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Alternative to what? Reassessing Northern AFNs through a Southern Lens

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Abstract
Alternative Food Networks (AFNs) are frequently presented as socially and environmentally transformative responses to the industrial agri-food system. However, less attention has been paid to the historical, epistemological, and political assumptions through which "alternativeness" itself is constructed and legitimised, particularly within European and Global North contexts. Drawing on a decolonial analytical lens inspired by Southern perspectives, this article examines how alterity is conceptualised and enacted across nine AFN initiatives in Trentino, northern Italy, including solidarity economy networks, community-supported agriculture initiatives, fair-trade organisations, food cooperatives, and community-based projects. Based on qualitative fieldwork combining in-depth interviews, field observations, and documentary analysis, the study explores how AFNs negotiate sustainability, solidarity, governance, and food system transformation within wider institutional and market-oriented environments. The findings show that AFNs generate meaningful openings for collective organisation, ecological learning, participatory governance, and solidarity-based exchange, while simultaneously remaining shaped and contained by regulatory frameworks, certification regimes, economic pressures, and uneven organisational capacities. Rather than understanding AFNs as either transformative ruptures or co-opted extensions of dominant food systems, the article argues that alterity emerges through situated, relational, and contested processes. In this sense, AFNs in the Global North are interpreted as spaces where partial openings and socio-ecological experimentation coexist with broader structures of coloniality, capitalist market relations, and institutional constraint. The article contributes to debates on decolonial food studies, the limits of alternative food systems, and sustainability by advancing a relational understanding of alterity within Northern agri-food contexts.

Keywords Alternative Food Networks · Decoloniality · Alterity · Solidarity economy · Global North

Introduction

Alternative to what? This question has become a recurring concern in critical scholarship on Alternative Food Networks (AFNs), particularly in European and Global North contexts. AFNs are frequently portrayed as transformative responses to the social, environmental, and economic consequences of the industrial agri-food system, characterised by corporate concentration, the commodification of nature, and the externalisation of socio-ecological costs (Goodman et al. 2012; Michel-Villarreal et al. 2025). However, comparatively less attention has been paid to the historical, epistemological, and political frameworks through which "alternativeness" itself is defined. From this perspective, alterity is not an intrinsic property of particular agri-food practices, but a situated construction shaped through power relations that configure both food systems and the academic discourses used to interpret them (Tregear 2011; Goodman et al. 2012).

Recent debates in agri-food studies have increasingly engaged with decolonial approaches to question the universalist assumptions underpinning dominant understandings of sustainability, development and ethical

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consumption. Initially developed through critiques emerging from the Global South concerning the coloniality of power and knowledge, these perspectives have foregrounded how contemporary food systems remain entangled with historical legacies of inequality, dispossession, and epistemic hierarchy (Figueroa-Helland et al. 2018). More recently, decolonial perspectives have also been mobilised in Global North contexts to interrogate how certain agricultural and food practices become legitimised as sustainable, ethical, or desirable (Layman and Civita 2022). Following this scholarship, the present article employs a decolonial analytical lens inspired by Southern epistemologies, understood in a non-essentialist and relational manner.

In this article, references to Northern contexts do not imply a homogeneous geographical category but rather point to historically situated socio-economic and epistemic formations shaped by Eurocentrism, coloniality, processes of capitalist development, and uneven global relations (Quijano 2000; Smith and Jehlička 2013). This is particularly relevant in Europe, where AFNs have often been celebrated for their contributions to environmental sustainability, ethical consumption, and economic relocalisation, while receiving comparatively less critical attention regarding the colonial and Eurocentric assumptions that may underpin these frameworks. Regulatory arrangements, certification regimes, and market-driven sustainability discourses shape how "alternativeness" is recognised and legitimised within European food systems (Poças Ribeiro et al. 2021; Lähde et al. 2023). As a result, AFNs may simultaneously challenge dominant food systems while reproducing implicit hierarchies of knowledge, value and participation. The use of a Southern analytical lens therefore does not seek to establish a rigid North–South opposition but instead draws attention to how coloniality operates relationally across territories, institutions, and forms of knowledge production, including within Northern food systems.

In this context, the article examines nine AFN initiatives in Trento, northern Italy, including solidarity economy networks, community-supported agriculture initiatives, fair-trade organisations, consumer cooperatives, and community-based projects. Trento offers a particularly relevant setting for this analysis due to its strong traditions of cooperativism, solidarity economy, and institutional support for sustainability-oriented food initiatives. Rather than treating the case as representative, the study approaches Trento as an analytically strategic site for examining how "alternativeness" is articulated, negotiated, and constrained within a European context often considered socially progressive and institutionally supportive of alternative food practices.

The contribution of this article does not lie in proposing a new definition of AFNs or in classifying degrees of alternativeness. Rather, it offers a decolonial reassessment of AFNs in the Global North by examining how alterity is enacted through situated and often contradictory practices. Specifically, the article asks: how do AFNs conceptualise their alternative character in relation to the dominant agri-food system? What practices and discourses do they mobilise to enact this alterity? And to what extent do these practices challenge – or reproduce – the power asymmetries and colonial legacies shaping contemporary food systems? By addressing these questions, the study contributes to debates on AFNs, food democracy, and sustainability transitions while also interrogating the epistemological boundaries through which "alternatives" are imagined and evaluated.

Theoretical framework: a decolonial analytical lens for studying Northern AFNs

Decolonial and Southern perspectives offer a critical lens through which to interrogate alterity in food initiatives operating within European and Global North contexts. The framework is mobilised not as a normative template, but as an analytical lens that foregrounds power, epistemic hierarchies, and the persistence of colonial logics in contemporary agri-food arrangements.

Decolonial perspectives in agri-food studies: from critique to analytical lens

Within agri-food studies, increasing attention has been paid to the historical, epistemological, and political assumptions underpinning dominant food system paradigms. Decolonial scholarship, rooted in critiques of Eurocentrism and the universalisation of modernity (Quijano 2000; Dussel 1995; Mignolo 2007), has contributed to these debates by highlighting how relations of power and knowledge continue to shape contemporary socio-economic arrangements, asymmetries, and exclusions beyond formal colonial rule.

Although early decolonial work on food systems was closely linked to food sovereignty movements, agroecology, and Indigenous struggles in Latin America (Figueroa-Helland et al. 2018), its analytical insights are not limited to those contexts. Recent debates have increasingly shaped critical scholarship on sustainability and alternative food movements. Decolonial and postcolonial approaches in food studies have examined how food governance frameworks frequently privilege technocratic, universalist, and market-driven understandings of sustainability while marginalising situated, relational, and peasant knowledges (Figueroa-Helland et al. 2018; Sands et al. 2023). Other studies have highlighted how ethical consumption initiatives and alternative food practices in the Global North may reproduce exclusions and epistemic asymmetries even while seeking

to challenge industrial food systems (Layman and Civita 2022). Together, this scholarship has contributed to questioning how legitimacy, expertise, and "alternativeness" are constructed within contemporary agri-food systems.

Rather than proposing a singular alternative model, decolonial perspectives foreground epistemic plurality and relationality as tools for interrogating how food systems define legitimacy, sustainability, and value. This makes them particularly relevant for analysing AFNs, which are frequently presented as socially and environmentally transformative while remaining embedded within political-economic, institutional, and market structures.

In this article, decoloniality is employed as an analytical perspective for examining how "alternativeness" is constructed and enacted within AFNs, particularly regarding the governance of production-consumption relations, the validation of knowledge, and the organisation of solidarity practices.

Southern perspectives beyond geography: relational approaches to decoloniality

A recurrent critique of decolonial approaches concerns the risk of reproducing rigid North-South binaries or treating the Global South as a homogeneous epistemic subject. Recent scholarship has addressed this issue by conceptualising decoloniality as a relational and non-essentialist perspective rather than a geographically bounded position (Kamal and Courtheyn 2024).

From this standpoint, "Southern" perspectives refer less to a fixed territorial identity than to critical orientations that question universalist assumptions and dominant hierarchies of knowledge and socio-material arrangements, as well as colonial relations of power (Stone et al. 2024). This relational understanding of decoloniality is particularly relevant for analysing AFNs in the Global North, where alternative food initiatives may simultaneously reproduce and contest dominant food system logics.

Importantly, this perspective also calls for reflexivity regarding positionality and the unequal relations through which knowledge about food systems is produced. Rather than assuming the existence of inherently decolonial practices within AFNs, the approach adopted here seeks to examine tensions, contradictions, and partial openings through which alternative ways of organising food relations emerge within structurally unequal contexts.

European agri-food systems, colonial legacies, and the Italian context

Applying a decolonial analytical lens to European AFNs requires situating these initiatives within the historical and political processes shaping agri-food systems in Europe. Critical scholarship has emphasised that European modernity itself is inseparable from colonial histories, even where such histories have been rendered marginal or invisible (Quijano 2000; Lombardi-Diop and Romeo 2015). At the same time, studies of post-socialist and peripheral European food practices have shown how dominant Western European understandings of sustainability and alternative food systems often marginalise other forms of knowledge, socio-ecological practices, and agrarian experiences within Europe itself (Smith and Jehlička 2013). This perspective highlights Europe not as a homogeneous space, but as internally differentiated through uneven historical trajectories, epistemic hierarchies, and asymmetrical relations of power.

In applying a decolonial perspective to Italian AFNs, this article draws on Italian postcolonial scholarship, which has critically challenged representations of Italy as external to colonial histories and postcolonial dynamics (Lombardi-Diop and Romeo 2015). Rather than conceiving Italy as a neutral or exemplary case within the Global North, this scholarship highlights the country's ambiguous postcolonial positioning, shaped by a colonial past, internal forms of territorial inequality, migration processes, and contemporary regimes of racialised and migrant labour that form part of the structural conditions within which agri-food initiatives operate.

These historical and geopolitical dynamics shape contemporary agri-food systems in Europe through highly institutionalised sustainability frameworks, capitalist market governance arrangements, certification regimes, and labour structures often dependent on racialised and migrant workforces. Within these contexts, AFNs operate not outside dominant food systems, but in relation to regulatory, economic, and epistemic structures that condition how sustainability, ethical consumption, and localism are defined and legitimised (Dring et al. 2025). Situating AFNs within these broader dynamics allows for a more grounded examination of how alterity is negotiated within Northern agri-food systems rather than assumed as an intrinsic characteristic of alternative initiatives.

Rethinking "alternativeness" through a decolonial lens

In AFN scholarship, "alternativeness" is frequently associated with proximity, transparency, ethical consumption, or environmental sustainability. While these dimensions remain important, a decolonial perspective invites attention to the epistemic, political, and economic assumptions through which alternatives are defined and legitimised (Mignolo 2007; Grosfoguel 2011; Sands et al. 2023).

From this standpoint, alterity does not reside solely in the adoption of specific practices or labels, but in how food initiatives negotiate dominant relations of power, knowledge, governance, and value. This does not imply that AFNs must embody radical rupture in order to be analytically meaningful. Instead, a decolonial reading remains attentive to ambivalences, contradictions, and partial transformations emerging within dominant systems rather than outside them.

Accordingly, the analytical lens employed is used to examine how AFNs articulate and enact "alternativeness" in practice, particularly through knowledge production, governance arrangements, economic organisation, and solidarity-based relations. The framework does not evaluate AFNs against an ideal decolonial model but instead explores the tensions and limits shaping alterity within contemporary food systems.

Methodology

This study employed a qualitative, decolonial-informed methodology to explore how actors within Trentino's AFNs conceptualise and enact alternatives to dominant food systems. The research focused on the lived experiences, organisational practices, and socio-political imaginaries of actors involved in solidarity-based food initiatives, paying particular attention to how they articulated sustainability, solidarity, alterity, and food system transformation.

Fieldwork was conducted by the first author between September 2024 and July 2025 in the Autonomous Province of Trento, northern Italy. Trento was selected as a theoretically relevant case rather than as a representative one, given its distinctive political–institutional autonomy, strong cooperative traditions, and long-standing support for solidarity economy and sustainability-oriented initiatives (Carrieri de Souza, Rover, and Forno 2023). At the same time, its peripheral yet affluent positioning within the Italian context makes it a particularly relevant site for examining how "alternativeness" is articulated, institutionalised, and contested within a European setting often perceived as socially progressive and well-resourced.

The methodological approach combined critical ethnographic sensibilities with in-depth semi-structured interviews, field observations, and documentary analysis. A total of nine interviews were conducted with actors who self-identified or were recognised by their peers as participants in Trentino's AFNs. Interviewees included members of Community Supported Agriculture (CSA) initiatives, solidarity economy networks, fair-trade organisations, food cooperatives, community gardens, and ethical consumption initiatives. Interviews ranged from 60 to 120 min and took place in community spaces, markets, cooperative centres, and agricultural sites connected to the initiatives. All interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed verbatim. Field notes and photographic documentation were also used to support contextual interpretation (Table 1).

Interview questions explored participants' trajectories and motivations for involvement in AFNs, their understandings of alterity and socio-ecological transformation, and the tensions and constraints encountered in practice. A particular focus was placed on how participants reflected on market relations, sustainability, solidarity, governance, and dominant understandings of food system change.

Table 1 Interviewed initiatives/organisations

Code	Initiative/organisation	Description
Int_1	Economia Solidale (Solidarity economy network)	Territorially based solidarity economy network coordinating farmers' markets and collective purchasing initiatives. It promotes ethical consumption, short food supply chains, and social and environmental sustainability.
Int_2	Natura Sì	National organic supermarket chain promoting organic and biodynamic products. Operates within formal certification and market-based logics while presenting itself as an ethical alternative to conventional retail.
Int_3	Bio-Expo	Independent organic and natural food shop focused on local sourcing and sustainable lifestyles. Acts as an intermediary between small producers and ethically oriented consumers.
Int_4	Campagna Amica (Coldiretti)	Nationwide farmers' market network promoted by the main Italian agricultural union. Supports direct sales and product origin labelling, while remaining closely linked to dominant agricultural institution
Int_5	CSA Naturalmente	Community Supported Agriculture initiative based on shared risk and long-term producer–consumer commitments. Emphasizes solidarity, agroecology, and non-market relational practices.
Int_6	Coop Samuele	Social cooperative using agriculture as a tool for social inclusion. Combines sustainable production with the labour integration of marginalized groups.
Int_7	Edera	Consumer-led food cooperative organizing collective purchasing from agroecological and ethical producers. Promotes democratic governance and political engagement through consumption.
Int_8	Mandacarù-Altromercato	Fair-trade cooperative linked to the national Altromercato network. Combines global fair-trade products with support for local ethical producers, framing consumption as solidarity.
Int_9	Orto Aperto	Community garden initiative centred on collective cultivation, food education, and ecological awareness. Functions as a non-market space for experimentation and community engagement.

To contextualise and triangulate interview data, field visits were conducted at seven sites linked to AFN activities, including solidarity markets, distribution centres, educational farms, and community gardens. These visits enabled the observation of organisational practices, informal exchanges, educational activities, and collective decision-making processes. In addition, internal documents, newsletters, websites, promotional materials, and social media communications produced by the initiatives were analysed to better understand how organisations represented their work, framed sustainability and solidarity, and communicated with larger publics.

Data analysis followed an iterative process combining inductive and theoretically informed thematic coding. Initial codes emerged from recurring themes identified across interviews, field observations, and documentary materials, particularly concerning sustainability, solidarity, governance, market relations, labour, and perceptions of alterity. These preliminary codes were subsequently grouped into broader analytical categories that informed the thematic organisation of the findings.

The coding process was also informed by decolonial scholarship on epistemic hierarchies, power asymmetries, and alternative forms of socio-ecological organisation. A particular focus was given to the manner in which the participants articulated tensions between market-driven and solidarity-based logics, negotiated institutional and certification frameworks, and reflected on dominant understandings of sustainability and food system transformation. This iterative analytical process allowed for a situated interpretation of how alterity is enacted, negotiated, and constrained within Northern agri-food contexts.

The research also benefited from the complementary positionalities of the two authors. While the second author has long-standing academic engagement and extensive contextual knowledge of Trentino's solidarity economy and AFNs, the first author conducted prolonged field immersion in the region from a distinct geographical and epistemic location shaped by social and solidarity work, and research experience in Latin American and Mexican contexts. Initially, the fieldwork was approached through relatively conventional understandings of AFNs as socially and environmentally progressive alternatives. However, sustained engagement with the field progressively revealed tensions, exclusions, and contradictions that complicated these assumptions.

The dialogue between contextual familiarity and critical distance became central to the interpretive process. The collaboration between the authors enabled ongoing discussion regarding the meanings of sustainability, solidarity, and alterity within the initiatives studied, while also encouraging reflexivity concerning how Northern food alternatives are frequently idealised within academic and policy discourse. Rather than approaching AFNs as inherently transformative or dismissing them as merely co-opted by state and market logics, the analysis sought to examine how alternative practices are negotiated within political-economic, institutional, and epistemic structures.

Accordingly, reflexivity was understood not as a detached methodological exercise, but as part of the situated and dialogical production of knowledge throughout the research process. The findings presented in this article emerged through this collaborative engagement with the field and aim to contribute not only to debates on AFNs and sustainability transitions, but also to discussions concerning the political and epistemological foundations of food alternatives in the Global North.

Findings: structural tensions and contradictions in AFN practices

The empirical findings of the study are focused on how AFN actors in Trentino negotiate sustainability, solidarity, participation, and food system transformation in practice. They are organised around three interrelated analytical domains: (i) epistemic practices and knowledge production, (ii) governance relations between production and consumption, and (iii) solidarity-based practices under market and institutional pressures. Across these domains, the analysis examines how AFNs navigate competing demands within broader Northern agri-food contexts.

Epistemological shifts vs. Eurocentric norms: knowledge, growth, and collective action

Across the AFNs studied, participants articulated a shared aspiration to foster collective identities and relational forms of organisation grounded in cooperation, mutual support, and horizontal decision-making. Many initiatives emphasised the importance of building close social relationships among producers and consumers, creating spaces for interaction, shared responsibility, and collective governance. Cooperative structures – both formal and informal – were frequently mobilised as organisational models aligned with principles of the social and solidarity economy, reflecting attempts to move beyond individualised and competitive food market forms of economic organisation.

These collective aspirations, however, were consistently described as fragile and difficult to sustain in practice. Interviewees across different types of AFNs pointed to persistent tensions between relational forms of organisation and the temporal demands imposed by remunerated employment, market participation, and agricultural labour. In territorially coordinated initiatives such as the solidarity economy

network Economia Solidale, as well as in the consumer-led cooperative Edera, participants highlighted the challenges of maintaining collective engagement, particularly when participation depended heavily on voluntary labour. Similar constraints were voiced within the CSA initiative Naturalmente, where shared responsibilities and sustained participation were perceived simultaneously as strengths and barriers to wider involvement.

Time scarcity emerged as a recurring theme shaping collective participation, learning processes, and organisational continuity. Several interviewees noted that maintaining spaces for reflection, collective experimentation, and community-building becomes difficult under conditions structured by productivity pressures and fragmented work schedules. As one CSA participant noted, participation in alternative food initiatives often competes with the demands of wage labour, leaving limited space for sustained collective engagement beyond immediate operational needs. These tensions were generally framed not as individual failures, but as larger structural conditions affecting the viability of collective practices.

Differences also emerged between initiatives depending on the degree of market integration and organisational structure. The community garden Orto Aperto, for instance, was described as a space where participation was less organised around rigid producer-consumer distinctions and where everyday practices of co-cultivation, informal learning, and shared care fostered stronger senses of collective belonging. Compared to more market-oriented initiatives, the garden appeared to facilitate forms of participation less directly shaped by economic imperatives, although its scale and reach remained relatively limited.

Another central dimension concerned knowledge production and educational practices. Across the range of initiatives, participants emphasised the importance of promoting food literacy and awareness of sustainable agricultural practices, particularly through educational activities involving children, students and local communities. The social cooperative Coop Samuele and the community garden collaborated with schools, while members of the CSA participated in experiential learning initiatives on farms. These initiatives sought to reconnect consumers with food production processes, agricultural labour, and ecological cycles through practical and embodied forms of learning.

At the same time, educational practices were often centred on technical and scientific understandings of sustainability, such as organic production methods, environmental impacts, and nutritional awareness. Interviewees less frequently articulated wider critiques concerning dominant assumptions shaping food systems, including the relationship between productivity, growth, and sustainability. Consequently, educational efforts frequently remained closer to mainstream sustainability discourses than to more plural or relational understandings of complex agroecological knowledge.

Questions surrounding growth further reflected these tensions. With the partial exception of the community garden, most initiatives expressed aspirations to expand their activities, whether through increasing production volumes, diversifying products, or expanding their consumer base. Market-oriented AFNs, including Campagna Amica, organic retail initiatives, and the fair-trade cooperative Mandacarù–Altromercato, often framed growth as necessary for economic viability and for extending the social reach of ethical, organic, or fair-trade products (Int_1; Int_2; Int_4; Int_8). In several cases, expansion was also understood as a strategy for increasing the visibility and accessibility of alternative consumption practices within bigger market structures, as in the dominant distribution channels.

While these strategies were generally presented as pragmatic responses to existing economic conditions, they also revealed the extent to which dominant understandings of development, success, and sustainability continued to shape organisational aspirations across AFNs. Overall, the findings indicate that efforts to foster collective organisation, sustainability-oriented learning, and alternative forms of participation were frequently shaped by broader economic pressures, institutional expectations, and prevailing assumptions regarding growth and viability. Although several initiatives created spaces for cooperation, ecological awareness, and collective experimentation, these practices remained heterogeneously developed and differently negotiated across organisational contexts.

Sustainable and fair production and consumption: governance, certification, and uneven participation

AFN practices in Trento are embedded within an institutional environment strongly shaped by state and governmental actors. Municipal and provincial authorities play a significant role in enabling short food supply chains, farmers' markets, and agroecological production through legal frameworks, access to public spaces, and targeted financial support. Participants frequently referred to provincial legislation on the solidarity economy and corporate social responsibility as an important facilitating context for their activities, particularly regarding the organisation of farmers' markets and collective purchasing initiatives (Int_1; Int_4; Int_5; Int_7). Institutional support also included the allocation of public spaces for community management, ongoing support for social cooperatives, and collaboration between municipalities and agricultural organisations such as Coldiretti in the operation of farmers' markets.

Concurrently, interviewees emphasised the extent to which regulatory and financial frameworks, both domestic and European, shaped the operational conditions of AFNs. The emergence of alternative food circuits was often linked to public policies supporting organic farming and food-related social enterprises. However, these same frameworks also introduced bureaucratic and technical requirements that were experienced differently across initiatives. As one member of the social cooperative Coop Samuele explained, several suppliers abandoned organic certification due to rising costs and administrative burdens following reductions in public subsidies. These challenges were particularly significant for smaller and less resourced producers, affecting their capacity to remain within certified markets.

Across the initiatives studied, certification emerged as a central mechanism through which sustainability claims, market access, and organisational legitimacy were negotiated. Most AFNs relied on formal certification schemes – including organic, biodynamic, zero-kilometre, or fair-trade labels – to communicate environmental and ethical standards to consumers. Among more market-integrated initiatives such as Natura Sì, Campagna Amica, and Mandacarù–Altromercato, certification was widely perceived as necessary for commercial viability, consumer trust, and participation within regulated supply chains.

Participants nevertheless identified important tensions in the implementation of certification systems. Standards were generally designed and overseen by institutional and technical actors external to the initiatives themselves, leaving limited space for producers' experiential knowledge or locally negotiated criteria. In addition, the financial and administrative burdens associated with certification were asymmetrically distributed, with smaller producers facing greater vulnerability and reduced organisational flexibility. As a result, certification was frequently experienced less as a collectively governed process and more as an external requirement linked to market participation.

These tensions became particularly visible in initiatives experimenting with alternative forms of validation. In the consumer-led food cooperative Edera, members described ongoing efforts to develop a participatory guarantee system (PGS) based on jointly defined criteria and mutual accountability between producers and consumers. Rather than rejecting standards altogether, the initiative sought to relocate processes of evaluation and trust-building within the network itself. Participants framed these practices as attempts to strengthen collective responsibility and reduce dependence on external certification regimes.

At the same time, participants acknowledged the limited scale and differentiated viability of such alternatives. Participatory and trust-based mechanisms remained largely confined to initiatives operating outside mainstream retail channels and required sustained time commitments from members. In contrast, larger and more market-oriented AFNs continued to depend on formal certification systems to maintain stable supply chains, wider visibility, and economic continuity. Different organisational configurations therefore generated asymmetrical capacities to negotiate institutional and market pressures.

Certification also shaped power relations along production and consumption chains in different ways. Although labels were often presented as mechanisms for protecting producers and informing consumers, participants observed that certified products increasingly functioned as niche commodities within competitive markets. Larger distribution actors were generally better positioned to absorb certification costs and benefit from commercial value associated with sustainability labels, while smaller producers faced greater economic risks and organisational constraints.

The fair-trade organisation Mandacarù–Altromercato provided an illustrative example of these tensions in a transnational context. Beyond product certification itself, interviewees described how European trade regulations, including tariffs on processed goods, limited the extent to which value could remain with producers in the Global South. In response, the organisation adopted strategies such as processing raw materials in Europe or internally absorbing additional costs, each involving significant trade-offs. More recently, the introduction of carbon certification schemes aimed at facilitating participation in carbon markets for forest-based producers introduced additional technological and organisational requirements. While these programmes were presented as environmental and economic opportunities, they generated new forms of dependency related to data collection systems, technical expertise, and partnerships with corporate actors.

Overall, the findings indicate that certification and institutional support played an important role in enabling the expansion and visibility of AFNs in Trentino, while also shaping participation, organisational practices, and access to markets in uneven ways. Although some initiatives experimented with more participatory and relational forms of validation, these practices generally coexisted with regulatory and market frameworks that continued to influence sustainability standards, economic viability, and organisational capacities across initiatives.

Solidarity and reciprocity vs. market constraints and structural inequalities

Across the AFNs analysed, solidarity and reciprocity were articulated as central values guiding organisational practices and relationships. Initiatives consistently framed their activities as oriented towards social inclusion, mutual support,

and the strengthening of territorial ties at local, national, and transnational scales. These commitments were expressed through diverse mechanisms, including cooperative governance, redistributive practices, long-term partnerships with producers, and collaboration with social organisations.

The social cooperative Coop Samuele, for instance, explicitly positioned agricultural production as a tool for labour integration and social inclusion, prioritising the participation of individuals facing structural marginalisation. Similarly, initiatives such as the solidarity economy network Economia Solidale and the farmers' market network Campagna Amica emphasised the importance of reinvesting economic value within the territory and strengthening collaboration among local actors. As one participant explained, supporting local farms was understood not only as an economic activity, but also as a way of reinforcing collective well-being at the territorial level (Int_4).

Other initiatives enacted solidarity through mechanisms aimed at redistributing risk and providing greater economic stability to producers. The consumer-led cooperative Edera, the CSA Naturalmente, the retail chain Natura Sì, and the fair-trade organisation Mandacarù–Altromercato implemented pre-financing schemes, advance purchasing agreements, and long-term commercial relationships intended to reduce uncertainty associated with agricultural production. In the case of Mandacarù–Altromercato, these practices extended beyond local contexts to include producers in the Global South, who were described as long-term partners rather than suppliers.

Beyond direct economic support, Mandacarù–Altromercato also mobilised resources for advocacy activities related to peasant, migrant, and territorial rights, while collaborating with social organisations and private actors to advance broader political objectives. In this sense, solidarity practices were framed not only as economic arrangements, but also as ethical and political commitments embedded within wider networks of cooperation.

Despite these efforts, participants consistently highlighted the constraints imposed by market conditions on the enactment of solidarity-based practices. Across different types of AFNs, initiatives faced pressures related to price competition, product availability, certification standards, and volume requirements. These constraints were frequently discussed in relation to large-scale retailers, which were perceived as capable of offering lower prices due to economies of scale and long-term capital accumulation. As one interviewee noted, alternative and local markets no longer necessarily guarantee economic savings for consumers, thereby limiting their appeal beyond value-driven niches (Int_1).

The capacity of AFNs to absorb economic shocks and respond to price volatility was further constrained by limited access to capital and investment. These challenges became particularly visible in the fair-trade organisation's engagement with global commodity markets such as coffee and cocoa, where fluctuations in raw material prices directly affected retail pricing and organisational sustainability. While the payment of higher prices to producers was described as an ethical priority, it also generated tensions concerning affordability and competitiveness within increasingly price-sensitive markets (Int_8).

These dynamics contributed to bigger tensions surrounding accessibility and participation within AFNs. On the one hand, initiatives sought to expand access to ethical and sustainable food while promoting social justice and redistribution. On the other hand, the higher costs associated with many alternative products frequently limited participation to middle- and high-income consumers. Several interviewees acknowledged that solidarity-based consumption practices often remained concentrated within socially and economically privileged groups, despite wider aspirations toward inclusion and accessibility (Int_1; Int_2; Int_4; Int_7; Int_8).

Differences also emerged regarding the organisational capacity of initiatives to navigate these pressures. More institutionalised and market-integrated organisations generally possessed greater logistical stability, wider consumer reach, and stronger access to financial resources, allowing them to maintain long-term partnerships and absorb certain economic risks more effectively. In contrast, smaller and more informal initiatives often depended more heavily on voluntary labour, local trust networks, and sustained member participation, making them more vulnerable to fluctuations in participation, prices, and organisational continuity.

At the same time, interviewees involved in advocacy and fair-trade initiatives highlighted the limited influence of AFNs within far-reaching regulatory and economic arenas compared to large corporate actors with greater lobbying capacity and market power. Participants described how policy frameworks and commercial rules were frequently shaped by actors operating at much larger scales, limiting the capacity of smaller solidarity-based initiatives to influence structural market conditions directly.

Overall, the findings show that solidarity and reciprocity were enacted through diverse organisational and economic practices aimed at supporting producers, strengthening territorial ties, and promoting forms of ethical exchange. However, these initiatives also operated within competitive market environments that shaped affordability, participation, and organisational sustainability in differentiated ways. As a result, solidarity-based practices frequently involved ongoing negotiations between social commitments, economic viability, and the broader conditions structuring contemporary food markets.

Cross-case synthesis

Taken together, the cases examined reveal that AFNs in Trentino do not constitute a homogeneous field of alternatives, but rather a heterogeneous constellation of initiatives shaped by distinct organisational forms, institutional relations, and understandings of sustainability and solidarity. Across the cases, participants articulated attempts to challenge dominant food system dynamics through practices centred on ecological production, collective organisation, ethical consumption, and community-based forms of exchange. At the same time, these initiatives remained embedded within capitalist market, institutional, and regulatory environments that conditioned the scope and limits of their alternative practices.

The comparative analysis revealed significant differences in how initiatives negotiated tensions between solidarity and market dependence, autonomy and institutionalisation, ecological commitments and economic viability, as well as participation and exclusion. Some organisations operated through more formalised structures connected to public institutions, certification systems, and professionalised governance arrangements, which facilitated greater visibility, stability, and access to resources. However, these same processes often generated new forms of administrative standardisation, market dependence, and uneven participation. Other initiatives prioritised informal collective organisation, horizontal participation, and relational solidarity practices, although these approaches frequently faced limitations related to scale, economic precarity, and continuity over time.

Rather than representing fixed or coherent alternatives, the initiatives studied reflected differentiated and negotiated forms of alterity. In some cases, participants explicitly questioned dominant understandings of productivity, consumption, and food value through practices emphasising reciprocity, collective care, and ecological responsibility. In others, alternative practices coexisted with more conventional market logics, professionalisation processes, and forms of institutional adaptation. These differences did not necessarily indicate the absence of alternative orientations but rather highlighted how AFNs operate within structurally unequal conditions that shape the possibilities and limits of food system transformation.

Importantly, the cases also demonstrated that institutionalisation did not uniformly weaken alterity, nor did smaller-scale or informal initiatives necessarily embody more transformative practices. Instead, different organisational configurations generated distinct tensions, possibilities, and contradictions. More institutionalised initiatives were often able to expand access, consolidate networks, and stabilise organisational practices, while simultaneously reproducing forms of bureaucratic mediation and dependence on dominant sustainability frameworks and capitalist market logics. Conversely, less formalised initiatives frequently created stronger spaces for relational participation and experimentation but struggled to sustain long-term economic and organisational viability.

Table 2 summarises the principal dimensions identified across the cases, highlighting how initiatives differently negotiated sustainability, solidarity, governance, labour relations, and market integration.

The comparative analysis suggests that alterity within Northern AFNs emerges not through complete rupture from dominant food systems, but through situated and often partial negotiations within broader political-economic and institutional structures. The initiatives examined did not operate outside market-driven and regulatory dynamics, however, they created meaningful openings for experimenting with alternative socio-ecological relations, collective organisation, and ethical food practices. These findings provide a basis for discussing how AFNs in Global North contexts navigate the tensions between transformation, institutionalisation, and structural constraint.

Discussion

Beyond binary readings of AFNs: alterity as situated and uneven

The findings of this study contribute to ongoing debates on Alternative Food Networks (AFNs) by challenging binary interpretations that frame alternative initiatives either as transformative ruptures with dominant food systems or as inevitably co-opted by market dynamics. Consistent with critical AFN scholarship (Goodman et al. 2012; Guthman 2008; Hinrichs 2000), the analysis of AFNs in Trentino suggests that alternative food practices emerge through contradictory and negotiated processes shaped by institutional, economic, and epistemic tensions rather than through complete separation from dominant agri-food structures.

From this perspective, alterity is not understood as a fixed condition or as the achievement of a coherent alternative system. Rather, the initiatives examined reveal asymmetrical and situated forms of alterity that partially challenge dominant assumptions regarding food production, consumption, governance, and sustainability while simultaneously remaining embedded within capitalist market and institutional arrangements. Across the cases, AFNs generated openings for collective organisation, ecological learning, solidarity-based exchange, and participatory governance, nonetheless, these openings remained conditioned

Table 2 Cross-case synthesis: openings and constraints across AFN types in Trento

Type of AFN	Epistemic openings	Governance & power openings	Solidarity practices openings	Mechanisms of containment / structural constraints
Market-integrated AFNs (Natura Sì, Campagna Amica, Mandacarù–Altromercato)	Partial re-signification of sustainability and ethics within mainstream food provisioning; introduction of environmental and social concerns into dominant consumption spaces.	Tactical use of certification and institutional frameworks to redistribute value and recognition, particularly in fair-trade relations.	Long-term partnerships, minimum price guarantees, and redistributive mechanisms embedded in commercial exchanges.	Strong dependence on market competitiveness, growth imperatives, certification regimes, and regulatory frameworks that limit deeper challenges to capitalist and colonial logics.
Consumer-led cooperative and CSA (Edera, CSA Naturalmente)	Experiential learning and food literacy practices that blur producer–consumer boundaries and foreground relational knowledge.	Relocation of decision-making authority through participatory guarantee systems and trust-based validation mechanisms.	Risk-sharing, pre-financing, and collective responsibility between producers and consumers.	High reliance on voluntary labour and time-intensive participation; limited scalability and vulnerability to market pressures.
Social and community-based initiatives (Coop Samuele, Orto Aperto)	Embodied, relational, and place-based knowledge rooted in care, co-presence, and collective use of land.	Governance oriented toward social inclusion rather than market legitimacy; weak attachment to formal certification systems.	Non-market reciprocity, social integration practices, and collective stewardship of shared spaces.	Marginal position within the food system, limited scale, and financial dependence on public support and institutional recognition.
Territorial coordination and intermediary initiatives (Economia Solidale, Bio-Expo)	Hybrid epistemic practices combining ethical consumption discourses with mediation between diverse initiatives and knowledges.	Partial reconfiguration of governance through coordination, networking, and mediation between grassroots actors and institutions.	Territorial solidarity via networking, collective purchasing, and support for local and ethical producers.	Tensions between coordination/ mediation roles and market viability; constrained capacity to influence dominant regulatory and market structures.

by regulatory frameworks, economic pressures, labour constraints, and unequal organisational capacities.

This interpretation complicates dominant narratives within AFN literature that frequently evaluate initiatives according to their degree of autonomy from capitalist markets or their capacity to scale up transformative alternatives. The findings instead support relational and process-oriented understandings of AFNs (Renting et al. 2003; Sonnino and Marsden 2006; Goodman et al. 2013; Wilson 2013), where tensions between institutionalisation, market integration, and alternative practices are not necessarily indicators of failure, but constitutive dimensions of how food system alternatives are negotiated in practice.

Importantly, the findings also challenge assumptions that less institutionalised or smaller-scale initiatives necessarily embody more radical forms of transformation (Lécuyer et al. 2025). While community-based initiatives such as Orto Aperto created stronger spaces for relational participation and collective experimentation, they also faced significant constraints linked to limited scale, voluntary labour, and organisational precarity. Conversely, more institutionalised initiatives were often better positioned to stabilise networks, redistribute resources, and expand access to ethical products, despite simultaneously reproducing forms of bureaucratic mediation and dependence on certification systems. Rather than establishing a simple opposition between "radical" grassroots initiatives and "co-opted" institutional actors, the analysis suggests that different organisational configurations generate distinct possibilities and limitations for enacting alterity within Northern agri-food contexts.

Cracks, constraints, and conditions of possibility

The analysis further suggests that AFNs in Trentino can be understood as sites where partial cracks or fissures emerge within dominant agri-food systems (Walsh 2021; Casalini 2022). These fissures do not represent complete ruptures with colonial/modern capitalist structures, nor do they constitute autonomous spaces operating outside market and institutional relations. Rather, they reflect situated openings through which alternative forms of knowledge, governance, solidarity, and socio-ecological relations are temporarily enacted and negotiated.

From a decolonial perspective, the significance of these fissures lies less in their capacity to offer scalable solutions than in their potential to destabilise dominant assumptions concerning expertise, economic value, participation, and sustainability. In several cases, initiatives created spaces where experiential knowledge, collective responsibility, and relational forms of exchange partially displaced more individualised and market-oriented logics. Participatory guarantee systems, pre-financing arrangements, community-supported agriculture, and collective learning practices illustrate how AFNs can generate alternative socio-economic relations that foreground interdependence, care and co-responsibility, even while remaining embedded within regulatory and commercial structures.

At the same time, the findings highlight the fragility and unevenness of these openings. As critical food studies scholars have noted (Smith and Jehlička 2013; Guthman 2008; Pole and Gray 2013; Forssell and Lankoski 2015), alternative food initiatives frequently operate within institutional and market environments that shape the terms under which sustainability and ethical consumption become legible and economically viable. The cases examined here suggest that openings tend to remain partial when alternative practices rely heavily on voluntary labour, niche consumption markets, externally defined certification regimes, or limited access to financial and political resources.

Rather than proposing universal pathways for food system transformation, the findings instead point toward conditions under which existing openings may persist, deepen, or connect with broader processes of socio-ecological change. Experiences discussed by participants, alongside examples identified in previous research, suggest that participatory governance arrangements (Niederle et al. 2020; Dorville and Lemeilleur 2023), institutional pluralism (Crivits et al. 2016; Herrero and Moragues-Faus 2025; Zerbian et al. 2022; Andreola et al. 2026), territorial commons funds (Bateman 2007; Zanasi et al. 2009), solidarity-based access mechanisms (Blay-Palmer et al. 2021; Scherer et al. 2024), and sustained spaces for epistemic dialogue (Walsh 2013; Quintero-Weir, Mansilla-Quiñones, and Moreira-Muñoz 2023; Clarence-Smith and Monticelli 2022), may contribute to stabilising or broadening alternative practices without fully subordinating them to dominant epistemic, capitalist market, and state-institutional logics.

Importantly, however, such conditions should not be interpreted as universally applicable models or policy prescriptions, but rather as levers that may expand the conditions of possibility for transformation. Their relevance remains situated, relational, and dependent upon specific territorial, social, institutional, and political contexts.

This interpretation shifts attention away from evaluating AFNs according to whether they "succeed" or "fail" in transforming food systems. Instead, it foregrounds the importance of examining how openings emerge, how they are constrained, and under what conditions they may generate more durable forms of collective organisation and socio-ecological experimentation.

Implications for decolonial AFN research in the Global North

This study also contributes to wider debates regarding the application of decolonial perspectives within Global North contexts. As recent scholarship argues (Kamal and Courtheyn 2024), decolonial critique should not be confined to geographically bounded understandings of the Global South, nor reduced to simple North–South oppositions. Coloniality operates through epistemic hierarchies, governance structures, and economic rationalities that traverse territories and continue shaping contemporary food systems in differentiated ways.

Within this framework, the findings suggest that AFNs in Northern contexts can be interpreted not as inherently decolonial alternatives, but as contested sites where dominant assumptions regarding productivity, growth, sustainability, expertise, and market organisation are negotiated differently. The relevance of a decolonial lens therefore lies not in identifying "pure" alternatives, but in analysing how epistemic, social, economic, and political openings emerge within structures that continue to privilege Eurocentric and capitalist market understandings of food systems.

Methodologically, this perspective also supports relational approaches to AFN research that move beyond bounded case studies or idealised typologies. The comparative analysis developed in this article illustrates how different organisational forms generate distinct but interconnected tensions across epistemic, governance, and solidarity dimensions. Attention to these relational dynamics helps illuminate how AFNs are shaped simultaneously by territorial specificities, institutional arrangements, transnational market relations, and far-reaching histories of coloniality and capitalist development.

At the same time, the study cautions against romanticising alterity or overestimating the transformative capacities of AFNs. The fragility of the openings identified across the cases highlights the depth of the structural conditions within which alternative practices operate. Decolonial transformation, from this perspective, cannot be reduced to the multiplication of niche alternatives or ethical consumption initiatives alone. Rather, it involves longer-term struggles over material conditions, social relations, political authority, and epistemic legitimacy that extend beyond the scope of AFNs themselves, addressing the epistemic and power relations that underpin them (Smith and Jehlička 2013). In this sense, the limitations of European AFNs are not primarily technical or organisational, but rather epistemic and political.

Conclusion

This article examined Alternative Food Networks (AFNs) in Trentino through a decolonial and Southern analytical lens, focusing on how alterity is conceptualised and enacted within Northern agri-food contexts. Rather than approaching AFNs as coherent alternatives or evaluating them according to binary narratives of success or failure, the analysis explored how alternative practices emerge through unequal

and situated negotiations across epistemic, governance, and solidarity dimensions.

The findings show that AFNs in Trentino generate meaningful openings for collective organisation, ecological learning, participatory governance, and solidarity-based exchange. At the same time, these openings remain partial and contested, shaped and conditioned by institutional, market, and epistemic structures that condition their scope, accessibility, and durability. Processes such as certification, institutional support, ethical consumption, and solidarity-based practices simultaneously create opportunities for experimentation while reproducing certain asymmetries and dependencies associated with dominant agri-food systems. In this sense, alterity emerges not as a complete rupture from capitalist and Eurocentric food structures, but as a partial, relational, and contested process.

By situating AFNs within broader debates on coloniality, sustainability, and socio-ecological transformation, this study contributes to expanding decolonial food scholarship beyond geographically bounded understandings of the Global South. The analysis suggests that decolonial critique in Northern and European contexts is less concerned with identifying "pure" alternatives than with examining how openings emerge within dominant systems and under what conditions they may persist, deepen, or connect with wide-ranging processes of transformation. The notion of cracks or fissures is useful here not as a metaphor for imminent systemic rupture, but as a way of understanding the fragile and differentiated spaces through which alternative socio-ecological relations can be enacted and negotiated.

The study also highlights the importance of relational and process-oriented approaches to AFN research. Rather than treating AFNs as bounded models or isolated initiatives, the comparative analysis demonstrates how different organisational forms generate distinct but interconnected tensions related to governance, participation, institutionalisation, and market integration. Attention to these relational dynamics helps illuminate the ways in which AFNs are shaped simultaneously by territorial specificities, transnational economic relations, and histories of coloniality and capitalist development.

At the same time, the research points to important limitations. The analysis is based on a specific regional context and focuses primarily on organised AFN initiatives, leaving other food practices and marginalised actors less explored. Future research could further examine how decolonial openings evolve over time, how they connect across territories, and how issues such as race, migration, labour, and social reproduction intersect with alternative food practices in European contexts. Comparative and longitudinal research may also help clarify the conditions under which partial openings become stabilised, institutionalised, or reabsorbed within dominant food system dynamics.

Finally, this study also underscores the importance of reflexivity in decolonial research on food systems. The interpretations developed throughout the analysis are themselves shaped by situated positionalities, institutional locations, and unequal epistemic relations that traverse both research processes and AFN practices. Engaging decolonial perspectives within European contexts therefore requires not only examining alternative food initiatives, but also critically reflecting on how knowledge about sustainability, alterity, and transformation is produced, translated, and legitimised within academic research itself. In this sense, producing decolonial knowledge also involves fostering forms of epistemic dialogue capable of opening spaces for exchange, contestation, and mutual learning across different situated experiences, forms of expertise, and socio-ecological realities.

Ultimately, this article argues that AFNs in the Global North are best understood neither as fully transformative solutions nor as merely co-opted extensions of dominant food systems. Instead, they constitute contested and relational spaces where struggles over knowledge, sustainability, solidarity, and socio-ecological futures remain open, uneven, and politically significant.

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Data and code availability Not applicable.

Declarations

Ethical approval We have asked for free and informed consent from each respondent. We provided each respondent with an information and consent sheets, which were properly signed and approved.

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