

Third, partnerships between CSAs and agricultural research institutions could facilitate access to resources and knowledge for sustainable cultivation techniques. Public funding, subsidies, tax incentives and a simplification of the regulatory framework from local governments could offset the costs of transitioning to sustainable practices and support research programs focused on reducing pesticide reliance. These measures are consistent with the recommendations of Giovannini and Forno (2023), who argue that public institutions play a critical role in fostering sustainable agricultural transitions. As Geels (2002) argues, transitions to sustainable agricultural systems require not only technological innovation but also changes in legal infrastructure, institutional practices, and societal norms.

4.5.2.2 Intersection with the Retail Regime

The integration of Community Supported Agriculture (CSA) models into contemporary food systems is hindered by entrenched shopping practices within the conventional retail regime. It is evident that pandemic pressure (i.e. landscape) has not been sufficient to disrupt these practices and create opportunities for those proposed by the niche. The retail system's emphasis on convenience, affordability, and accessibility conflicts with key elements of the CSA niche, such as consumer involvement in role-sharing, decision-making, and alternative purchasing and distribution methods. This tension highlights the structural and cultural barriers that limit the adoption of CSA practices, as well as the dominance of the conventional retail regime in shaping consumer behavior.

A central point of this study is the mechanism of infrastructural lock-ins determined by the retail regime, i.e. the pervasive influence of supermarkets and their alignment with modern, convenience-oriented lifestyles. As noted by participants, the ubiquity and simplicity of supermarket shopping make it a preferred choice for many consumers:

“We still buy at Poli or Orvea because it's close to work, and there are things we can't find in the CSA” (M1).

“Supermarkets have taught consumers like me that things are quick and easy; I arrive, get what I need, pay, and leave without hassle” (M12).

These reflections underscore the stability and dominance of the conventional retail regime, reflecting the cultural lock-in created by the alignment of supermarket practices with societal norms of convenience and efficiency where time-saving practices are deeply embedded in daily life (Shove, 2003; Warde, 1999). Indeed, the appeal of supermarkets is particularly strong in the context of modern lifestyles, characterized by accelerated routines and multitasking. As Shove (2003) notes, the temporal pressures of contemporary life often relegate activities such as shopping, cooking, and eating to secondary tasks, disrupting traditional mealtime rhythms. This dynamic marginalizes alternative models like CSAs, which require more deliberate and time-intensive engagement. For instance, one participant remarked, *“CSA shopping is good, but supermarkets are essential” (M12)*

Another significant lock-in to CSA adoption is the economic structuring of the retail regime, which relies on aggressive pricing strategies to maintain its dominance. Due to the advantage of economies of scale, supermarkets often sell produce below cost, creating a price disparity that makes CSA products appear less competitive, as mentioned by participants:

"Supermarkets sell produce below cost, but no one questions who covers the difference—the farmer, the truck driver, or the supermarket clerk?" (P6).

"CSA prices are much higher than the vegetables from Natura Sì, for example, and there's no comparison with supermarket prices" (M12).

These pricing strategies, as discussed by Monteiro et al. (2013), not only reinforce the economic dominance of supermarkets but also obscure the hidden costs of conventional food systems, such as environmental degradation and labor exploitation.

To address these challenges, CSAs must develop strategies that bridge the gap between their reconnection-based practices and the convenience-driven retail regime. First, partnerships with local governments and public institutions could establish subsidized programs to offset the higher costs of CSA participation, particularly for low-income households. Such programs could include voucher systems or tax credits tied to sustainable food purchases, as suggested by Jilcott Pitts (2021). These measures would not only improve accessibility but also align with broader policy goals of promoting sustainable food systems.

Second, CSAs could enhance their value proposition by emphasizing the freshness, nutritional quality, and ethical production of their products. Marketing campaigns could educate consumers on the hidden costs of supermarket pricing, fostering a deeper understanding of the social and environmental benefits of CSA models. This approach aligns with the recommendations of Seyfang (2006), who argues that AFNs must actively communicate their unique value to compete with conventional retail systems.

Third, implementing dynamic pricing models within CSAs—such as offering discounts for surplus produce or sliding-scale memberships based on income—could improve accessibility while

maintaining economic sustainability for farmers. These measures would address the economic barriers identified in this study and make CSA participation more inclusive.

Finally, CSA initiatives could create alliances with other local food producers or small retailers to expand product variety, replicating some of the convenience of supermarkets without compromising their principles. Offering pick-up points at workplaces or public transport hubs could also improve accessibility for time-constrained consumers. These strategies, along with some of the previously mentioned ones, resonate with the concept of "hybrid food networks" (Ilbery & Maye, 2005), which combine the strengths of alternative and conventional systems to meet diverse consumer needs.

4.6 Conclusion

This article explored the dynamics of Alternative Food Networks (AFNs) through an in-depth analysis of NaturalMente in Trentino CSA. By integrating the Multi-Level Perspective (MLP) and Social Practice Theory (SPT), the study reveals how entrenched socio-technical regimes and everyday practices interact to shape the scalability and sustainability of grassroots innovations like CSA. The findings align with previous research on the challenges of scaling AFNs (Galt et al., 2012; Bonfert, 2022), while offering new insights into the specific mechanisms that hinder CSA adoption, such as competition with private gardens, rigid delivery systems, and misaligned culinary practices. These results underscore the importance of addressing both structural and behavioral lock-ins to foster sustainable transitions in agri-food systems.

The case of NaturalMente in Trentino highlights the tension between niche innovations and dominant regimes, particularly in regions with strong cooperative systems like Trentino. This aligns

with many relevant studies applying the Multi-Level Perspective (Geels, 2002; Smith et al., 2010; Geels, 2011), which emphasize the resilience of established regimes and the difficulty of integrating alternative practices. However, our findings also reveal that CSA challenges extend beyond regime resistance, encompassing everyday practices such as cooking, shopping, and gardening. This broader perspective highlights how systemic change requires disrupting deeply entrenched routines and reconfiguring interconnected practices, aligning with the latest theoretical developments on these approaches (Nicolini, 2016; Keller et al., 2022).

The implications of these findings are significant for both policymakers and practitioners. To support CSA scalability, policymakers should prioritize streamlining organic certification processes, subsidizing participation for low-income households, and fostering partnerships between CSAs and agricultural research institutions. These measures align with recommendations by Laforge et al. (2017) and Giovannini et al. (2024), who advocate for institutional support to overcome structural barriers. Practitioners, on the other hand, should focus on enhancing CSA accessibility through flexible delivery systems, user-friendly digital platforms, and community-building initiatives that foster culinary creativity and food literacy. These strategies align with the literature on AFNs (Seyfang, 2006), which advocates for adapting to changing consumer behavior while preserving core values.

In a broader context, this study contributes to the growing discourse on sustainable transitions by demonstrating the value of integrating MLP and SPT to analyze grassroots innovations. Future research should explore several related dimensions. For instance, this paper suggests a potentially significant role for instruments such as subsidies and tax incentives. Analyzing the feasibility of these policy instruments in CSA strategies could help bridge the gap between niche experimentation and regime-wide transformation, enhancing CSA scalability by supporting producers and expanding

consumer access. Concurrently, ongoing observation of this and other grassroots innovations, along with their adaptation strategies, is essential to evaluate the potential of hybrid food networks that integrate the strengths of alternative and conventional systems. By addressing these issues and limitations, scholars and practitioners can develop more effective strategies for fostering resilient and equitable food systems in diverse contexts.

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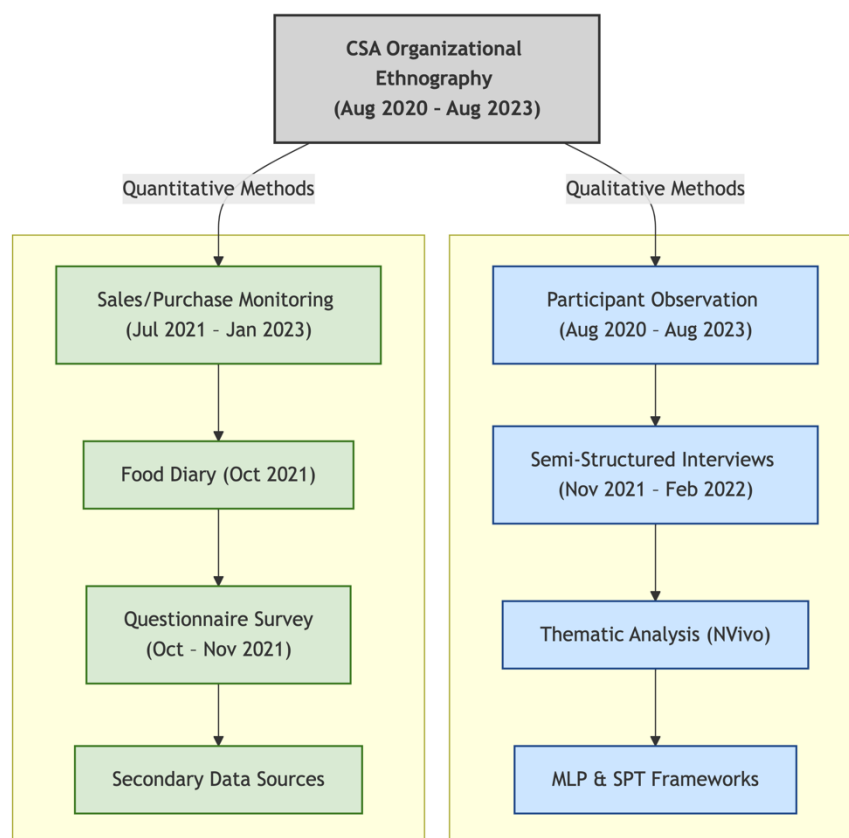
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Appendix A — Graphical Overview of Applied Methods



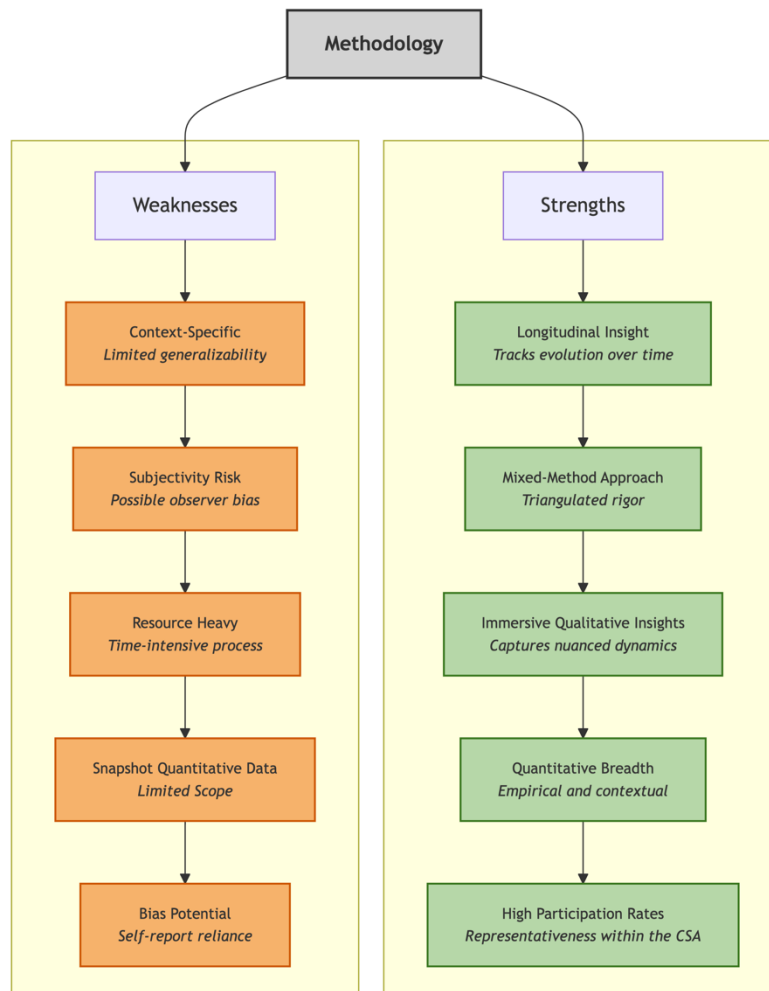
Appendix B — Interview List

Code	Role	Gender	Age Class
P1	Farmer (Fruits, flowers)	M	60+
P2	Farmer (Vegetables, fruits)	M	40-49
P3	Farmer (CSA President, vegetables, fruits)	F	40-49
P4	Farmer (Wine)	F	20-29
P5	Farmer (Fruit, vegetables, cereals)	M	50-59
P6	Farmer (Flowers, fruits)	F	60+
P7	Farmer (Wine)	M	30-39

P8	Farmer (Cheese, yoghurt, milk)	F	50-59
P9	Farmer (Cattle)	F	50-59
M1	Consumer	M	40-49
M2	Consumer (CSA Vice-President)	M	40-49
M3	Consumer	F	20-29
M4	Consumer	F	40-49
M5	Consumer	F	50-59
M6	Consumer	F	40-49
M7	Consumer	M	40-49
M8	Consumer	M	40-49
M9	Consumer	F	50-59
M10	Consumer	F	30-39
M11	Consumer	M	60+
M12	Consumer	M	50-59
M13	Consumer	F	40-49
M14	Consumer	F	50-59
M15	Consumer	F	40-49
M16	Consumer	F	30-39
M17	Consumer	F	40-49
M18	Consumer	F	40-49
M19	Consumer	F	20-29
M20	Consumer	F	40-49
M21	Consumer	F	50-59
M22	Consumer	M	60+

M23	Consumer	F	30-39
M24	Consumer	F	50-59
M25	Consumer	F	30-39
M26	Consumer	F	30-39
M27	Consumer	M	20-29

Appendix C – Strengths and Weaknesses of the Methodology



CHAPTER 5. TRACING DEMOCRATIC INNOVATIONS: A LONGITUDINAL PERSPECTIVE ON A FOOD POLICY COUNCIL

Mattia Andreola, Francesca Forno, Michela Giovannini

Abstract

Food systems are undergoing rapid transformation driven by evolving consumer and producer demands, technological advancements, financialization, and climate change. In response, municipalities around the globe are establishing Food Policy Councils (FPCs), multi-stakeholder roundtables designed to craft comprehensive and sustainable food policies. FPCs are crucial in addressing global food system challenges, promoting food citizenship, and emphasizing justice, rights, and local control over food systems. This article, centered on a case study of Nutrire Trento ("Feeding Trento")—a FPC initiative in Trento, Italy—employs an ethnographic approach combining in-depth interviews, field notes, and direct observation from the outset. It explores how democratic innovations of this nature emerge and respond to the complexities of modern food systems through collaborative governance and sustainable practices. The research uniquely integrates the Multi-Level Perspective (MLP) with Event Structure Analysis (ESA) to trace the historical development of Nutrire Trento. It identifies key enabling and disabling factors that shape its trajectory. The findings reveal a dynamic interplay between institutional support, crises, and grassroots initiatives, contributing to the literature by providing a nuanced understanding of the power dynamics and strategies that drive these democratic efforts.

5.1 Introduction

Food systems are undergoing significant change due to many factors, including consumer and producer demands, technological advancements, financialization, and climate change. The dominant industrial model of food production is proving unstable, characterized by corporate control and reliance on fossil fuels and chemical inputs. Policies often prioritize economic growth over equitable access to healthy and culturally appropriate food, perpetuating low wages, poor labor conditions, and limited access to nutritious food for many. Furthermore, decision-making is disproportionately influenced by large corporations, resulting in ineffective policies.

However, these challenges also create opportunities for more sustainable and just food systems, as demonstrated by the rise of movements like fair trade, food justice, and food sovereignty. This growing critical awareness of the industrial food system has increasingly shaped governance processes, with diverse stakeholders actively promoting alternative methods of production, distribution, and consumption. These transitional processes have led to the emergence of various democratic innovations, such as Food Policy Councils (FPCs), multi-stakeholder roundtables designed to develop comprehensive and sustainable food policies. FPCs are essential for addressing global food system challenges, fostering food citizenship, and prioritizing justice, rights, and local control over food systems. By bringing together institutions, businesses, and civil society, FPCs empower citizens—in their varied roles as consumers, producers, distributors, administrators, and scientists—to engage in, plan, implement, and evaluate sustainable food system initiatives. Such initiatives have been established worldwide under various names, including “Food Policy Council,” “Food Alliance,” “Food Policy Coalition,” “Food Policy Alliance,” “Food Council,” “Food Forum,” and “Regional Food Project” (Michel et al., 2022).

Scholars have examined these deliberative arenas from various perspectives, focusing on institutional power, participant needs and strategies, the importance of stability and resource availability over time, and the crucial role of local authorities in steering urban food governance processes (Moragues-Faus & Battersby, 2021). Additionally, research has highlighted that the support provided by local authorities is contingent upon political will, available resources, and the prevailing culture of participation (Kang et al., 2022; Zerbian et al., 2022). These factors further underscore how local governance dynamics influence the effectiveness of urban food governance mechanisms in connecting and sustaining local food systems.

Despite these insights, a research gap remains in understanding the interaction between local governance contexts, urban food governance mechanisms, and local food systems. Specifically, there is insufficient focus on how the roles and approaches of local authorities, in conjunction with the internal dynamics of local food systems, shape the efforts of democratic innovations such as FPCs (Kang et al., 2022; Zerbian et al., 2022). To address this gap, a broader conceptual framework is needed—one that encompasses both spatial and temporal dimensions—to identify the factors that enable or hinder the continuity, sustainability, or scalability of democratic innovations fostered by these arenas.

This study aims to fill this gap by analyzing the FPC process of *Nutrire Trento*, an urban food policy initiative in the city of Trento. Specifically, it seeks to address the following research questions: How do FPC originate and evolve? What are the enabling or disabling factors? To explore these questions, the paper introduces an innovative combination of Multi-Level Perspective (MLP) heuristics and an analytical approach grounded in Event Structure Analysis. As will be demonstrated, this combination effectively guides the interpretation of events and clarifies the different stages of

complex processes by identifying and visualizing their nonlinearity and the roles of various actors involved.

Beyond providing a clearer understanding of the unfolding processes within such democratic innovations, this approach also enhances the MLP framework. While MLP is often praised for its descriptive power, it has been criticized for lacking specific guidelines or methodological tools for empirical analysis (Holtz et al., 2008; El Bilali, 2019). By addressing these critiques, the proposed approach offers a more prescriptive application of MLP, while also drawing greater attention to the role of power dynamics in shaping outcomes—an aspect that MLP has traditionally underemphasized (Welch and Warde, 2015).

The paper is structured as follows: The next section reviews relevant literature and concepts. The third section introduces the study context and explains the analytical method. The fourth section presents the results of the Event Structure Analysis, tracing the history of Nutrire Trento. The fifth section discusses these results within the Multi-Level Perspective, highlighting key moments. Finally, the conclusion summarizes the findings, their contribution to the literature on FPCs as deliberative arenas, and offers reflections on the analytical method and the use of Event Structure Analysis.

5.2 Theoretical Framework: Food Policy Councils as Democratic Innovations

Food Policy Councils (FPCs) serve as governance tools that connect stakeholders with food-related issues, defining action spheres, objectives, and processes for policy implementation and measurement (Calori & Magarini, 2015). Typically operating at local, regional, or municipal levels, some FPCs also function at state, provincial, or national levels (Mooney, 2022). Their local focus aligns with the "localist (food) strategy," which offers both opportunities and challenges for broader

influence (*ibid.*). FPCs exhibit a range of organizational structures, from non-profit organizations to hybrid models, with some integrated into local government frameworks (Santo, 2019). Despite their diversity, all FPCs share a common goal: to promote "food democracy" by establishing new deliberative arenas (Bassarab et al., 2019; Sieveking, 2019).

In recent years, public policy has increasingly emphasized the importance of public deliberation as a means to devise innovative and effective solutions to societal challenges. Different forms of deliberative democracy are recognized as innovative ways to reconnect citizens with governance (Hebinck & Oostindie, 2018; Penco et al., 2021), as they involve designing solutions to specific societal needs. These innovations aim to reimagine and enhance citizen involvement in governance by expanding opportunities for participation, deliberation, and influence (Elstub & Escobar, 2019).

As part of this democratic innovation, deliberative arenas have emerged as mechanisms to rethink the role of the public sector in addressing complex contemporary challenges (Bryson et al., 2014). Such collaborative and deliberative governance arrangements represent important democratic innovation aiming at addressing critical social needs, fostering stakeholder collaboration, empowering marginalized communities, driving systemic change, and promoting sustainability (Howaldt & Schwarz, 2010; Mulgan, 2006; Moulaert et al., 2013; Candel, 2022). The significance of these arenas lies in engaging diverse sectors in collaborative efforts to design and implement programs or services that meet social objectives (Ziegler, 2017). This form of governance typically aims to bring together multiple stakeholders, including public agencies, in forums for consensus-driven decision-making (Ansell & Gash, 2008). It underscores the importance of involving a broad network of stakeholders in public management and fostering partnerships between the public sector, businesses, and nonprofit organizations to advance public policy agendas (Osborne, 2006). At the local level, strategies involving private (for-profit and nonprofit) and public actors have emerged in the form of mini-publics

and participatory budgeting. Collaboration between different actors within these arenas arises from interactions among a constellation of interests that can sometimes diverge significantly (Baglioni et al., 2017). For instance, while traditional industrial actors often prioritize profit maximization and economic efficiency, nonprofit organizations focus on the impact of their services on individuals and communities. These stakeholders come together to engage in consensus-driven decision-making processes that influence the dynamics of local food production. They navigate divergent interests to reach consensus, designing collaborative processes that facilitate effective change and address potential obstacles, including strategies for scaling proposed initiatives. Public actors, such as local or national governments, must balance the pursuit of the common good with the need to mediate between competing demands (Galli et al., 2019).

FPCs are part of these broader efforts to “democratize democracy”. Their aim is to transform the food systems that have become increasingly commercialized, industrialized, expanded, and globalized over the past century. In this specific case, the challenges addressed and the initiatives promoted pertain to the democratic sphere as well as the socio-economic and environmental spheres (Matthies et al., 2019; Stamm et al., 2017). FPCs function as networks or arenas that link the goal of sustainability with aspirations for democracy and good governance. By addressing the unsustainability of current food systems, FPCs aim to initiate participatory and deliberative processes among farmers, food entrepreneurs, consumers, and other stakeholders. They operate on the premise that fostering dialogue and collaboration among all food system actors can contribute to solving problems and moving food systems toward sustainability.

5.2.1 A Multi Level Perspective on Food Policy Council Development

The multilevel perspective (MLP) is a theory developed by Frank Geels to study the dynamics of socio-technical transitions. It integrates concepts from evolutionary economics, structuration

theory, and neo-institutional theory to view transitions as non-linear processes resulting from the interaction of developments at three analytical levels: niches, socio-technical regimes, and landscapes (Geels, 2002; 2005; 2007).

At the micro level, niches are the locus of radical innovations. They act as protected spaces where novel technologies and practices can develop without the pressures of the prevailing market or regulatory frameworks. Niches are crucial as they allow innovations to grow and potentially challenge or integrate with existing regimes. These innovations might emerge in isolation but often aim to replace or coexist symbiotically with the existing regime, depending on their nature (Geels and Schot, 2010). The meso level, constituted by socio-technical regimes, refers to established systems including networks of actors, social groups, rules, and material elements that stabilize these systems. A regime is predominantly stable, and maintained through the alignment and co-evolution of its components (Geels and Schot, 2010). However, regimes are not immutable. They can experience destabilization through internal tensions or external pressures, creating windows of opportunity for niche innovations to influence or replace the regime (Geels and Schot, 2007; Van Driel and Schot, 2005). The macro level, or socio-technical landscape, encompasses external trends and events such as cultural shifts, economic trends, and major crises like pandemics or climate change. While landscape changes are typically slower and less abrupt, they can significantly impact regimes by either stabilizing or destabilizing them, thereby influencing transition dynamics (Van Driel and Schot, 2005; Geels and Schot, 2010).

MLP posits that transitions occur when there are substantial changes in how societal functions are performed, often through regime change. Such changes are facilitated by the interaction between innovations at the niche level, stability and dynamics at the regime level, and broader shifts at the

landscape level (Geels, 2011). The process is highly non-linear and involves multiple actors and factors across these levels.

In practice, MLP has been applied to study transitions in sectors such as transportation and energy, where technological niches have played a significant role (Geels, 2002). More recently, MLP has been increasingly applied to sustainability transitions, informing governance interventions aimed at fostering such transitions (Shove and Walker, 2008). It has also expanded to include civil society-driven democratic innovations, focusing on ‘participatory governance’, such as deliberative arenas (Skelcher and Torfing, 2010). Indeed, MLP provides a broad conceptual framework for understanding these processes, illustrating how democratic innovations are influenced by the relationships of the three levels described above (Ciasullo et al, 2020).

At the same time, MLP is criticised because its descriptive and interpretive connotations lack specific methodological tools or procedures for the empirical analysis of how and why factors are assigned to theoretical levels (Berkhout et al., 2004). Geels (2014) points out that many scholars focus heavily on niche-level innovations, treating regimes only as barriers, rather than exploring how regimes can be destabilised and how innovations can align with or challenge existing systems. Furthermore, Geels (2011) also acknowledges that the landscape level is treated like a “residual garbage can”. This is partly due to the unclear boundaries of the system. Holtz et al. pointed out in 2008 that "what actually is 'the regime' to be researched and possibly managed is not, however, usually given through clear system boundaries, but is a matter of framing and deliberation" (p. 623). This challenge remains common in research on agrifood sustainability transitions (El Bilali, 2019).

Furthermore, the time frame has been scarcely and only recently addressed (Van der Windt and Swart, 2018; Dannenberg et al., 2020; Averbuch et al., 2021; de Boon et al., 2022), partly as a result of certain shocks, such as COVID-19, which have the potential to accelerate the pace of change

(Roberts and Geels, 2019; Leeuwis et al., 2021). For all these reasons, we believe that Event Structure Analysis provides a valuable integrative element, as it allows a clear definition and operationalisation of events, helping translate the broad concepts of MLP (niches, regimes, landscapes) into specific and measurable events and processes.

5.3 Context and Methodology

5.3.1 The Nutrire Trento Project: Beyond Food

The City of Trento, the capital of the Autonomous Province of Trento, is located in an Alpine region with a population of around 540,000, of which 120,000 reside in Trento. The province features diverse topography, including valleys, medium-altitude spaces, and high mountains, with agriculture conducted on terraces due to the challenging terrain. Forests and pastures cover 70% of the area, while cultivated land accounts for 9%. There are about 16,500 agricultural companies, with small farms predominating. The Gross Saleable Production (GSP) from agriculture and forestry amounts to 698.4 million euros. Key activities include fruit growing, particularly apple production, and viticulture. The cooperative model, which processes 80% of wine production, enhances economic resilience but may hinder sustainable practices.

Historically, Trentino's agriculture was diverse, but it has never been self-sufficient. The region faced harsh conditions during the Little Ice Age and lacked central support throughout various socio-political changes. The establishment of an Agrarian Institute and the cooperative movement in the 19th century shifted agriculture towards monoculture. Specialized viticulture and fruit growing surged in the mid-20th century due to mechanization and the cooperative system, leading to economic prosperity. Today, five main producer organizations manage 95% of Trentino's fruit and vegetable

production, following EU regulations. Despite a context in which the conventional supply chain is largely predominant, there is still a significant presence of several alternative food networks (AFNs) – such as Solidarity Purchase Groups³ – that emerged to reterritorialize, resocialize, and relocalize food systems by facilitating direct relationships between producers and consumers (Andreola et al. 2021). These AFNs aim to redistribute bargaining power throughout the supply chain, offering small-scale farmers the opportunity to reposition themselves in a globalized agrifood system in which they often struggle due to higher production costs and prices than in conventional supply chains (Aubree et al., 2013).

The 'Nutrire Trento' project emerged within this context as a deliberative arena focused on addressing food and nutrition challenges. Initiated in 2017 by the Municipality of Trento in collaboration with the University of Trento, the project was launched under the UniCittà memorandum of understanding. Its primary goal is to strengthen the local food system by preserving biodiversity, promoting circular economy principles, raising awareness about conscious consumption and sustainable production, and fostering collaboration between urban and rural stakeholders. Through these efforts, 'Nutrire Trento' seeks to create a more resilient and integrated local food system bridging the gap between the city and its surrounding agricultural areas.

Similarly to other FPCs (Sieveking, 2019), Nutrire Trento, operates without official leaders, although the municipal administration guides the identification and implementation of policies. Monthly meetings, facilitated by a local administrator, involve participants from government, academia and non-profit organisations. Over one hundred actors have engaged in this democratic innovation, grounded in principles of inclusiveness, popular control, weighted judgment, and transparency. After each meeting, minutes are taken and distributed via a mailing list that currently

³ Known in Italian as 'Gruppi d'Acquisto Solidale' (GAS) (Forno et al., 2015)

has 115 members. Furthermore, this multistakeholder participatory table organizes in-depth discussions and conferences, also supported by European projects. The main topics are food education, producer markets and public catering. Despite periods of inactivity, the Roundtable is now fully active.

5.3.2 Event Process Analysis: Understanding Phenomena Through Sequences and Patterns

The following analysis is grounded in an extensive ethnographic study. Two of the authors have been involved in the Nutrire Trento process since its inception, while the third author has participated for over two years. This collaborative involvement allowed for continuous discussion about the process, leveraging each author's expertise, background, and perspectives to provide a comprehensive and nuanced understanding of the initiative.

Since 2017, a diverse range of data has been collected, including analyses of meeting minutes, ongoing participant observation in both formal meetings and informal settings (summarized in Table 6), and in-depth interviews. The interviewees (listed in Appendix D) were selected through a purposive sampling process based on two main criteria: first, their frequency of participation in meetings, as those who attended most regularly were expected to have a thorough understanding of the FPCs dynamics; second, representation from each participant category to ensure a balanced perspective. Consequently, the interviews comprised: four representatives from farmers' unions, four independent farmers and civic association members, three institutional representatives and Solidarity Purchase Group members, two members from Food Recovery NGOs, and one each from shopkeepers, local catering cooperative employees, and local solidarity economy representatives.

Table 6 – List of employed methodologies

Methodology	Timing	Description
Participant Observation	From 4 October 2017 to date	Continuous monitoring to capture the development of initiatives and relevant details. It includes informal moments.
Field Notes	From 4 October 2017 to present	Minutes taken for each Table meeting, keeping track of participants, their affiliation, decisions, debates and significant comments, also with the support of audio recordings.
In-depth Interviews	30 January to 25 August 2020	Twenty-three interviews conducted with participants of the Nutrire Trento Table.
Follow-up Interview	19 September 2023	Additional interview with the manager of the Municipality of Trento.

The following analysis utilizes a specific type of process analysis known as Event Structure Analysis to systematically organize and interpret the extensive data collected. Unlike variance research, which examines relationships between dependent and independent variables, process analysis focuses on understanding phenomena through patterns observed in sequences of events (Freitas et al., 2021).

In process theories, events—defined as actions by an agent affecting an object at a specific time—are central components. These events can include decisions, meetings, or even simple gestures such as handshakes. The interpretation and identification of these event sequences involve a theoretical examination of their meaning within the studied context (Heise, 1989, 1991; Freitas et al., 2021; de Melo et al., 2021).

Overall, process research emphasizes the historical explanation of macro outcomes that develop over time, focusing on understanding and interpreting sequences of events within their cultural and contextual settings. Once events are identified, they are sequenced chronologically to explore potential causal connections. While chronological ordering is essential for historical explanation, it alone does

not imply causation. However, arranging events in sequence helps narrow down the possible causal connections that need to be evaluated (Heise, 1997).

As customary in this type of research, findings have been validated through consultations with interviewees to ensure the accuracy and reliability of the event sequencing.

5.4 Analysis: Unpacking the Process by Unfolding Events

The list of events is detailed in Table 7, with corresponding connections illustrated in Appendix E. The Event Structure Analysis reveals that the development of the FPC can be delineated into three distinct phases: the initial phase, the phase during the COVID-19 pandemic, and the phase following the installation of the new administration up to the present.

Table 7 – Event list.

Event Name	Event Description	Date	Agency
1. Memorandum of Understanding	The signing of a memorandum of understanding between the University and the Municipality of Trento, incorporating the project into the UniCittà framework.	15 May 2016	Partnership
2. Initiation	The Municipality and the University of Trento initiated the "Nutrire Trento" project.	2 June 2017	Project design
3. First Public Meetings and Table Establishment	Inaugural meeting of the Nutrire Trento Working Table with stakeholders, including officials, researchers, and citizens.	4 October 2017	Project launch
4. Funding secured	10,500 euros from UniCittà project are secured as seed funding.	October 2017	Allocate funds

5. Online Mapping Tool	Decision to develop an online mapping tool to visualise short supply chain experiences and launch public communication activities.	Late 2017	Project launch
6. Initial Stakeholder Engagement	Identification of key stakeholders and their roles within the project, including producers, GAS groups, and associations.	Late 2017 - May 2018	Identify partners
7. Conflict Over Inclusion Criteria	Disagreements arise regarding the inclusion of non-organic certified producers.	28 May 2018	Conflict
8. Withdrawal of the GAS groups	The disagreements lead to the temporary withdrawal of some groups.	12 June 2018	Leave project
9. Logo Creation	Creation of the Nutrire Trento logo through a youth competition and the development of an animated informational video.	28 September 2018	Project launch
10. SATURN	Joining the consortium of the European project SATURN to receive the assistance of a European network of technicians and researchers	1 November 2018	Join Network
11. Platform	Creation of the project's online platform	14 March 2019	New Tool
12. Key Events and Conferences	Organized Agriculture Festival, Biodiversity Days, Researchers' Night, and the "Food, Territory and Sustainability" conference to refine objectives, build networks, and engage citizens.	30 August 2019	Organize Public Events
13. Public Engagement	Distributed postcards to gather citizen feedback on improving Trento's food system.	27 September 2019	Engage citizens
14. Joining the Milan Urban Food Policy Pact	Trento joins the Milan Urban Food Policy Pact, committing to sustainable food systems.	1 October 2019	Join Network
15. Food, Territory and Sustainability	Participants discussed the agri-food chain, advancing goals. Similar cities shared initiatives and began local food policy discussions.	16 November 2019	Public Event

16. COVID-19 Pandemic and lockdowns	The pandemic and lockdown disrupt global and local food systems.	9 March 2020	Contingent Event
17. COVID-19 Pandemic Adaptation	Transition to online meetings and launch of home delivery services to support local producers during the pandemic.	11 March 2020	Restructure
18. Partnership between the Municipality and Trentino Solidale	The Municipality of Trento and Trentino Solidale collaborated to redistribute 900 kilos of fresh food from public canteens to those in need.	30 March 2020	Partnership
19. “Trento si aiuta”	The Municipality and Trentino Solidale launched a volunteer service to assist the elderly with shopping and pharmacy needs, helping them stay home.	2 April 2020	Project launch
20. Nutrire Trento #Fase2	Nutrire Trento #Fase2 launched, focusing on home delivery, supporting local food supply chains, and investigating pandemic-driven consumption changes.	16 May 2020	Project launch
21. NT #Fase2 Analysis	Analysis of questionnaires and purchasing flows uncovers previously ignored issues.	8 August 2020	Project analysis
22. Municipal Elections	Trento municipal election campaign features Nutrire Trento in several political programmes.	20 September 2020	Elections
23. Administrative Changes	Municipal elections lead to a new mayor and administrative reshuffling, affecting the project's governance.	21 September 2020	Restructure
24. Community Supported Agriculture (CSA) Development	A CSA project is established, driven by grassroots efforts and research collaborations with the University of Trento.	September 2020-01 April 2021	Project launch
25. Challenges in Stakeholder Participation	Struggles in reconvening the Nutrire Trento Roundtable and decreased participation from key stakeholders.	2021	Crisis

26. University representative reduced involvement	University research team decreases its involvement to give a signal against the inertia of the project.	26 May 2021	Protest
27. Referendum on Organic Farming	A divisive referendum on increasing organic farming in Trentino is organized.	28 July 2021	Contingent Event
28. Referendum boycott	Farmer representatives opposed the referendum, citing harm to the sector.	September 2021	Cooperation failure
29. Referendum ignored by Institutions	No position taken by the Nutrire Trento Round Table or any other local institution.	03 September 2021	Cooperation failure
30 City councillors support referendum	Despite the lack of an official institutional position, two city councillors stand in favour of the referendum	24 September 2021	Protest
31. Referendum Failure	The referendum fails due to low voter turnout.	26 September 2021	Cooperation failure
32. Renewed Focus on Food Policy Plan	A structured process begins within the municipal administration to develop a local food strategy, driven by city councillors' motions.	05 September 2022	Restructure
33. City Council's Unanimous Decision	The City Council unanimously commits to developing a local food strategy, advancing sustainable food policies.	14 September 2022	Strategy approved
34. SURFIT Project	Winning the European SURFIT Project's call renewed university-municipality collaboration, providing resources to further local food policy efforts.	08 July 2023	Partnership
35. Designation of the new councillor in charge	The new municipal government representative for land and public works is tasked with supporting Nutrire Trento's developments.	26 October 2023	Restructure

36. New official hired	A new official is hired exclusively to focus on issues related to Nutrire Trento.	28 December 2023	Restructure
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5.4.1 *The Inception Phase of 'Nutrire Trento' (Events 1-15)*

As previously discussed, the ‘Nutrire Trento’ project, launched in 2017 through a partnership between the Municipality and the University of Trento, aims to transform Trento's food supply system by strengthening relationships among local actors. Its primary objectives are to promote sustainable urban and peri-urban agriculture, facilitate direct interactions between producers and consumers, and support short supply chains and direct sales.

Although Nutrire Trento began in 2017, the first significant milestone was the signing of the UniCittà memorandum of understanding between the university and the municipality in May 2016 (event 1), marking a pivotal moment for the project. As one participant noted:

“The turning point was the inclusion of this vision, this project in the University-Municipality of Trento memorandum, Unicità. On the one hand, the competencies of the university, of research, study, laboratories. On the other hand, combining these competencies with those of the municipal administration, thus the political value of such a project that was supported by the municipal council and the mayor.” (Int_23)

Upon its formalization (event 2), the Nutrire Trento project sought to raise awareness of sustainable production and consumption, integrate food education in schools, provide training for farmers, and improve local product logistics. The initial phase involved several key steps: creating a participatory multi-stakeholder roundtable (event 3), allocating funds to support the initiative (event 4), conducting a snowball mapping of existing sustainable food networks (event 5), and identifying key stakeholders (event 6). The initiative's inclusive approach engaged various stakeholders from the

outset, including producers, citizens, researchers, public schools, economic sectors, cultural associations, and professionals. Established networks, such as those of the municipality and university, played a crucial role in this process.

However, the Municipality of Trento's approach to including all types of short supply farmers (i.e. local family farmers who sell directly their produce to consumers via farmers markets or other short supply chain), both conventional and organic, led to an initial conflict (event 7). Some participants felt this inclusion was inconsistent with the project's sustainability goals, resulting in protest from the Solidarity Purchase Groups, who decided to withdraw from the table (event 8). The history of Alternative Food Networks (AFNs) in Trentino, including the Tavolo dell'Economia Solidale Trentina and initiatives like the “Fa’ la Cosa Giusta!” fair⁴, influenced this dynamic. Despite institutional recognition and funding, AFNs in Trento have been less inclined to collaborate with other local players compared to similar movements elsewhere.

“The conflict between the institutions and Solidarity Purchase Groups. I don't think it has been completely resolved yet (...) they are realities where they like to be closed in upon themselves, in their little niche.” (Int_2)

Following this initial phase, the Nutrire Trento Table faced the challenge of expanding its participation beyond the initial stakeholders. Recognizing the need for a broader approach, the project adopted various strategies of stakeholder engagement and networking. The first step was to launch a call for young people in the city to create a logo and a promotional video (event 9). Secondly, participation in several events central to city life were planned (event 12): the Agriculture Fair,

⁴ Fa' la cosa giusta! (Do the right thing!) is a local fair aimed at bringing consumers closer to organic farmers, fair trade shops, associations, social cooperatives and in general to introduce farms, projects and good practices in the local area.

Biodiversity Days, and Researchers' Night were ideas about how to “better feed the city” were gathered from citizens via a post-card (event 13).

The period concluded with two significant developments for Nutrire Trento. First, the project became a signatory of the Milan Urban Food Policy Pact, an international initiative that brings together cities committed to developing sustainable local food strategies. Second, the project organized the ‘Food, Territory and Sustainability’ conference (event 14), which was the result of a thorough participatory process within the FPC. The conference addressed the challenges faced by the conventional food supply chain and explored potential goals for Nutrire Trento. It also facilitated exchanges of ideas and strategies with other cities facing similar challenges to Trento.

However, as discussions advanced in late 2019 and early 2020, the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic significantly disrupted the project's momentum, presenting new challenges for continuing its initiatives.

5.4.2 *The COVID-19 pandemic phase (16-21)*

The COVID-19 pandemic, with its progressive restrictions on citizens' freedom of movement culminating in a national lockdown (Event 16), exposed vulnerabilities in the food supply chain and heightened public awareness about the need for solutions.

"It is clear that at this time, and Covid has made us realize this, but it has made many people realize that it is not all taken for granted. So, we should understand that even agricultural production is not a foregone conclusion and that even if we go to the supermarket, we will not necessarily always find something. Because if we don't manage to maintain all that fair profitability to all functions from the producer who produces to the consumer who can have an income to buy, it becomes complicated, it is a balance that must be recovered." (Int_19)

“With the second phase, with the COVID emergency, all the theory that had been discussed up until the moment before was put into practice.” (Int_13)

The pandemic acted as an unprecedented catalyst for Nutrire Trento's activities. It reignited participant engagement, including those from Solidarity Purchase Groups who had previously disengaged. More critically, it prompted a shift in focus and approach. The FPC adopted a more proactive stance, shifting to online meetings and mobilizing 40 stakeholders (Event 17). It promoted home delivery services by identifying 71 companies interested in this modality, which were then publicized through the Nutrire Trento map. These measures supported local producers and highlighted a surge in consumer interest in local and sustainable products.

In response to these emerging needs, the Nutrire Trento #Fase2 project was launched (Event 20), funded by the initiative's budget and supported by 15 producers and 82 consumer households. This phase, led by dedicated coordinators and promoted through municipal social media channels, marked a significant step in aligning the project with the community's evolving needs for food security and local sustainability. Additionally, the City of Trento and the NGO Trentino Solidale (a local food bank) formed a crucial partnership to redistribute food from public canteens to those in need (Event 18). The volunteer service “Trento si aiuta” (Event 19) further supported community solidarity by assisting the elderly with essential tasks, minimizing their need to leave home.

During the pandemic, the University's research team conducted a study on the purchasing behaviors of consumers involved in NT #Fase2 (Event 21). The analysis revealed several issues: producers struggled to balance their daily operations with the demands of food delivery throughout various times of the day, and the gradual return to in-person work made continuous delivery less practical. Additionally, the limited product variety provided by local agriculture emerged, as even small producers in Trentino exhibited minimal diversification.

The pandemic's impact was compounded by municipal elections in September 2020, which brought a new mayor and potential shifts in governance and policy priorities for Trento. Despite these changes, the second phase of Nutrire Trento demonstrated the project's resilience and its commitment to community protection during the health crisis. The pandemic served as a catalyst for deeper engagement, innovative solutions, and a renewed emphasis on local food networks and social inclusion.

5.4.3 Consolidation and expansion phase (22-36)

The election of Trento's new administration (Event 22) initially raised hopes for the continuity of the Nutrire Trento project, particularly with the mayor's promises to enhance agricultural development and support local farmers. However, the transition to the new administration encountered several setbacks. These included the unexpected resignation of the councillor for ecological transition and subsequent administrative reshuffles within the municipal offices overseeing the Nutrire Trento initiative (Event 23). These changes introduced uncertainty regarding the future direction and implementation of the project.

Despite these obstacles, Nutrire Trento continued its efforts. Following an analysis of Phase 2 outcomes, the concept of Community Supported Agriculture (CSA) began gaining traction among the project's producers and consumers. The CSA project, initiated with the involvement of various university researchers and research groups, represents a bottom-up initiative to promote sustainable food practices and strengthen community ties (Event 24).

Nevertheless, the post-COVID-19 period introduced new challenges. Nutrire Trento struggled to engage key actors, such as Coldiretti and CIA (farmers' unions), who reduced their participation (Event 25). Frustration over the project's stagnation led university researchers to decrease their

involvement in the FPC, hoping to provoke a response from the institution (Event 26). Concurrently, the province of Trento was confronted with a divisive referendum aimed at expanding the area dedicated to organic farming (Event 27). Farmers' unions called for a boycott of the referendum (Event 28), while institutional actors lacked a coordinated strategy, with the municipal administration failing to take an official stance (Event 29). Despite this, a few councillors chose to support the referendum independently (Event 30). Ultimately, the referendum failed due to low voter turnout (Event 31).

This political climate significantly complicated the Nutrire Trento project's landscape, affecting stakeholder engagement and decision-making processes. Despite these challenges, efforts to develop a comprehensive food policy plan gained momentum, driven by a political motion from a group of city councillors advocating for a structured process within the municipal administration (Event 32). This push resulted in the appointment of a new, municipal government representative to oversee the Nutrire Trento initiative (Event 33) and the municipal council's unanimous decision to adopt a local food strategy (Event 34). This decision signalled a renewed commitment from the Municipality of Trento to advancing sustainable food policy.

Additionally, the need for new resources to support initiatives, including the hiring of a full-time municipal official, was identified. The renewed partnership between the Municipality and the University led to the successful application for the SURFIT project call (Event 35). This project unlocked new resources, enabling the hiring of a new official (Event 36) and laying the groundwork for future initiatives focused on food safety, environmental protection, and community well-being.

5.5 Discussion

The integration of Event Structure Analysis (ESA) with Multi-Level Perspective (MLP) in the analysis of Nutrire Trento has produced a precise understanding of how interactions between various societal levels can both enable and hinder the evolution of democratic innovations such as FPCs. ESA's focus on the sequence of events also provides clear insights into the interplay between niche, regime, and landscape forces.

The initial mobilization phase (Events 1-13) underscores the importance of building and integrating coalitions of diverse social actors as a critical step in the successful incubation of democratic innovations (Caniëls and Romijn, 2008; Amanatidou et al., 2024). The formalization of Nutrire Trento (Event 2), the establishment of a collaborative roundtable (Event 3), and the allocation of dedicated funds (Event 4) aimed at embedding sustainable practices within a broader framework, helped align the various participating actors around a shared vision. The inclusion of Solidarity Purchase Groups and other niche actors (Event 5) reflects the project's strategy of leveraging innovative practices to challenge and potentially transform the existing system. This approach aligns with Candel's (2022) concept of democratic innovations, suggesting that grassroots initiatives supported by diverse community coalitions are more likely to influence public policy.

However, the conflict between institutions and niche actors over the inclusion of both organic and conventional farmers (Event 7) underscores the challenges of reconciling divergent perspectives within a unified vision, as highlighted by Smith et al. (2005) in their study on socio-technical transitions. The withdrawal of Solidarity Purchase Groups from the collaborative table (Event 8) serves as a clear indication of the friction between niche and regime actors—a common theme in MLP literature, where niche innovations often struggle to gain legitimacy within established regimes (Raven, 2007). This initial phase of conflict (Event 7) is emblematic of the broader challenges that democratic innovations face in achieving acceptance and diffusion. The clash between niche actors,

such as Solidarity Purchase Groups and other associations backing the referendum, and regime actors, like agricultural unions defending conventional agriculture by opposing the expansion of organic farming, exemplifies this friction on a larger scale (Event 28).

The COVID-19 pandemic (Events 16-21) serves as a prime example of how landscape pressures can create windows of opportunity for democratic innovations. The health crisis acted as an exogenous shock, intensifying existing pressures, exposing vulnerabilities within the food supply chain, and pushing mayors and local policy makers to implement a series of policies and interventions to alleviate the impact of the crisis (Fattibene et al., 2023). This aligns with the MLP model, which suggests that crises can accelerate transitions by destabilizing entrenched regimes and opening avenues for niche expansion (Geels and Schot, 2007). The swift adaptation of the Nutrire Trento initiative, including the promotion of home delivery services (Event 17) and the launch of the Nutrire Trento #Phase2 project (Event 20), illustrates how crises can spur rapid organizational and strategic changes. The pandemic also facilitated niche empowerment, as evidenced by the growing consumer interest in local and sustainable products (Cohen 2020; Jribi et al. 2020; Forno et al. 2022). Beyond increasing consumer awareness, the organization of this and other municipally funded initiatives, such as Events 18 and 19, underscores the critical role that local authorities play in building sustainable local food systems by providing essential resources (Zerbian et al., 2022). With increased participation of previously disengaged actors, such as Solidarity Purchase Groups, this period saw a strengthening of relationships and mutual recognition among FPC actors. Additionally, the shift toward direct supply chain services and Community Supported Agriculture (CSA) (Event 24) demonstrates the capacity of innovation niches to adapt to changing societal needs. This aligns with Seyfang and Longhurst's (2013) findings on the resilience of grassroots innovations in response to external shocks.

The post-pandemic phase (Events 22-36) highlights the ongoing challenges and opportunities in sustaining and expanding the FPC. The election of a new administration (Event 22) initially raised hopes for continuity, given the interest shown in the initiative during the election campaign. However, administrative reshuffles (Event 23) and political dynamics, such as the divisive referendum on organic farming (Event 27), introduced new uncertainties.

The centrality of institutional support and resources (Bui et al., 2016) in fostering the growth of innovation niches becomes even more apparent through subsequent events. The reduced involvement of the university research group in the FPC process, as a form of protest against the project's inertia (Event 26), further underlined the centrality of knowledge-based barriers (Sonnino, 2023). Furthermore, along with the decision by some majority municipal councillors to support the referendum (Event 30), these forms of protest triggered a response from local institutions. The renewed commitment, culminating in a formal decision of the city council to develop a local food policy for a City of Trento (Event 33), underscores the importance of both horizontal and vertical power relations in democratic innovation processes. Finally, the renewed partnership between the municipality and university researchers (Event 35), the joint participation in the SURFIT project and the recruitment of a new official (Event 36) suggest a strategic institutional commitment to sustaining and scaling the initiative, but also mitigating the lack of financial and human resources identified in the literature as a key barrier to the development of these initiatives (Fattibene et al., 2023). However, only the next stages of the process will eventually confirm this trajectory.

Overall, the event structure analysis has helped to highlight the intricate dynamics between niches and innovation regimes. As shown, these interactions are far from linear; instead, they involve an iterative process marked by conflict, negotiation, and integration, shaped by power relations. Indeed, as documented by Avelino and Wittmayer (2016) in their study of transformative democratic

innovation, transition processes are subject to an intricate dynamic interplay in which various actors influence and are influenced by one another. Moreover, as the authors themselves point out, power is not static but shifts over time due to the interaction of different actors and the application of different strategies. This is undoubtedly consistent with the results of our analysis: the role of the city of Trento in the process was neither linear nor consistent with a pure preservation strategy or a transition strategy. In the pandemic period (events 16-21), the city administration promoted and supported niche initiatives, fostering discourses of social inclusion and emerging as an innovative actor. However, in the subsequent period, the lack of institutional support for the same niche initiatives or referendum suggests the adoption of more conservative strategies as a regime actor, contributing to the weakening or failure of these initiatives.

This oscillatory trend cannot be attributed solely to the change in administration, especially considering that it remained under the same political majority. Zerbian (2022) suggests that this mixed approach often arises because influential actors, such as public institutions, develop projects or policies without addressing the underlying values of public infrastructure. Additionally, the resources allocated to these projects frequently do not align with the needs or goals of beneficiaries—such as local food initiatives, farmers, and civil society—nor do they drive the structural changes necessary to effectively support an urban food strategy. This disconnect contributes to participants' discontent and distrust, undermining their engagement and participation. Furthermore, the political discourse underpinning the narrative of these institutions is often not clear, as noted by Giordano et al. (2022). This lack of clarity can result in fragmented strategies and mixed signals, causing confusion among stakeholders and reducing the efficacy of policy initiatives (Marino et al., 2024).

5.6 Conclusion

Food policy councils (FPCs) offer significant potential as platforms for promoting food democracy and implementing comprehensive and integrated food policies (Sieveking, 2019). The detailed examination of niche-regime interactions during the course of the Nutrire Trento project has highlighted that FPCs operate through dynamic and iterative processes of conflict, negotiation, and integration. Understanding these processes is critical, as it sheds light on the key enabling and disabling factors that shape the trajectory of democratic innovations.

The application of Event Structure Analysis (ESA) in this context provided a detailed and operational understanding that complemented the Multi-Level Perspective (MLP) framework. This integration offers valuable insights into socio-technical transition processes that go beyond sustainable food systems. Indeed, ESA's ability to map chains of events and their interactions provides a clearer view of the complex interplay between landscape pressures, regime structures, and niche innovations. This analysis not only deepens our understanding of democratic innovation projects, but can also contribute to the broader sociological discourse on the Multi-Level Perspective by illuminating the power dynamics and strategies of the various actors involved.

The creation of deliberative arenas that bring together actors with different values, priorities, and capacities is essential for addressing "wicked problems"- complex challenges such as climate change that require widespread changes in mindset and behavior (Strumińska-Kutra & Scholl, 2022; Giovannini & Forno, 2023). Similar to civic food networks (Renting et al. 2012) such as Solidarity Purchase Groups, Community-Supported Agriculture (CSA), and urban gardening, FPCs provide a platform for collaboration among diverse interests and perspectives. However, unlike purely community-based initiatives, in these deliberative arenas the involvement of institutions is paramount.

The case of Trento shows that the development of a local food policy is closely related to the functioning of local governance arrangements. However, local government efforts have often been

characterized by inconsistency and fragmented strategies, with periods of active support alternating with phases of inaction, withdrawal, and a political discourse underpinning their narrative that is not always clear. This fluctuation reflects broader challenges in maintaining momentum and commitment, particularly in the face of political changes, shifting priorities and conflicting interests within the administration. Throughout this process, the university has played a crucial role as a policy entrepreneur, consistently advocating for the establishment of comprehensive and sustainable food policies. By providing essential knowledge and expertise, the university has helped lay the groundwork for these initiatives. However, the success of these efforts ultimately hinged on the varying intensity of participatory and collaborative practices that, while arising from grassroots initiatives, were effectively coordinated within the UniCittà memorandum of understanding framework. Despite the challenges of inconsistency, lack of continuity and occasional setbacks, local actors in Trento have managed to come together around a shared vision. The development of a local food policy continues to progress, also thanks to the participation in EU funded projects.

Yet, like democracy itself, food democracy requires ongoing engagement and active participation. For food democracy to be not only evoked but also realized in practice, it is important to recognize that democratic innovations involve broad processes characterized by conflict and negotiation.

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Appendix D – Interview List

Name	Occupation	Category	Age	Gender
Int_1	Trainer	Solidarity economy activist	30-45	Female
Int_2	Shopkeeper	Shopkeeper	<30	Female
Int_3	Farmer	Farmer	30-45	Female
Int_4	Graphic Designer	Cultural association member	30-45	Female
Int_5	Architect	Cultural association member	30-45	Female
Int_6	Farmer/ Representative	Farmer union representative	45-60	Male
Int_7	Employed-private sector	Representative	45-60	Female
Int_8	Retired	ONLUS president	>60	Male
Int_9	Judge	ONLUS member	45-60	Female
Int_10	Manager	Solidarity Purchase Group representative	45-60	Male
Int_11	City Councilor	Solidarity Purchase Group activist/Political	45-60	Male
Int_12	Freelancer	Solidarity Purchase Group activist	30-45	Female
Int_13	Food technologist	Food company representative	<30	Female
Int_14	PhD candidate	CSA representative	30-45	Female
Int_15	Farmer	Farmer union representative	45-60	Male
Int_16	Farmer	Farmer union representative	45-60	Male
Int_17	City Councilor	Political	45-60	Female
Int_18	Farmer	Small farmer	30-45	Female

Int_19	Representative	Farmer union representative	45-60	Male
Int_20	Representative	Farmer union representative	45-60	Male
Int_21	Employed-public sector	Solidarity Purchase Group activist	30-45	Female
Int_22	Representative	Farmer union representative	45-60	Female
Int_23	Municipal official	Municipal representative	45-60	Female

Appendix E – Linking the most relevant events

Connection ID	Events Connected	Mechanism
1	1–2	University and Municipality of Trento sign the memorandum of understanding, incorporating the project into the UniCittà framework, and initiate the "Nutrire Trento" project.
2	2–3	Municipality and University of Trento initiate the "Nutrire Trento" project and hold the inaugural meeting of the Nutrire Trento Working Roundtable.
3	1-4	10,500 euros from UniCittà project are secured as seed funding.
4	3–5	Roundtable leads to the development of an online mapping tool and initiation of public communication activities.
5	3–6	Public communication activities help identify key stakeholders, including producers, GAS groups, and associations.
6	6–7	Disagreements arise regarding the inclusion of non-organic certified producers among the identified stakeholders.
7	7–8	Disagreements lead to the temporary withdrawal of some GAS groups.
8	3–9	Creation of the Nutrire Trento logo through a youth competition and development of an animated informational video.
9	1-10	The Municipality and the University decided to include Nutrire Trento in the SATURN project.

10	10-11	Municipality and SATURN technicians set up the project's online platform.
11	3-12	The roundtable organizes key events and conferences
12	12-13	At these events, distribution of postcards solicits feedback from citizens on thinking about the possible improvements of Trento's food system.
13	12-14	The networks established with other municipalities contributes to Trento joining the Milan Urban Food Policy Pact.
14	12-15	"Food, Territory and Sustainability" conference participants discuss the agri-food chain and project goals.
15	LANDSCAPE	The COVID-19 pandemic disrupts activities.
16	16-17	The pandemic forces a transition to online meetings and launch of home delivery services.
17	16-18	The pandemic situation brought to the partnership between the Municipality and Trentino Solidale to redistribute food.
18	16-19	This partnership also launches "Trento si aiuta" volunteer service for the elderly.
19	16-20	Launch of Nutrire Trento #Phase2 focuses on home delivery and supporting local food supply chains.
20	20-21	Analysis of changes in consumption during the pandemic leads to consideration of CSA.
21	LANDSCAPE	New election round: Nutrire Trento gains attention during the Trento municipal elections.
22	22-23	Municipal elections result in a new mayor and administrative reshuffling, impacting the project's governance.
23	21-23	New administration takes into account the results of Nutrire Trento #Phase2.
24	23-24	New administration supports the establishment of a CSA project.
25	23-25	Challenges in stakeholder participation arise as the Roundtable struggles to reconvene.

26	25-26	The inertia of the project causes the reduction of the involvement of the academic team.
27	LANDSCAPE	A referendum is organised to increase the organic quota in Trentino.
28	27-28	The referendum to expand organic farming is divisive and it is boycotted by the representatives of the agricultural groups, who demand to citizens to not vote so that the necessary quorum is not reached.
29	27-29	Except for a few political representatives, the institutions do not provide any voting instructions.
30	27-31	The referendum on organic farming fails, due to low participation, showing the need for a structured local food strategy.
31	26-32	Municipality reacts and starts to develop a structured process towards a local food strategy, driven by a motion of the city councillors.
32	32-33	City Council's unanimous decision to develop a local food strategy marks a commitment to advancing sustainable food policies.
33	1-34	The consortium led by the University of Trento wins the European SURFIT project, bringing new resources and project ideas to the Roundtable.
34	33-35	A new municipal government representative receives the mandate to support Nutrire Trento, aiding the strategy development.
35	35-36	New official is hired, dedicated entirely to issues related to Nutrire Trento, ensuring sustained progress.

CHAPTER 6. DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

This concluding chapter draws together the insights developed throughout this thesis, which has addressed the issue of food system transformation towards sustainability through the lenses of consumer behavior, alternative food networks (AFNs), and urban food governance. The central aim was to critically explore the barriers and opportunities that influence this transformation, and to understand how these three domains interact to shape the trajectory of food systems in specific territorial contexts.

By combining macro-level comparative analyses with grounded, place-based research in Trentino, the thesis has provided a multi-scalar, interdisciplinary investigation into the potential and limits of current efforts toward food sustainability. This approach responds to calls in the literature (Ericksen, 2008; Wiskerke, 2009; Hinrichs, 2014; Moragues-Faus et al., 2017) for nuanced, empirically grounded accounts that address the complexity of food system transformations.

At the heart of this investigation were two key research questions:

What are the key barriers and opportunities within consumer behaviour, alternative food networks, and urban food governance that impede or facilitate the transformation to more sustainable food systems?

How do consumer behaviour, alternative food networks, and urban food governance interact to influence the transformation of food systems towards sustainability?

In the following sections, I will address these questions directly, drawing on the empirical findings and theoretical contributions of the four main articles, and providing a broader analysis of

the content emerged throughout the thesis. First the three levels will be addressed separately and then the interactions between levels will be discussed.

6.1 The fragmented landscape of transformation: barriers and opportunities across scales

One of the clearest conclusions to emerge from this study is that while all three domains discussed (consumer behavior, AFNs, and urban food governance) offer potential pathways toward more sustainable food systems, each is constrained by significant structural and contextual barriers.

6.1.1 Consumer behavior: between aspirations and constraints

The thesis began with an exploration of the role of consumers as possible agents of change within food systems. Across the literature and in the first article of the thesis, consumers are often depicted as pivotal actors whose preferences can drive markets towards sustainability (Vermeir & Verbeke, 2006; Schäufele & Hamm, 2018). However, both the European survey and the focus group data reveal that consumer agency is shaped and limited by broader institutional, socio-economic, and cultural conditions.

The survey on chicken meat preferences demonstrated that while many consumers across Europe express concern for indirect quality attributes, such as animal welfare, organic production, and local provenance, these concerns do not consistently translate into purchasing behavior (Vittersø et al., 2019). As others have noted, this “attitude-behavior gap” (Hughner et al., 2007; Carrington et al., 2010) reflects not only the cost and availability of sustainable options, but also deeper structural inequalities and the limits of consumer choice in neoliberal market settings. As the findings of the first article in this thesis show, consumers’ willingness to prioritize sustainability-related food

qualities varies significantly across European countries, shaped by trust in food system actors, national regulatory frameworks, and socio-demographic factors (Vittersø et al., 2019). In particular, the study demonstrates that high levels of trust in regulatory institutions (e.g. Norway) often reduce consumer engagement, as individuals defer responsibility to the state. Conversely, in contexts where public institutions are viewed with suspicion, as in parts of Southern and Eastern Europe, engagement with sustainability attributes is more selective and contingent, often mediated through informal or culturally embedded practices (Torjusen et al., 2024).

This suggests that consumer behavior cannot be reduced to isolated acts of choice, but is embedded in national food cultures and institutional environments, which shape what is perceived as desirable, feasible, and legitimate (Kjærnes et al., 2022; Dubuisson-Quellier, 2022). Moreover, neoliberal framings of consumer agency based on the idea of sovereign, rational individuals "voting with their wallets", obscure the ways in which economic precarity, time scarcity, and uneven access to infrastructures of provisioning constrain meaningful engagement with sustainable food practices (Guthman, 2008; Johnston & Goodman, 2015).

Furthermore, as the second article shows, cultural context is also important and conceptions of 'good food' vary from country to country, shaped by conventions of tradition, creativity and sustainability (Boltanski & Thévenot, 2006/1991; Ponte, 2016). Italian consumers, for instance, are more embedded in the so-called Domestic World, where food is tied to place, family, and memory, while Germans display more Inspired World traits, emphasizing creativity and innovation in food practices (Swaffield et al., 2018; Andreola et al., 2021). These cultural logics determine both the constraints and the possibilities of sustainable consumption, operating a strong influence on supply choices to the extent of causing apparent conflicts in the ethical principles of critical consumers.

These findings reinforce Warde's (2016) critique of rationalist models of consumption and underscore the need for a shift in responsibility from individualized ethics to systemic interventions that address the socio-material conditions shaping habitual, situated food practices. Consumers may wish to support sustainable food systems, but their capacity is often constrained by limited access, affordability, and information, as well as ingrained routines and cultural norms. Efforts to promote sustainable consumption must therefore be embedded in broader institutional and infrastructural changes that make such choices viable and attractive.

6.1.2 AFNs: niche innovation with structural vulnerabilities

Alternative Food Networks have long been hailed as incubators of sustainable practices and relationships, operating at the “niche” level within the multi-level perspective (Geels, 2002). The CSA case study analyzed in the third article affirmed this potential: participants developed closer ties with producers, gained awareness of seasonality and food origins, and, at least temporarily, reorganized their consumption practices.

However, the case also revealed the fragility of such initiatives. Indeed, CSA models prioritize participatory governance, shared risk, and direct producer-consumer relationships. These alternative practices fundamentally challenge the impersonal, efficiency-driven logic of conventional food systems: while fostering trust and ecological awareness, they often clash with entrenched routines. For example, CSA members must adapt to seasonal availability and unfamiliar produce, disrupting the convenience-oriented expectations cultivated by supermarkets. Similarly, the CSA's pre-ordering system and fixed delivery schedules conflict with the spontaneity and flexibility of dominant retail practices, creating friction for time-constrained households. These findings echo concerns in the literature that AFNs risk remaining niche and exclusionary, serving mostly affluent and culturally capital-rich consumers (Goodman et al., 2012; Rosol, 2012; Alkon & Agyeman, 2011).

Moreover, even before the pandemic-induced disruptions, AFNs in Trentino faced multiple challenges: difficulty accessing land due to high costs and fragmentation, limited visibility and infrastructure, and marginal positioning relative to the dominant cooperative system (Fonte & Cucco, 2017). Although it is often regarded as an alternative supply chain model and also counted among the most resilient, it is relevant to remark that the Trentino cooperative system has emerged as a paradoxical actor. While it has supported small farmers and buffered against market volatility, it has also entrenched productivist logics that resist ecological diversification and experimentation, thus acting as a regime-level barrier to transition (Gios & Santuari, 2002; Magnani & Osti, 2016; Forno et al., 2019).

The vulnerability of the CSA to competition from other players, both conventional and other AFNs, and the limited ability to scale or influence broader food policies underlines a fundamental insight: without supportive policy frameworks and infrastructural integration, AFNs may remain isolated islands of innovation, unable to challenge or transform the dominant regime.

6.1.3 Urban food governance: potential and pitfalls of participation

The case of Nutrire Trento, as explored in the fourth article of this thesis, offers a valuable lens through which to examine the transformative potential and inherent tensions of urban food governance. Framed as a Food Policy Council (FPC), the initiative brought together a diverse coalition of actors, including municipal authorities, civil society organizations, academic institutions, and food producers, in a participatory process aimed at co-producing knowledge, shaping food-related initiatives, and fostering more sustainable food practices at the local level.

This model of governance aligns with an emerging paradigm that views cities as strategic nodes for sustainable food system transformation (Morgan, 2009; Moragues-Faus & Morgan, 2015; Ilieva,

2016). Particularly in the context of rapid urbanization and growing concern over the social and ecological consequences of globalized food systems, local governments are increasingly seen as key actors in addressing food insecurity, promoting food justice, and integrating food into broader sustainability and climate agendas. FPCs have emerged as one of the most visible institutional expressions of this shift, embodying principles of democratic innovation and multi-level governance (Ansell & Gash, 2008; Hassanein, 2003; Renting et al., 2012).

However, the longitudinal analysis conducted in this thesis reveals both the possibilities and fragilities of this governance model. On the one hand, Nutrire Trento functioned as a critical arena of experimentation, enabling processes of deliberation, agenda-setting, and alliance-building that contributed to the politicization of food at the municipal level. It has fostered new relational dynamics among previously isolated, self-centered, niche actors, fostering greater collaboration, promoting greater interconnection. This has highlighted critical, yet under-discussed, aspects of the local food system, orienting the debate towards a more holistic vision of food sustainability. Over the years, issues have emerged such as the marginalization of short supply chains against to the dominance of industrial agriculture and large-scale distribution, food waste, public procurement and, above all, socially relevant issues such as inequality and food poverty.

At the same time, the initiative was marked by a series of persistent governance dilemmas. First, as the analysis showed, institutional commitment from the municipality fluctuated over time, leading to discontinuities in leadership, resources, and political support. This reflects a broader structural constraint, as food remains an "orphan policy" at the urban level, lacking a clear institutional home or mandate, which makes it highly vulnerable to shifts in political priorities or personnel changes (Pothukuchi & Kaufman, 2000; Sonnino, 2016). In such contexts, food governance initiatives are

often project-based, precariously funded, and reliant on the voluntary engagement of civil society actors, whose capacity to sustain long-term participation may be limited.

Second, the participatory framework itself encountered challenges related to power asymmetries, hierarchies, and civic fatigue. While formally inclusive, the process was shaped by differential access to time, knowledge and institutional capital, which risked marginalising some voices, especially the more radical ones, and crystallising the agenda according to the preferences of the most influential actors. This resonates with critical literature on participatory governance, which cautions that inclusive formats do not automatically translate into equitable influence or transformative outcomes (Cornwall, 2008). In this case, tensions emerged particularly between grassroots activists advocating for structural change and municipal actors oriented toward incremental, pragmatic interventions.

Yet, despite these constraints, the potential of FPCs as democratic innovations should not be underestimated. The Trentino case revealed how such spaces can act as institutional incubators, helping to reconfigure relationships, develop shared vocabularies, and generate collective imaginaries for alternative food futures. Drawing on the Multi-Level Perspective (Geels, 2011), these councils can be seen as niche governance arrangements that challenge the dominant policy regime by embedding new narratives, problem framings, and procedural norms. In the case of *Nutrire Trento*, the FPC contributed to the gradual diffusion of concepts such as food sovereignty, agroecology, and public procurement reform into local administrative discourse, even if these have not yet resulted in robust policy shifts, suggesting that even modest institutional forms can lay the groundwork for deeper systemic transformations when supported by committed actors and open to iteration.

6.2 Interactions and interdependencies: toward a multi-level understanding

Addressing the second research question, which explores how consumer behavior, alternative food networks (AFNs), and governance interact, this thesis advocates for the importance of addressing these domains not as isolated elements, but as deeply interdependent. The characteristics of one domain or a change in it can support or hinder transformations in another, and the direction and strength of these effects depend on contextual alignments and institutional configurations.

6.2.1 *Consumers and AFNs: mutual reinforcement, uneven engagement*

The interaction between consumers and Alternative Food Networks (AFNs) is dynamic and potentially transformative, but also marked by asymmetries and exclusions. As the empirical data from the Trentino CSA case shows, AFNs can act as catalysts for behavioral change by creating spaces where consumers are invited to reconfigure their everyday practices. Participating in a CSA fosters experiential learning about seasonality, the labor involved in food production, and the environmental consequences of consumption, leading to shifts in both purchasing habits and how people understand their role within the food system.

From Warde's (2005) perspective, this change emerges not through isolated acts of ethical choice, but through the alignment of understandings (e.g., knowing how to cook with seasonal ingredients or store unfamiliar vegetables), procedures (e.g., collective norms about sharing produce, rules for pickup times, or expectations around loyalty to the CSA), and engagements (e.g., motivations to support sustainable agriculture, beliefs in the fairness of direct trade, and emotions such as pride, trust, or frustration). In this way, AFNs can help reproduce and normalize more sustainable consumption patterns within specific social contexts, not only by shaping routines but also by reconfiguring the meanings and affective investments associated with food practices.

However, this mutually reinforcing relationship remains uneven and exclusionary. As discussed in Article 1 and 2 (and mentioned in section 6.1.2), participation in AFNs is often stratified by socio-economic and cultural capital. Those who engage in such networks tend to have higher levels of education, disposable income, and pre-existing environmental concern (Grunert et al., 2014; Schjøll & Thorjussen, 2019, Vittersø et al., 2019). As a result, AFNs may inadvertently reproduce the very inequalities they seek to challenge, becoming enclaves for the already environmentally and socially privileged.

Moreover, broader systemic barriers, such as logistical complexity and infrastructural limitations, further limit the spread of AFNs beyond niche communities, especially in comparison with pervasive large-scale retailing. The CSA initiative in Trentino, for instance, struggled to reach beyond a core group of motivated participants, constrained by the limited reach of its distribution system and the absence of integration into mainstream food provision infrastructures and habits. These challenges highlight the limitations of relying on consumers alone to drive food system change, especially when their engagement is mediated by structural conditions of access, time, and affordability (Warde, 2016; Johnston & Goodman, 2015).

Ultimately, while the interaction between consumers and AFNs can produce valuable micro-level shifts, its broader transformative potential remains dependent on the ability to overcome these structural exclusions and to embed such initiatives within a supportive institutional and policy environment. This has been documented in several successful cases where public institutions actively supported AFNs, both locally and nationally, and will be discussed in the next section.

6.2.2 AFNs and governance: tensions and synergies

The relationship between AFNs and food governance is marked by both potential synergies and deep-seated tensions. On one hand, AFNs are frequently lauded as laboratories for social and ecological innovation, i.e. spaces where new practices, values, and organizational forms can be tested outside the constraints of conventional market logics (Seyfang & Smith, 2007). From a Multi-Level Perspective (MLP), AFNs occupy the niche level and thus hold potential to disrupt incumbent food regimes by introducing alternative models of production, distribution, and consumption (Geels, 2002; Marsden & Morley, 2014).

On the other hand, the empirical analysis presented in this thesis shows that the ability of AFNs to influence governance (or to be supported by it) is highly contingent on the broader institutional context. The Trentino case illustrates this ambivalence well. Although the area has a rich tradition of alternative supply chains and formal mechanisms for the development of participatory food policies, the main one, the cooperative system, now operates as a dominant actor and often constitutes a structural barrier to the diffusion of alternative models. As already mentioned, its emphasis on standardised production, economies of scale and productive efficiency leaves little room for experimental or diversified practices such as those promoted by AFNs. Although not a governance institution per se, the cooperative system therefore wields considerable economic and infrastructural power, becoming a central interlocutor with local institutions, shaping market access, attracting subsidies and investment, and influencing the broader context of food policies. As such, Trentino AFNs are often not in direct competition with public institutions, but in tension with these entrenched agro-industrial networks.

Moreover, policy support for AFNs in Trentino remains largely rhetorical. Although the Province was the first in Italy to adopt legislation promoting the solidarity economy (LP 13/2010), the actual implementation of this law has been limited. Institutional inertia, bureaucratic complexity,

and a lack of clear funding mechanisms have contributed to a gap between symbolic recognition and material support. As such, AFNs continue to operate in a precarious space, lacking the infrastructural and policy scaffolding necessary to scale up or integrate into wider food planning frameworks.

Nonetheless, some synergies are possible. The participatory governance processes observed in initiatives like Nutrire Trento offer a potential bridge between grassroots innovation and formal policy-making. When local institutions adopt more flexible, open-ended governance models, capable of learning from bottom-up initiatives and redistributing resources accordingly, AFNs can be amplified and stabilized rather than marginalized. But this requires a shift in institutional logics: from a control-oriented, productivist paradigm to one oriented toward collaboration, experimentation, and embeddedness.

For instance, in Toronto, the city's Food Policy Council has played a pivotal role in integrating community-based food projects into municipal planning and procurement policies (MacRae & Donahue, 2013). Similarly, in Italy, grassroots lobbying by Solidarity Purchasing Groups (Gruppi di Acquisto Solidale, or GAS) led to a significant legal milestone: a parliamentary amendment recognizing GAS as non-profit associations engaged in collective purchasing without profit margins (Brunori, Rossi, & Guidi, 2012). This amendment, achieved through an alliance with the Green Party, shielded GAS from tax evasion accusations while requiring formal association status, thereby enhancing their legitimacy. Once officially recognized, GAS gained access to public projects, contracts, and media visibility, demonstrating how policy changes can transform grassroots initiatives into institutionalized components of local food systems.

6.2.3 Consumers and governance: framing and responsiveness

The interaction between consumers and food governance is shaped above all by the way responsibility for sustainability is framed. Throughout this paper, it has already been mentioned several times how the current dominant paradigm is the neoliberal one that emphasises the role of consumers as the main agents of change through the adoption of ethical choices based on information, labels and personal beliefs (Micheletti, 2010; Giesler & Veresiu, 2014). However, this framing not only overburdens individuals, but also obscures the structural conditions that make sustainable choices viable or impossible, i.e. policies, infrastructure and market dynamics.

As Article 1 and broader comparative data reveal, consumer engagement varies not only according to personal characteristics, but also in response to institutional configurations and trust in governance systems (Vittersø et al., 2019; Kjærnes et al., 2013). A higher or lower level of institutional trust is very influential in determining consumer engagement. However, as the analysis shows, this relationship is not linear in all countries. In countries with a high level of institutional trust, consumers may rely on the assumption that regulatory bodies ensure safety and sustainability, thus reducing the need for active engagement. In contrast, in contexts of generalised institutional mistrust, consumers compensate with active engagement embedded in everyday food practices and family life, with influences going both ways, i.e. between trust and engagement. Indeed, in such countries, as the level of institutional trust in consumers increases, so does engagement in more sustainable purchasing. Thus, governance systems are not merely external contexts for consumption but actively shape consumer subjectivities and orientations toward sustainability.

In this light, the role of governance should not be limited to providing information or incentives for ethical consumption. Especially in countries like Italy, characterised by a low level of institutional trust, this approach risks leading to inefficient resource use. Instead, food governance can play a constitutive role in reshaping the field of possible actions, for instance by institutionalizing food

democracy (Hassanein, 2003), supporting community-based infrastructures, and ensuring equitable access to sustainable options. Participatory governance models, such as those explored in Nutrire Trento, can help redefine consumers not merely as market agents but as citizen-participants in food system transformation.

Yet, the Trentino case also reveals the fragility of these participatory approaches. While Nutrire Trento succeeded in fostering deliberation and achieved some institutional recognition, its capacity to reshape broader policy agendas or redistribute power was limited. This highlights that participation alone is not enough; governance systems must also exhibit consistency and responsiveness, meaning the ability to integrate and act upon grassroots input to build trust and drive systemic change. Also the shortcomings demonstrated by the experimental alternative supply chain projects promoted by the Tavolo di Nutrire Trento, suggest the need to reframe consumers as citizen-participants within broader social, institutional, and infrastructural networks.

Comprehensive and incremental support for community-based initiatives, also by integrating the issue of food into broader political agendas (equity and health especially), instead of small interventions limited in size, time and target, could result in a virtuous circle of empowerment of collective action and confidence in local government action. Furthermore, by promoting responsive and participatory models, governance can transform consumers from isolated market actors, burdened by the individualisation of responsibility, into active contributors to food system change, addressing structural barriers that limit sustainable choices and promoting collective strategies rooted in trust and collaboration.

6.3 Toward transformative food systems: contributions and future directions

This thesis offers a multi-scalar, empirically grounded contribution to understanding the transformation of food systems through the interwoven roles of consumer practices, Alternative Food Networks (AFNs), and urban food governance. The findings presented across the four core articles collectively point to the need for rethinking both the conceptual frameworks we use to study change and the institutional approaches used to foster it.

This thesis has drawn upon a range of theoretical perspectives, including Conventions Theory (CT), Social Practice Theory (SPT), and the Multi-Level Perspective (MLP), which were mobilized in different chapters to address specific research questions. While each article is theoretically self-contained, taken together they point toward a broader theoretical contribution: an integrative framework for understanding food system transformation that combines normative, practical, and structural dimensions.

Conventions Theory foregrounds the normative and justificatory orders through which actors evaluate and legitimize food practices. Building on Boltanski and Thévenot (2006/1991), CT highlights how food is never just material but always embedded in contested moral grammars of worth. In the context of this thesis, CT illuminated how consumers and AFN participants justified their food choices, revealing the plurality of evaluative logics that shape alternative food practices, such as those relating to the civic, ecological and inspired worlds shown in chapter 3. This contributes to a literature that increasingly recognizes the moral economy of food (Ponte, 2016).

Social Practice Theory, by contrast, draws attention to the embodied and practical enactment of food practices. Chapter 4 demonstrates that consumption is less about individual choice than about the routinized integration of meanings, materials, and competences (Shove et al., 2012; Warde, 2005). Within this thesis, SPT helped unpack how CSA members have integrated new practices into their daily lives, and what inconsistencies and misunderstandings have arisen in the process. This aligns

with a growing body of research treating food not as a commodity alone but as a practice nexus linking material infrastructures, cultural meanings, and routines (Halkier & Jensen, 2011). It is precisely because of this interplay of elements that transcend the CSA or domestic boundaries that zooming in is not enough to understand the problems of the initiative.

Henceforth, the Multi-Level Perspective provides the structural and temporal scaffold that situates these practices and justifications within broader dynamics. Originating in transition studies (Geels, 2002, 2011), the MLP conceptualizes socio-technical change as an interplay between niches, regimes, and landscapes. Applied to food, it allows us to see how AFNs and urban food governance initiatives interact with dominant food regimes and wider societal pressures. The integration of the Multi-Level Perspective (MLP) with Social Practice Theory (SPT) provides a promising analytical lens to understand how everyday consumption practices are embedded within, and shaped by, dominant regime dynamics. This cross-fertilization offers new insights by revealing how innovative food system niches are simultaneously constrained by entrenched everyday routines, such as cooking habits, shopping preferences, and consumer knowledge gaps, and by broader systemic obstacles, including market structures, regulatory frameworks, and institutional inertia. Together, these mutually reinforcing forces help explain why well-intentioned alternatives often struggle to scale or endure, despite their transformative potential.

Furthermore, as seen in Chapter 5, combining the MLP approach with event structure analysis (ESA) allows us to operationalise the three MLP analytical levels more clearly, and thus to trace non-linear and path-dependent developments more clearly, revealing the power dynamics and asymmetries that condition transitions in food systems.

Together, these perspectives form a pragmatic pluralism, revealing the justificatory struggles underlying choices, the embodied routines that reproduce or reconfigure practices, and placing these

insights within structured but dynamic contexts. This integrative stance contributes to the growing field of food studies by proposing that food system transformation can only be understood through the interplay of cultural meanings, practical routines, and structural dynamics. The thesis thus contributes to bridging literatures on moral economies, practice theory, and sustainability transitions, offering an analytical vocabulary for future research that seeks to connect micro-level practices with macro-level change.

Beyond its purely theoretical insights, this thesis advances several scholarly debates at the intersection of food studies and sustainability transitions. First, it contributes to debates on the scaling and hybridization of Alternative Food Networks (AFNs). Much of the AFN literature has contrasted “alternative” and “conventional” systems, often presenting them as dichotomous spheres. This thesis demonstrates that AFNs do not exist in isolation but can scale up by forging hybrid alliances with other actors, combining the strengths of grassroots initiatives with elements of conventional infrastructures (Ilbery & Maye, 2005; Goodman, 2012). In doing so, it enriches the debate on the future of AFNs by showing that sustainability transitions are more likely to be achieved through processes of hybridization and negotiation than through strict opposition.

Second, the thesis adds to the literature on urban food governance and policy councils, which often celebrates their innovative and participatory character. While recognizing their potential, this research underscores the limits of short-term or project-based governance, showing that transformative change requires long-term institutional commitments that transcend political cycles. By analyzing Nutrire Trento, the thesis highlights both the promises and frustrations of participatory governance, thereby contributing to debates on how to anchor food governance within broader institutional structures to avoid precariousness and discontinuity (Moragues-Faus & Morgan, 2015).

Third, the findings speak to broader debates in transition studies about the role of crises and disruptions. Although shocks such as the COVID-19 pandemic are often viewed either in terms of as temporary shocks or as opportunities for institutional learning, experimentation and structural change. It is important to deconstruct this narrative and highlight the conditions required for governance structures to be able to seize such opportunities. These include elements that complement those mentioned in the previous point, such as flexibility and robustness of a system to support a transformative trajectory, as well as the effects of hesitation and fatigue. This insight contributes to an emerging body of research that, while not viewing crises solely as constraints, seeks to identify the elements that make them catalysts for transition (Moore et al., 2023).

Fourth, the thesis engages with debates on power and inequality in participatory processes. While food democracy and food justice are increasingly invoked in policy discourses, this research shows how participatory initiatives can inadvertently reproduce existing hierarchies if issues of representation and power are not explicitly addressed. This contributes to critical scholarship on food governance (Cornwall, 2008; Mansbridge et al., 2010) by emphasizing the need to design governance arrangements that actively counteract exclusionary dynamics and foster genuinely inclusive transformation.

This thesis also provides insights at the methodological level. It demonstrates the value of a multi-method and multi-level approach to the study of food system transformation and the exploration of sustainability across different scales and dimensions. While each method addressed specific research questions in the different papers, their juxtaposition revealed patterns and connections that would have remained overlooked in a single-method design, providing a more complete picture. Specifically, survey data provided a broad, comparative overview of consumer orientations, with European-level data highlighting cross-country similarities and context-specific differences. Through

dialogue-based discussions, the focus groups highlighted how cultural conventions influence justifications relating to food quality. This also brought to light the different cultural traits that influence consumer behaviour and any contradictions between individual orientations. Ethnographic fieldwork captured the embodied practices, tensions and frustrations of AFNs, especially through the direct observations of the organized activities. Furthermore, Event Structure Analysis facilitated a coherent integration of different methods, allowing the construction of a consistent temporal framework that highlighted the dynamics underlying governance processes. At the same time, it proved particularly suitable for the operationalisation and investigation of the levels of the Multi-Level Perspective, especially regime and landscape, which are often confused and not adequately employed by scholars (Geels 2011, 2014).

Finally, the thesis contributes to discussions on the integration of food into cross-sectoral policy agendas. Much of the literature still treats food policy in isolation, focusing on agriculture, nutrition, or urban planning separately. The findings here support calls for integrated, cross-sectoral approaches that embed food into broader frameworks of climate action, social equity, and public health (Moragues-Faus & Sonnino, 2019). By illustrating how food governance interacts with other policy domains, the thesis helps reframe food not as a niche issue but as a central entry point for socio-ecological transitions.

In terms of future research, this work opens several promising directions. A particularly relevant extension would be to compare the trajectory of Nutrire Trento with other Food Policy Councils in different territorial and institutional settings, such as those affiliated with the Milan Urban Food Policy Pact. Such comparative analysis could help identify which institutional designs, political contexts, or civic mobilizations lead to more robust and inclusive food governance. Further research could also

explore how public institutions and grassroots actors co-produce governance innovations, and how these are influenced by changing configurations of trust, legitimacy, and expertise.

In conclusion, this thesis argues that food system transformation is not merely about technological or behavioral change, but about the reconfiguration of social practices, institutional relations, and political commitments. Sustainable and just food futures will require coordinated efforts that align everyday engagements with long-term structural shifts, bridging the gap between micro-level experimentation and systemic transformation.

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