

Article

# Urban Food Strategy in the Making: Context, Conventions and Contestations

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**Abstract:** Contemporary food systems face several paradoxes regarding equity and sustainability. Considering food production—an issue that simultaneously affects both the supply (production) and demand (consumption) sides—several cities have begun to implement new strategies, called Urban Food Policies. These approaches aim to address the various challenges presented by food system failures, while also involving the existing network of grassroots initiatives. For this reason, these have established Food Policy Councils, arenas where institutions can engage with supply chain actors and food activists, deciding through the processes of participatory democracy their Urban Food Strategies. This article investigates the evolution of a new Urban Food Strategy in a middle-sized Italian town, Trento. Despite a growing number of case studies discussing the promises and problematic aspects of UFS, empirical research and analysis tend to overlook the role of the context in which these processes are embedded and how the system of political, economic, cultural, and environmental opportunities weigh upon the success of these policies. The paper draws upon a multi-method qualitative approach combining in-depth interviews, document analysis, and direct observations of the construction process of an Urban Food Strategy for the city of Trento.

**Keywords:** urban food policy; urban food strategy; food policy council; food supply chain; cooperativism

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## 1. Introduction

The type of food that reaches consumers' tables has significant social and environmental consequences. As often pointed out, contemporary food systems face three paradoxes. The first paradox deals with food waste. An estimated 1.3 billion tons of edible food, equivalent to a third of global food production, is wasted each year [1]. The second paradox is related to access to adequate food supply for humans. Despite widespread hunger and malnutrition in the world, a larger percentage of what is grown is used for animal feed or biofuels [1]. The third paradox is linked to increasing inequalities at the global level. For every person suffering from malnutrition, there are two who are obese or overweight [1]. Furthermore, the way food is produced is also very important for maintaining soil fertility, water and air quality, the state of the climate, and to reduce the loss of biodiversity, as well as impoverishment of the food culture and the landscape. As increasingly highlighted, the reduction of negative externalities, both upstream and downstream of the food supply chain, is also exacerbated by a "western consumption" model based on a logic of low prices, high availability of food, and high waste. Consumption and food waste also grow with the lifestyle typically associated with urban areas, which are currently hosting more than half of the world's population and by 2050 will host more

than two-thirds of the world's population [2] and therefore have the greatest need to import resources from the outside. Managing the consumption of the city is a key challenge for sustainability also because it is precisely in the urban context that both global consumption models such as those of "fast food," and the various approaches of "slow food" are more prevalent.

Therefore, cities have begun to implement new strategies that consider the whole food chain, involving both supply (production) and demands (consumption). Such approaches, which aim to address a multitude of challenges created by the conventional way of producing, distributing, and consuming food, use participatory methods to democratize, legitimize, and increase the effectiveness of addressing the problems [3–5]. In several cases, these processes are also facilitated by pre-existing networks of grassroots initiatives which in turn can benefit from the institutional support of Urban Food Strategies and Food Policy Councils in terms of data access, funding, increased resonance and awareness of issues and initiatives, promotion and strengthening of new and existing networks among stakeholders [5].

Urban food systems and policies face similar problems worldwide, whose intensity and severity depend on the particular characteristics and conditions of a city's context [6]. Some key elements to describe the local context are the geographical environment, infrastructures, local economic structure, historical, political, social and cultural factors such as the governance framework and institutions, and the relative strength of policy-makers and market players. Consequently, an Urban Food Strategy is tailored and can assume significantly different forms depending on the local context, since this determines the aims, objectives, and feasible actions, applied tools, and also the influence of its components. Indeed, even the actors who participate in Urban Food Strategies, such as Alternative Food Networks (AFNs), are conditioned by local dynamics that are filtered through their respective roles and interests.

Morgan et al. [7] and Goodman et al. [8] pointed out that the forms of action developed in Alternative Food Networks represent interesting spaces for experimentation and social innovation. In this way, consumption ceases to be a mere individual action and becomes part of a collective process. However, the existence of these networks, their form, spread, and internal composition are strongly conditioned by the political, economic, cultural, and environmental opportunities of the external context in which they operate [9]. Even more, these contextual elements influence the relationship between the various participating actors and the institutions, conditioning their form such as the opportunities for participation and collaboration, the inclusivity or exclusivity of the processes, as well as the issues that will prevail in different contexts [10]. Literature provides important insights into these new actors in the food supply chain: alternative food networks, urban food policies, urban food strategies, and food policy councils. In most cases, however, they consist of single case study analysis mainly focusing on the motivations and objectives that led individuals to embrace these networks, their organization, and the benefits they bring.

In this paper, we stress the need to "bring the context in" by considering the cultural, political, economic, and environmental system of opportunities which enable and constrain the making of food strategies as such processes are mediated by a series of relationships, roles, needs, and requirements shaping stakeholders' perceptions. This leads to the formation of multiple meanings and interpretations that may be shared by other stakeholders and affects the interactions within an arena such as a food policy council. Here the diversity of interests and objectives is seen as conflicting, so diminishing the effectiveness of collective actions. This paper aims, therefore, to deepen this field of studies, by analyzing the path of the Trento case and the obstacles it faced and to emphasize the element of contextual analysis as a fundamental methodological innovation for this research field. The case here is particularly interesting with its peculiar food system. Trentino is an autonomous Italian province renowned for its mountains, such as the Dolomites, which

are part of the Alps, and in where the agricultural sector has maintained a rather central role also thanks to the cooperativism that has developed here, especially after WWII.

This paper is organized as follows: Chapter 2 is divided into three subchapters in which we propose a review of the literature on Alternative Food Networks and Urban Food Policies, discussing the lack of attention on contextual factors and their weight upon actors' perceptions and willingness to embark in collective actions and strategies in the current debate. Moreover, we explore the so-called economy of conventions approach, as we believe it offers the theoretical framework needed to address the issue. Next, we introduce our methodological approach and describe the strategy used to analyze the case study of Trento, providing a comprehensive overview on the Trentino food supply chain (§3). Then, we discuss the perception of the economic, environmental, cultural, and political context as perceived by the interviewed actors (§4), based on the analysis of some in-depth interviews with the participants in the Nutrire Trento Round Table, i.e., the decision-making body of the initiative. A concluding paragraph wraps-up the main issues addressed in the article while opening up further lines of enquiry (§5).

## 2. Literature Review

In recent years food has become a central topic in political and public debate. Food scandals have caused people to pay more attention to the healthiness of what is on their plates, and there is a greater awareness of issues linked to the agri-food supply chain. As often argued, the conventional food system tends to be more and more centralized and dominated by large agro-food companies and retailers groups [11–15]. This has created the emergence of a concurring counter-trend development: the so-called Alternative Food Networks.

### 2.1. Alternative Food Networks

Alternative Food Networks are new types of organizations mostly configured at local level and involving small-scale producers, whose aim is to increase the sustainability of the agricultural system [16]. Consumers, activists, and politicians are showing more awareness on health and food security issues [17–20] as well as a growing distrust in the conventional food system [17,19,21–23]. These changes in interests ensure the success and the spread of Alternative Food Networks. At the same time, there are evermore consumers looking for high-quality food products perceived as exclusive and distinctive [20,23,24], a phenomenon defined by scholars as a “quality turn” [23]. On the other side of the supply chain, several farmers have been mobilized to look for alternatives to the traditional supply chain, because of an increasingly difficult economic position perceived as unfair [17,25].

The terminologies used in literature, such as “Short Food Supply Chains” (SFSC) [17], “alternative food initiatives” [26], or “Local Food Systems” (LFS) [4,27] underline the basic distinguishing features of Alternative Food Networks, i.e., local food production, distribution, and consumption; sustainable agricultural methods.

The alternative products and production methods seek to rediscover certain principles, such as naturalness, also through traditional and ecological production methods. This orientation is manifested in organic or low-input agricultural production, and so-called local food, zero kilometers, or with an identifiable geographical origin [28]. Recognizing how, where, and by whom certain foods—perceived as qualitatively superior—are produced, is a very important characteristic.

Reducing the distance between producers and consumers creates more direct supply chains with fewer intermediaries, mainly through the establishment of territorial links or small networks, although there are also examples of “spatially extended” Alternative Food Networks, such as Fair Trade. This ensures both transparency and a variety of ways of communicating reliable information on the product and its production.

Literature has repeatedly underlined the potential of Alternative Food Networks to generate positive results in several fields, such as greater ties to the territory [29], greater

economic vitality [30], and attention to ecological sustainability [22] and social justice [31]. The transition to a local food system reduces or, at least, prevents the appropriation of value by multinational companies, revitalizing the primary production sectors, especially in peripheral areas [32], and disconnecting the local economy from the fluctuations of the global economy. These alternative networks also offer the potential for new collective initiatives leading to community development, while strengthening trust and social capital and creating synergies with other similar initiatives in other sectors, especially tourism [33].

However, numerous critical points have also emerged from the literature. For example, concerning economic and environmental sustainability, an agreement on the benefits of alternative food networks is not recognized and in certain research its value is reduced, such as in the 2013 report edited by Santini and Gomez y Paloma [34]. They argue that the commonly mentioned benefits of local food systems are still under discussion, mainly because the quantitative and qualitative indicators examined in the research are not giving consistent and reliable results.

In addition to this, the main criticisms that often emerge from the literature are the following: the first concerns the notion of “local,” which is often emphasized by research, attributing to an intrinsic and a priori desirability to the local feature [35]. This should be avoided, both for scientific rigor and because it is not yet possible to evaluate with extreme certainty the positive contributions of a localized food system, as the ongoing debate on the subject demonstrates. Moreover, re-localization can be motivated by an attitude of “defensive localism” [36]. This is a conservative orientation of communities wishing to defend themselves against global external forces perceived as a threat to the local identity or the economic structure, rather than a real attempt to adopt initiatives that are inclusive and consistent with the principles of sustainability.

The second critical area concerns the issue of equity, where Alternative Food Networks are criticized for failing to dismantle pre-existing social inequalities, and instead to perpetuate them, consolidating and legitimizing phenomena of individualism and trust in market solutions [8,37]. In fact, instead of including the most disadvantaged and the poor, favoring their entry into these networks, a large part of the participants come from wealthy segments of society, making these initiatives appear more as a product, rather than a motor, of the current socio-economic development of a region [38].

To overcome these critical issues, these networks must necessarily spread, involving more consumers and producers in the process of breaking the status quo of food consumption routines and reconfiguring them, integrating information, knowledge, and new production-consumption habits into daily practices [5,8]. “A proper institutional building is therefore much needed, to create further institutional and interstitial space for the clustered agglomeration and crossover innovation in the convergent development of alternative food movements” ([5] page 53). Cities around the world are moving toward the creation of institutional arenas to accelerate the process of agglomeration and innovation in local food systems, supporting and promoting issues of environmental, social, and economic sustainability. The adoption of urban food policies and the institutionalization of food policy councils are providing a response from local governments to address both the distortions of the global food system and the impasse experienced by Alternative Food Networks. These new policy instruments find their function precisely in facilitating these initiatives, as well as targeting the overall sustainability of the food supply in the area.

## 2.2. Urban Food Strategies

Cities that pursue an urban food policy have two main tools to reach their objectives: Food Policy Councils and Urban Food Strategies. The former are, quoting the words of Sonnino and Spayde “organization[s] of people who are endowed with a mandate and, at least ideally, the power and the authority to affect food system change through the design of policies that integrate food with other policy areas—including health, the environment, transport and anti-poverty” ([39] page 189). The efforts of these councils are, therefore,

not only aimed at giving coherence to administrative interventions but also at providing an arena for discussion and communication for policy formulation. The literature identifies, however, four basic functions of Food Policy Councils: the first is mainly theoretical, collecting the necessary data and information on the reference scenario, identifying the problems, assessing any solutions and initiatives developing in the territory, formulating potential policies adapted to the specific urban context, monitoring the implementation phases and, therefore, their progress. The second function concerns the practices encouraging changes in the food system by mobilizing participating organizations, providing tools, resources, rules, funding opportunities, as well as collecting data. As a third aspect, Food Policy Councils are committed to promoting new networks between project partners, i.e., institutions, companies, organizations, mediating between the different parties and orientations, resulting in the creation of a new common narrative. Finally, they are responsible for disseminating information, educating the public on problems and possible solutions, also publicizing the initiatives undertaken to create the cultural context necessary to ensure long-lasting political changes [5].

Their legitimacy is based on a strong involvement of civil society. They are made up of representatives from institutions, experts in the sector, other stakeholders such as representatives of producer' unions, consumers and operators' associations, environmental organizations, NGOs, agri-food chain workers, and so on. It could be said, therefore, that Food Policy Councils carry out the crucial task of institutionally legitimizing food-related discourses and practices, which could influence or even accelerate the policymaking process at the national or territorial level, making a significant contribution to reforming the food system [3,5].

As a complement to Food Policy Councils, Urban Food Strategies (UFS) are real tools that the local governments use to pursue their objectives. They refer, in fact, to documents such as food charters and food plans, where visions, actions, and strategies are declared. A food charter is, in fact, a declaration of values, indicators, and principles guiding the food policy of a community. Usually, they are developed within Food Policy Councils, where people from all over the territory meet and discuss their concerns and desires regarding food and agricultural policy, to develop a common vision and a set of principles that will form the basis of the local food charter. When a food charter is adopted by the local city council, it becomes a public document that guides the decision-making process, highlighting what the state, the region, the city, and the levels of government of the cities, i.e., what these institutions can do and where they must focus their efforts to stimulate access to healthy, fair, and sustainable food for all. Through food charters, cities can promote local investments with microloans, initiate a system of food policy advice, guide efforts to preserve rural food stores, promote food cooperatives, or create policies to support urban agriculture [5]. Food charters are the manifestation of a concrete willingness to monitor and encourage changes in the transition to a more sustainable, fairer, healthier urban, and regional food system connecting urban, peri-urban, and rural areas [40,41], and creating synergies between the many activities and roles both within the city and its surroundings [42].

In brief, the fundamental characteristics of Urban Food Policies are the level of attention paid to justice and rights. This is summed up in the concept of food citizenship, which means engaging people in food-related behaviors that support the development of a democratic, accessible, socially as well as economically just and environmentally sustainable food system, threatened by the current order [43]. These principles are normally pursued through re-localization and re-socialization strategies [39] and aim to take control of the food chain away from multinational companies and global players. Furthermore, the Urban Food Policies identify local agriculture as an effective means of preserving the environment, but also of protecting the cultural heritage. Their action, however, also concerns another aspect of the food chain, that is the reduction of waste and loss of food caused by suboptimal practices in the production, distribution, and consumption phases.

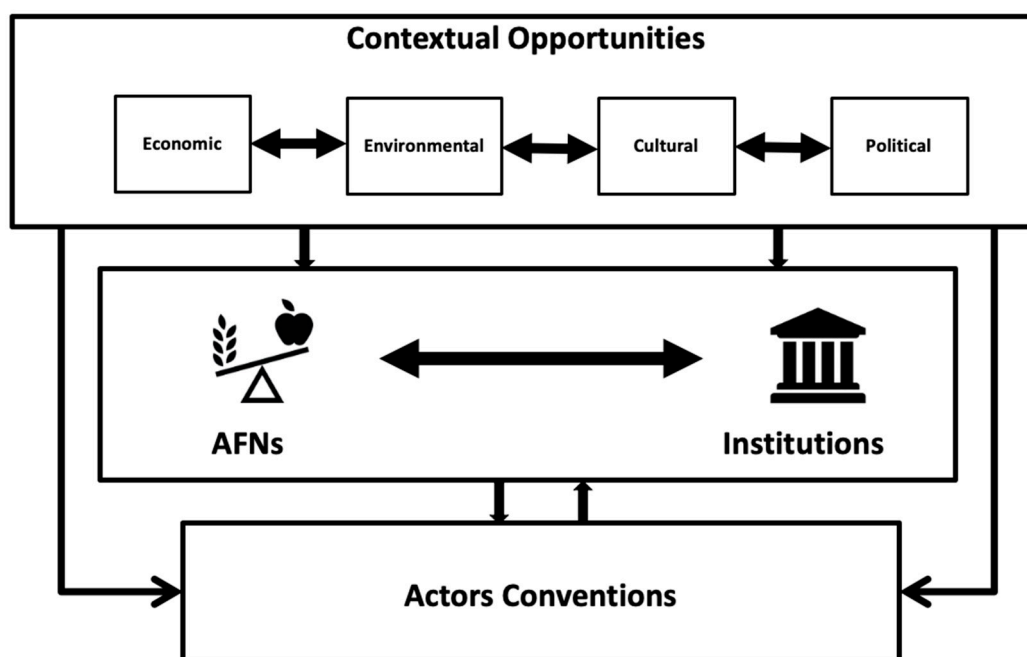
The existence of common purposes and key principles between Alternative Food Network and Urban Food Policies makes the latter an important tool for overcoming the critical issues of the former. However, the ability to deal with the problems of the supply chain and the perception of them by the stakeholders is something to be assessed in the fieldwork.

From the above-mentioned literature review a serious focus on the context and its perception by the stakeholders that interact in alternative food networks and in arenas such as food policy councils a gap emerges. When addressing the role of Urban Food Policies, Urban Food Strategies, and Food Policy Councils in shaping a common vision among actors, insufficient importance is given to the role of the economic, environmental, political, and cultural context on this process, not to ideological and value differences in the interpretation of these contextual elements and the fragmentation of interests at stake. This is precisely where we want to make our contribution with this paper and with our analysis of the process of construction of an Urban Food Strategy for the city of Trento.

### 2.3. Economics of Conventions

Food actors and networks strongly base their essence, resources, and relationships on the objective conditions given by the local socio-economic structure and *terroir*. All these combined factors delimit the opportunities and the scope of action in an urban food strategy.

As shown in Figure 1, in the process of formulating a local Food Policy the political, economic, cultural, environmental context can affect the action of both Alternative Food Networks and institutions: for this reason, an analysis of the context can contribute to a deeper understanding of the differences in these processes.



**Figure 1.** Theoretical approach of “economy of conventions” in the context of building a local food policy.

The focus on the context in literature is not completely absent but its analysis is limited and mainly focuses on some cultural or economic large-scale factors, such as the existence of food regimes or the influence of the neo-liberal paradigm, without focusing precisely on the local conditions nor on how these macro phenomena take form on the specific territory and interact with other elements. Furthermore, the literature does not consider the perspective of food policy councils and urban food strategies as an arena where different actors collaborate and compete according to their visions.

Indeed, the fact that Alternative Food Networks of a city, as well as the other stakeholders involved in an Urban Food Policy, live in the same context should not lead to the mistaken belief that they are conditioned by the same economic, environmental, political, and cultural variables in the same way and that, therefore, they can share the same positions on the issues of the sustainability of the food supply chain, on food strategies to be pursued, and neither so far production methods to be adopted, and so on.

Although they may share several characteristics of the area, the same spaces, the same rules, some structural problems, the diversity of roles and needs complicates the definition of a common path, and the sharing of a common meaning of what is sustainable, what is fair, and what is urgent, since it implies an objective dimension of these concepts that do not take into consideration the nuances involved in the process of social construction.

As the economics of conventions approach suggests, within collective action there is semantic uncertainty among actors in the phases of classification and quantification of concepts and phenomena, hence different conceptions spread among actors. For this reason, the reconciliation in a common judgement is made possible by the adoption of conventions and forms of mutual coordination [44,45].

In this regard, the study by Boltanski and Thévenot [44] identified six different conventions adopted by actors to eliminate uncertainty, guide their judgement, and make evaluation possible when the price does not incorporate sufficient information to estimate the quality of a product, as in the case of agri-food goods. Each of these forms of coordination identifies specific elements that can be assessed concerning the concept of quality. Standard consumers, those who normally purchase their goods in supermarkets or other large-scale retail outlets, may adopt the classic commercial convention which relies on price, or the industrial convention where the focus is on the existence and adherence to technical production standards. However, other conventions can guide the evaluation of a product and the consequent purchases: The convention of fame, where quality is related to the opinion of experts; the domestic convention, where uncertainty is resolved through the emphasis placed on the aspects of trust and the existence of long-term relationships; the convention of inspiration, determined by the passion and feelings of those involved in the production process; finally, the civic convention, which refers to the positive effects on local society and the environmental convention, which evaluates the positive effects on the environment. The latter is typical of critical consumers and those who use alternative supply chains.

The same can be said for Urban Food Policy: the actors involved do not necessarily share the same conventions in the discussion and decision-making phases. In these activities, there is a continuous process of construction of meanings, mediated by the context, experiences, roles, interests, and needs of the stakeholders which are oriented by conventions that may be somewhat different according to the emphasis on certain aspects or even conflicting. Unlike the situation analyzed by Barbera and Dagnes [9], for example, where they analyzed the conventions used by consumers in farmers markets, local markets, Eat-ally and large-scale retail trade, a Food Policy Council is an arena where the present figures are not just consumers, but also producers, activists, traders, trade union representatives, politicians, and so on. The heterogeneity of the stakeholders prevents or, at least, greatly slows down the process of defining a single convention that can guide the work of the Food Policy Council.

Moreover, the process of defining the main concepts that revolve around these areas, i.e., those of sustainability, equity, necessity, as well as the concept of quality explored by the research mentioned above, are not immutable once they are articulated. The attributes that identify them are continuously subject to negotiation, compromise, and conflict by the actors in the field, in this case, producers, retailers, consumers, activists, officials, etc. Thus, a consensus about what is good for the supply chain, for the environment, for the city emerges, spreads, and sometimes disappears in favor of new concepts [9].

These dynamics, if approached with appropriate analytical tools, permit the development of a more advanced understanding of the evolution of certain specific processes—such as Urban Food Policies and the interactions between conventional, alternative, and institutional actors—and to clarify the influence of the context and its perception.

### 3. Methodology and Context

The study used a mixed-methods research approach. At first, we proceeded with an extensive collection and analysis of available data on the datasets of the Institute of Statistics of the Province of Trento (ISPAT), the Institute of National Statistics (ISTAT), the Trentino geographical portal (Geocatalogue), and the report of the Rural Development Program on the characteristics of local food systems to understand the peculiarities of the territory of Trento and its surroundings. These data are of particular importance as the external context contributes to structuring the local food chain and in this way is affecting the transition process undertaken by Nutrire Trento. This was then complemented with the collection of twenty-three interviews with as many participants in the Nutrire Trento Round Table and being carried out in the first eight months of 2020 (see Appendix A). The choice of the participants is the result of a reasoned sampling, as some stakeholders were selected based on two parameters: first, the frequency of participation in the meetings, following the logic that those who participated the most and most regularly in the meetings are likely to have a more complete idea of the dynamics of the Round Table. Second, the fact that each member of the table had at least one interviewed “representative” of his category. For this reason, four interviews were collected for farmers’ union representatives, the same number for independent farmers and civic associations members, three for institutional representatives and Solidarity Purchase Group members, two for Food Recovery NGO members, one for shopkeepers, local catering cooperatives employees, and for Local Solidarity economy representatives. Nevertheless, not all categories have been examined in this work.

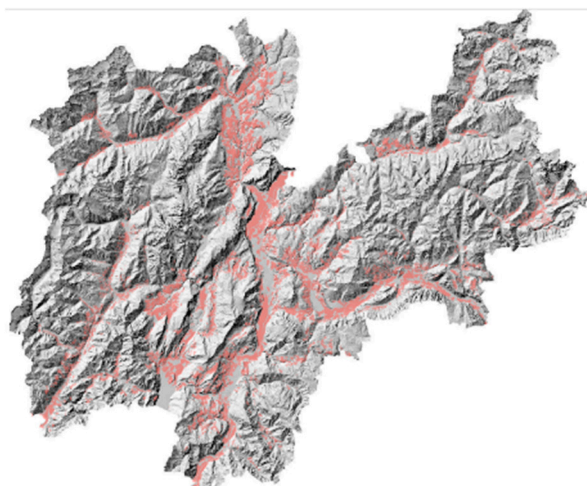
We used an interview track inspired by that developed by Kathleen Blee [46] in her study titled “Democracy in the Making” adding some general questions utilized in standard questionnaires to deepen the perception of the context in which projects of this kind are inserted. Therefore, the focus of these interviews was on the personal background of the interviewees, their perceptions on different aspects of the project in the context. The qualitative data analyzer software NVIVO was used for the analysis of the interviews.

In addition to the in-depth interviews, we attended most of the monthly meetings as participant observers and therefore we had access to the reports of the meetings. Our observation took place during the whole course of Nutrire Trento, as we participated in all 32 meetings of the Round Table.

#### *Setting the Stage: Exit from Poverty while Losing Food Diversity*

The Autonomous Province of Trento is an Italian Alpine Region located in Northeast Italy, covering about 620,000 hectares with a total number of inhabitants at around 540,000 and so a population density close to 90 people per square kilometer. 88% of the Municipalities are located at an altitude of more than 600 m above sea level [47] reflecting the peculiar topography of the province made up of valleys and high mountains with high percentages of steep slopes. These topographical characteristics have always made cultivation activities difficult, and terraces were created to overcome this problem. Nowadays, the machinery used in agriculture is often not suitable for use in such areas, consequently, they have often been abandoned in favor of the flatter areas. Furthermore, most lands being located at high altitudes, where the climate is harsher than the valley floor, the cultivation of many plant and fruit species is not possible, therefore croplands are generally localized in the flatter areas, as reported in Figure 2 [48,49].



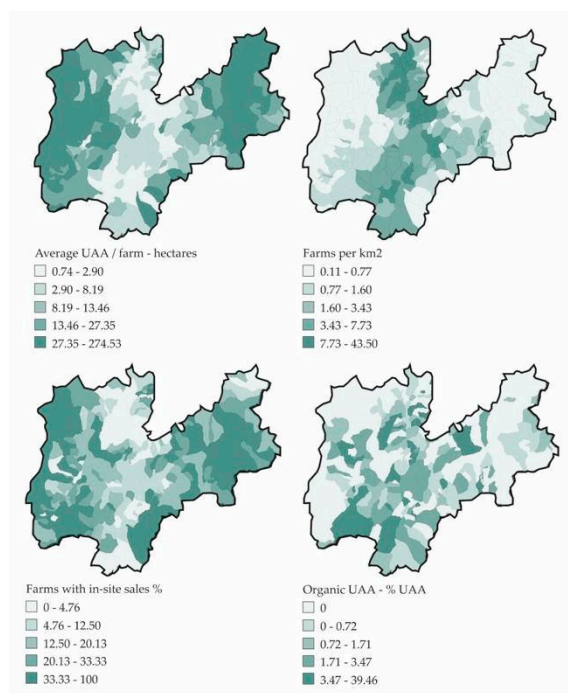


**Figure 2.** Crops in the Autonomous Province of Trento compared to the Digital Terrain Model. Source: [48,49].

These characteristics deeply influence the territory's dynamics and have favored the flourishing of villages and cities in the valley floors. Along the Adige valley—the main valley of the Trentino province—are located Trento and Rovereto, the two main centers of the region. In recent years, a phenomenon of abandonment of small villages occurred, in particular of those more distant from major urban centers.

About 20% of the province's inhabitants live in Trento which is the capital, but 70% of the other inhabitants live in villages with less than 25,000 dwellers. Therefore, the Province of Trento is classified by Eurostat as an intermediate region [50]. In Trento, the overall density is 742 inhabitants per square kilometers and the pressure on urban and peri-urban areas is nine times higher than the rest of the province [51]. 20% of Trento's territory is classified as agricultural and 50% as forest or pasture land. About 70% of the territory is covered by silvopastoral -agricultural areas, the remaining 30% is categorized as urban. The repartition of the province's surface is similar to the one of the city of Trento: 61% of the territory is covered by forests, 33.6% by agricultural areas, and only 5% by other types of land use. Collective bodies and public actors manage most of these silvopastoral -agro-forestral areas whose ownership is collective and is managed following the "uso civico" rights, a customary right embedded within the properties of communities and villages [52]. Therefore, profit is not their main aim.

In Trentino, about 7800 farms are involved in the agricultural sector and 40% of them occupy a surface of less than 0.5 hectares [53]. The comparison between the maps in Figure 3 shows that the correlation with the average UAA is inversely proportional to the number of farms per hectare. Farms in the outermost areas of the region have larger average surfaces than those located in the more central areas. On the contrary, there is a greater concentration of farms per hectare along the Adige valley's surroundings. The number of farms that have their shop, shows another difference between the central areas of the region and the more peripheral ones. Indeed, in those areas located at the fringe of the province, there is a great number of on-site shops with agricultural products.

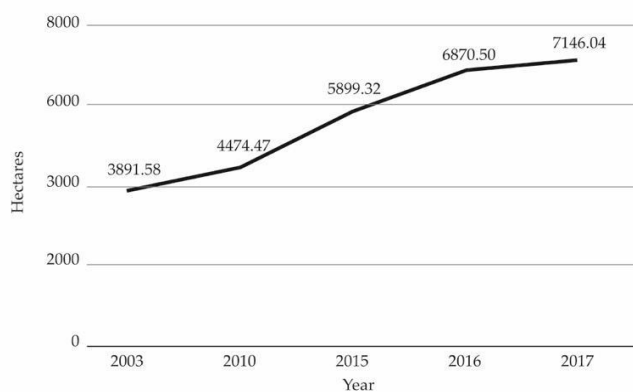


**Figure 3.** Comparison between the average of utilized agricultural areas, the percentage of farms with on-site sales, the number of farms per km<sup>2</sup>, and the percentage of Organic UAA [54].

The food system is a key sector in the province’s economy with a 15.6% of exports in food, drink, and tobacco in the second semester 2019 [55].

Gross salable production (GSP) of the agricultural and forestry sector amounts to 698.4 million Euros, 95% attributable to the agricultural sector and 5% to the forestry sector [56]. Fruit growing is the main business, with 33% of the GSP of the agricultural sector, followed by zootechnics with 17%, and viticulture with 15% [56]. Apple production makes up to 82% of the GSP of fruit growing followed by small fruits (as berries) with 11% [56]. Apple orchards extend over 10,798 hectares and involve 5864 farms [56].

The organic sector is increasing in Trentino and areas devoted to organic production have been constantly growing since 2003, as reported in the graph in Figure 4. In 2017, the area cultivated adopting organic methods was 7146.04 ha corresponding to 1.15% of the entire province’s surface, excluding forests, uncultivated lands, and hedges from the calculation [53].

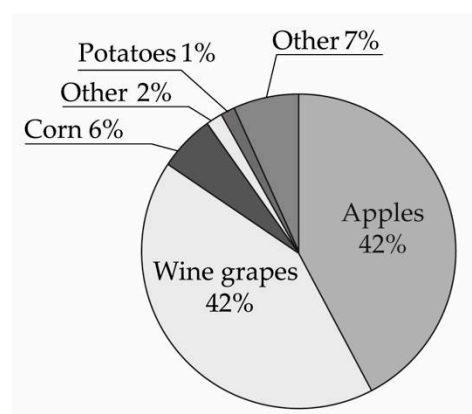


Surface devoted to organic productions in the Autonomous Province of Trento - forests, unused land, tare and hedges are not taken into account (2003-2017)

**Figure 4.** Area devoted to organic production in the Autonomous Province of Trento. Source: [57]. Author’s elaboration.

In 2011, the last National Agricultural Census reported the percentage of organic utilized agricultural areas (UAA) in the total amount of UAA. As shown in Figure 3, organic production was fairly well distributed in the territory, with a certain concentration in the most central part of the Adige valley area.

The imaginary of the Trentino province, which might be said to be the real situation (see Figure 5), is strictly connected to wine and apple production matching with its crop land use, which is mainly devoted to vineyards and apple orchards. However, the current monocultural agricultural landscape is a relatively recent fact when before the 1950s–1960s it was not so. According to Perini [58], intercropping was a common method on a great part of cultivated land. The landscape, until the middle of the XX century, was characterized by mulberry and tobacco growing, with corn being widespread in the valley floors, and barley and rye cultivated in mountain areas [59]. Nonetheless, there has always been the necessity to import vegetables and fruits from outside the province's boundaries with a common thread between the present and the past. In fact, until the middle of the XIX century, agricultural production in the region was, generally, limited to self-consumption [60,61]. Beans, cabbages, and turnips were commonly cultivated. Fruit trees were also almost completely neglected because of the fragmented land ownerships and high initial capital need. Fruit growing was considered of interest only in some areas, as in Val Rendena and Val di Non. Pear orchards were more common than the apple as production was not constant. Vineyards were cultivated in rows to facilitate the simultaneous cultivation of mulberries, as follows, fewer timber elements were needed to bear the plants [58,62].



**Figure 5.** Main agricultural production in the Autonomous Province of Trento. Source: [54]. Author's elaboration.

The crisis of this system started in the 19th century with the outbreak of plant diseases and pest infestations and the situation worsened during the second part of the 20th century because of the changing dynamics in the economic sector. Indeed, competition from foreign markets in the silk and tobacco industry in the 1960s decimated that operating in Trentino. Thus with the demise of the mulberry and tobacco industry comes the rise of that of the apple and grape as we see today. A fall in cultivated vines as a result of the damage caused by *Phylloxera* exacerbated the agricultural plight at that time. Moreover, migration of rural populations during the second part of the XIX century had already led to a disappearance of vineyards in secondary valleys that were characterized by a high genetic diversification [59].

Specialized viticulture spread during the 1950s and the 1960s. In those decades, many changes occurred in the agricultural production sector and the economic systems. The change from companion planting to specialized cultivations happened with the introduction of mechanized cultivation practices, the establishment of new land leases and with diversified family incomes [59].

If the agricultural landscape of two hundred years ago was characterized by different cultivations, today it is almost made up of two main monocultures: apple orchards and vineyards.

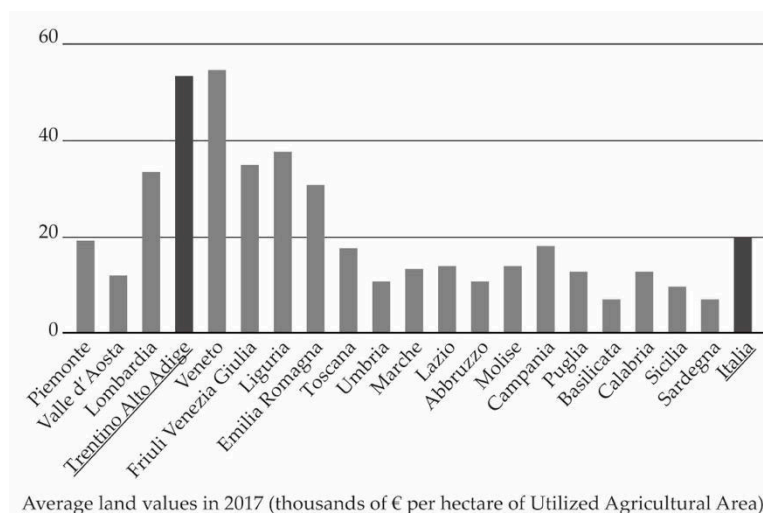
As reported by “Trentino Agricoltura”—an online platform created by the Autonomous Province of Trento that collects information, communications, services, and publications from the local agricultural sector—the usually small size of farms, their fragmentation, the high average age of producers, as reported in Figure 6, led to competitive market disadvantages. Therefore, in response and so increase competitiveness of local enterprises, farmers gathered in three producer organizations: Melinda, Trentina, and Cio Serene Star, clustered in turn in a bigger association: the “Associazione Produttori Ortofrutticoli Trentini” (Apot) (lit. Trentino Fruit and Vegetable Producers Association). Apot declares that 90% of the sector belongs to the association itself and approximately 95% of the volume of products, corresponding to €350,000,000 of annual revenue, is given by apples, the rest from cherries, berries, strawberries, kiwis, plums, and potatoes [63]. Other reasons for the local tendency to gather in cooperatives, could be linked to the supply of modern equipment and techniques, the rationalization of production processes, and the ability to adapt to a constantly evolving market, characteristics that have made the local agricultural sector economically efficient and competitive while protecting the incomes of its employees.

Age class	Age class percentage
19-34	6.8 %
35-49	26.8 %
50-64	37.9 %
> 65	28.5 %
Total	100 %

**Figure 6.** Farmer’s age classes in Trentino. Source: [56]. Author’s elaboration. Main agricultural productions.

However, some typical characteristics of cooperatives, such as the need to produce economically satisfactory results in the short term, to avoid internal tensions among members, can be both an obstacle to the growth and balance of cooperatives in the long term [64] and the adoption of more sustainable practices [56]. For example, the presence of a structured cooperative system seems to be a weak spot for niche agricultural production. They have difficulties in finding adequate marketing space and should, therefore, be supported with specific tools (networking, territorial pacts, short supply chains, etc.), that would require more time and effort to become economically sustainable. The less well-known systems of production therefore sometimes do not have a sufficient degree of take-up and encounter difficulties in creating a greater value [56].

The Province of Trento is characterized by a high land value [65]. This factor, in addition to the fragmentation of land ownership between a myriad of small farmers, could be crucial elements that led to difficulties in the introduction of innovations, which in turn could have fostered specialized and market-oriented agriculture [66]. As reported in Figure 7, in Trentino Alto Adige land value is almost three times greater than the average in Italy, and five times greater than other territories as Sardinia, Basilicata, or Sicily [65].



**Figure 7.** Average land values in 2017 (thousands of € per hectare of UAA). The values for Trentino and Italy are highlighted in dark grey. Source: [65].

The hypothesis of a link between the inertia of the sector and the high land value is reflected in a series of interviews, reported in Section 4, conducted with prominent members involved in the agricultural scene.

#### 4. The Emerging of a New Urban Food Policy in Trento

To fully understand the analysis we are going to propose, it is also necessary to briefly introduce the context in which the Urban Food Strategy of Trento is being developed, including a dense network of associations sensitive to the subject.

Regarding the local association context, the success of the local cooperative model seems to play a decisive role in the local supply chain and, therefore, on the prominence of local alternative food networks. Indeed, the cooperative system allows for less dispersion of value along the supply chain granting farmers greater market power and fairer remuneration also in the conventional sector. This may have contributed to a reduced need for local farmers to move toward building market alternatives typical of Alternative Food Networks (local markets, direct sales or through Solidarity Purchasing Groups) while also building the image of a thriving and flawless sector. Furthermore, this may have indirectly led to a lack of awareness among the population and institutions of the problems related to agriculture and the local food chain [10]. Compared to other case studies in Italy, Alternative Food Networks in Trentino seem to be much more “institutionalized” and linked to the action of the “Tavolo dell’ Economia Solidale Trentina,” a working group recognized and supported by the Autonomous Province of Trento. On the one hand, the institutional recognition, which has also meant the availability of funding from the Autonomous Province of Trento, has enabled critical consumer organizations, in particular, to develop with a certain continuity. On the other hand, the Alternative Food Networks in Trento appear very limited to specific cliques of the population and less inclined to dialogue with other local entities in order to further spread sustainable practices among new producers or consumers. Therefore, they tend to take those closed and self-referential approaches, with little impact on the local food chain. This trait emerged over and over again during the meetings of the Tavolo di Nutrire Trento, the decision-making board of the city’s participatory project.

However, despite this necessary premise, the Trentino context is very active. In addition to the already mentioned “Tavolo dell’ Economia Solidale,” it is worth briefly mentioning Trento Consumo Consapevole, a non-profit association and Solidarity Purchase Group founded in 2017—almost at the same time as Nutrire Trento—to promote and facilitate critical, conscious, and solidarity-based consumption in the province of Trento, as

well as to create a “critical mass” and examine issues related to taxation, and discuss consumption styles and producers. Another well-established organization in the area is Trentino Arcobaleno, a social promotion association which collaborates with the “Tavolo dell’Economia Solidale” and which aims to create a new economy, more closely linked to its local area and respectful of the environment and workers. Finally, it is also worth mentioning the Biodistretto association of Trento, an organization founded in 2018 that involves both farms, wineries, and eco-restaurants.

Nutrire Trento is set in this context. It started by stimulating a public debate on key issues related to food and the opportunity to build an urban strategy for food, bringing together actors from the food sector. This was made possible by three events in 2017. These initiatives aim to create a new awareness among participants, not only on the issues involved, but also on the experiences already existing in the area, and to involve them in the construction of the Nutrire Trento project. Therefore, a multilateral round table was established where all the players in the food system could discuss, share initiatives, and identify new objectives, working together with the institutions.

Jointly convened by the Municipality and the University of Trento, the Round Table is an informal space in which all stakeholders can spontaneously participate. The working group currently involves producers, firms, researchers, professionals, schools, associations, and groups of citizens and is constantly looking for new stakeholders. The Round Table has inclusive governance, as revealed by interviews with the participants themselves, which allows all interested stakeholders to participate in meetings, discuss and make proposals. In their attempt to bring together as many local agri-food actors as possible, the project partner institutions decided not to exclude conventional agricultural producers from the initiative. This allowed 125 actors from the area to participate in the meetings, with a constant flow of new stakeholder, but it also determined the withdrawal of some “purist” producers and activists who demanded the adoption of organic as the main criterion.

The Round Table has various functions. It is the consultative board deciding the criteria for joining the project and the platform, which is designed to coordinate and increase the visibility of on-going initiatives in the region.

The Round Table prepares thematic events and produces information and promotional material, such as the conference “Food, Territory, and Sustainability. New food strategies and local policies to feed cities” on 15th and 16th November 2019. These initiatives aim to contribute to the development of new awareness among citizens on the values of agriculture and local food, including those promoted by the so-called Alternative Food Networks, and to renew and strengthen the relationship between the agricultural sector and urban community. This link became very visible during the COVID-19 emergency between March and May 2020, with the emergence of many direct sales and home delivery initiatives in response to the condition imposed by the pandemic.

The Round Table promoted a trial to support these new sales channels developed during the pandemic, also to analyze and discover their economic, environmental, and social sustainability. The administration of three questionnaires revealed the spread of some good practices, such as better planning of consumption and a decrease in food waste. The project also highlighted a series of challenges facing the Trentino food supply chain: First, the shortage of fresh products, especially fruit and vegetables, which reflects the low biodiversity of crops in the area, but also the inflexibility of the sector; second, the difficulties faced by producers in networking, which has led to major logistical problems, requiring individual deliveries for each producer, increased waiting times, the emergence of minimum expenditure quantities and, of course, reduced sustainability of the initiative, both economically and environmentally. A brief experience confirmed some impressions and made evident the obstacles that Nutrire Trento has to face.

#### 4.1. Bringing the Context in: Considering the Conventions' Fragmentation

As we have seen in the previous chapters, various inherent problems burden the local food supply chain: dependence on foreign production to satisfy the local needs, scarce diffusion of organic farming, a substantially monocultural production system, as well as a certain reluctance to change, exacerbated also by the domineering cooperative structure.

The rigidity of the system is the central aspect that a project like Nutrire Trento has to deal with, when placing itself in the framework of the transition toward sustainability.

What seems to be profoundly linked to this situation, and especially with the inflexibility of the supply chain, is the lack of a common interpretative key to these phenomena among the actors seeking change. This can also be seen in their participation in the meetings of the Nutrire Trento Table.

There is no dominant convention that can coordinate the interpretations of the stakeholders and the efforts of the Table, which is inevitably slowed down and weakened. In each of the dimensions of the context—economic, political, cultural, and environmental—different and contrasting frames emerge showing a fragmented scenario.

##### 4.1.1. Economic Context

Within the economic theme, a very divisive topic emerges for local stakeholders, i.e., the issue of cooperatives. Local stakeholders are aware of the importance that the cooperative model has had in the history of Trentino. Nevertheless, a fracture has occurred among the participants of the Table: producer representatives repeatedly recognize the fundamental role that cooperatives have played in guaranteeing stability and prosperity to the agro-food sector. Food activists and small-scale producers, on the other hand, seem to identify some problematic dimensions in the cooperative model that hamper the sector's transition toward a more sustainable future and to the adoption of methods perceived as better, healthier both for consumers and the environment.

For example, the director of a local farmers' union (Int15) expressed his views on the matter as follows:

*"I believe that through co-operation of a certain role, a certain ability to give equity to agriculture has existed. I'm obviously speaking from our point of view. So through co-operation, we have succeeded over time in giving that dignity to the productive capacity to be able to bargain a fairer condition compared to the possible actions of traders and other sectors."*

In the same interview, he acknowledges that consumers are pushing for cultivation methods such as organic farming, but at the same time, he contests its feasibility in a context such as Trentino, as it fails to provide sufficient assurance of profitability for workers, as local cooperatives do, opposing these two issues and considering them as mutually exclusive.

*"In addition to an increasing focus on something organic and natural, when we know very well that unfortunately for the city of Trento and its orographic characteristics it is not always possible to go organic. Organic vegetables yes, but they have other complications. Greenhouses are needed, major investments are required, and companies intending to make this investment need guarantees in the supply chain. How can we give companies the certainty that they will make significant investments to cultivate their land? The cooperation that currently exists in Trento gives these guarantees, gives this security"*.

Despite admitting some critical points in the choices made by cooperation over the years, which have been corrected in any case, an interviewee (Int23), the representative of another important farmers' union—i.e., Coldiretti, the largest agricultural association in Italy and Trentino—at the Nutrire Trento table, came to the same conclusions as his colleague:

*“Cooperation is envied all over the world, so cooperation has been and could be a great tool, so let’s say that cooperation at some point may have followed globalization, but now it is absolutely re-adapting and correcting itself. Cooperation is a great idea.”*

As mentioned above, activists do not share the celebratory, almost apologetic narrative of cooperatives. One example is given by a member of a Solidarity Purchase Group (Int14), but also a representative of a Community Supported Agriculture, one of the many examples of Alternative Food Network that is based on seed planning agreed between the producers and consumers that are going to buy the products, as well as on risk-sharing.

*“For many farmers, it is not acceptable to produce anything other than apples, because the cooperatives want apples, the market wants apples, what else do you think they will produce if not apples? At best cherries or grapes.”*

Essentially, the interviewee mentions the link between the Trentino monoculture system and the cooperative model. The same opinion is shared by an independent farmer (Int18), i.e., a producer that is not a member of a cooperative or agricultural association, who identifies the Trentino cooperative model as the origin of many distortions in the sector. For example, when asked about Trentino producers, the interviewee used very strong words to criticize her colleagues.

*“In my opinion, it is taking a direction that I am not enthusiastic about. They are all grandchildren with apple fields of 3–4 hectares. Even during my course, I was the only black sheep. I used to say what? The cooperative tells you what to do in your field? Are you kidding me? But why are you doing this?” and they said, “I don’t know, they told me I have to do it this way”. But that doesn’t make any sense, you have to be informed. Instead, you rely on third parties, also because of some ignorance. It seems that their main objective is to deliver these boxes of apples or grapes, and that’s it. It doesn’t matter how they are done, because that’s what their grandfather taught them, that’s what their father taught them, that’s what the consortium tells them to do, so that’s what they have to do, got it? Little interest. All the teachers used to say “you are on your own land, you must know what you are doing”. Because if you’re part of the cooperative and it tells you to use that specific product, you have to do it if you want to give the product—and you’ve already signed a pact with the devil and we’re not going to argue about that—but at least you know what the reason is.”*

*“That’s probably a problem with me not compromising. That’s not even a problem for them, because they’re so used to being puppets that they don’t realize this at all.”*

This excerpt from the interview is particularly important, as it once again underlines the link between cooperatives and low biodiversity in local crops, a link that is confirmed by the literature [64]. In addition, the interviewee sees a relationship of subordination of the farmer to the cooperative, which results in a series of directives imposed from the top. The producer just follows these instructions, reducing his role to that of a mere executor. Finally, there is a mention of another problem that affects the Trentino agricultural sector, although it is not discussed in sufficient depth, that is the problem of generational turnover. Because of the high land value, those who pursue a career as an agricultural entrepreneur in Trentino are those who have inherited the land from a relative. It is uncommon that this scenario occurs for those who are not already born into a peasant family [56]. A further problem is made explicit in two other extracts from the same interview with the aforementioned farmer (Int18):

*“Talking with a farmer, he told me that the employees of the cooperatives, so the secretary, the manager, etc. have their salary regardless of how the season goes. Which is fair enough on the one hand. But on the other hand, the same regime doesn’t apply to farmers, because if you haven’t delivered your quintals of apples, you don’t get that amount. Maybe you didn’t deliver because there was a frost or a deer, I don’t know. There are A and B workers here, it’s asymmetrical and I don’t like that way of doing cooperatives.”*



*“Then there are many more contributions to the wine and fruit discourse. Just think of the hail policies. If you’re a horticulturist, you don’t take anything, if you go to the policy it costs you a lot of money and you don’t take anything home. If you are a fruit grower, the cooperative pays you, the province reimburses you for part of it and I swear, I know a lot of growers that pray for hail because they know they get more money than if they harvested. It makes me cry.”*

What these words reveal is that cooperatives cause some inequities, according to the interviewee. First, between the administrative employees and the producers themselves, since the former have guaranteed salaries, whatever the outcome of the harvest, while the latter is bound to deliver what was stipulated; second, between producers who deliver fruit products (apples and grapes) to the cooperatives and the independent ones, because the former is protected by very convenient insurance policies that protect them in case of adverse weather phenomena, and also by provincial subsidies, while the latter has to deal with much less favorable conditions.

It is therefore clear that the economic-productive context is a significant obstacle for a Food Policy such as Nutrire Trento, which aims to spread a more sustainable paradigm and bring producers and consumers closer together.

In fact, the Trentino food chain has a production structure that puts economic sustainability before the environmental one. In addition, stakeholders are not able to find a sufficient degree of consensus on the interpretation of local issues and therefore no dominant convention emerges. Producers’ representatives seem to adopt a civic convention, focusing on the positive contribution of the cooperative system to the prosperity of the agricultural sector and on the benefits it has given to small farming communities in Trentino. Activists and some small-scale producers, on the other hand, adopt an environmental convention, talking about the problems related to monocultures spread by the cooperative model. Even more, they partially contest the social benefits brought by this model: although they acknowledge some merits in terms of profitability of the sector, the cooperative system has also caused real distortions through the verticalization of the relationship with producers and the subsidiary policy.

#### 4.1.2. Environmental Context

The existence of an environmental convention that is not shared by all the actors in the Round Table became explicit with the decision on the criteria for admission to the Nutrire Trento platform.

The enlargement of the network to non-organic producers was certainly a central decision of the project. It opened a door for professional associations that do not embrace alternative production methods, or at least that are not based exclusively on them, such as Coldiretti, CIA, and ACLI Terra. However, it has led to the distancing of many other actors, especially those belonging to solidarity purchasing groups. This was underlined by several interviewees. For example, an independent farmer and representative of an association of women farmers (Int03):

*“I think the greatest tension was when the municipality said “we can’t say yes to organic and no to the others”, then there was a fracture.”*

(Int03) Her comments continued at another point in the interview:

*“In my opinion the organic issue was badly managed, or if it gave the impression at the beginning that it was possible to go in that direction and then absolutely not (...) in my opinion this led to the exhaustion of some people. Some exhausted people stayed, others gave up.”*

The same principle emerges from the words of an activist of the Solidarity Economy Round Table (Int01):

*“Since both the city farmers’ market and we at the solidarity economy were too sided on organic. If you try to favor direct products instead, it’s logical that the municipality*

*won't be able to choose only organic products. A lot of people on the other hand didn't think it was wise and walked away."*

From this last fragment, we can deduce an important insight into the agricultural sector in Trentino: as we have also seen from the review of the data, the spread of organic methods in Trentino is probably not sufficient to cover the eventual demand. For this reason, once again a comparison emerges between those who are guided by an environmental convention, which identifies environmental sustainability as the main problem of the local agri-food sector, and those who are guided by a civic convention, which—as we saw in the previous chapter in the words of the farmers' union representative (Int15)—challenges the possibility of abandoning conventional methods, while not sacrificing the economic sustainability of the current production system.

#### 4.1.3. Cultural Context

In the cultural context, greater attention to sustainability issues among the population is generally recognized. Although this is not validated by quantitative measurements, it is certainly an important and encouraging indicator for the work of the Table.

At the same time, however, there is a disconnection between producers and consumers that certainly indicates that the work of Food Policy Councils such as Nutrire Trento, which aim to bring these two parts of the supply chain closer together, is still far from complete. Evidence of this is provided by the statements of an aforementioned independent farmer (Int18) who, noticing a certain ignorance of basic agricultural issues among consumers, complains about the impossibility for farmers of interacting with them directly on a broad scale.

*"Many times people asked me in December: "do you have tomatoes?", "no, they don't exist in December", "I found them at Poli (it's a local supermarket chain, author's note)", "you found tomatoes at the supermarket because they come from Spain". People feel very bad about it, and they're people of a certain type. I could understand a 5-year-old's astonishment because they're from Spain, but I couldn't understand it when I have to deal with many people of a different calibre."*

*"The fact that people come up and go shopping in the fields, that takes more time and that time is better spent. When they come to my farm to do their shopping, they see that there are particular things and they ask why and I say 'because they have properties', 'because you know some flowers keep away other insects, you can eat them etc.' It would be much simpler if this were done in a large-scale way if people would go and buy things where they are produced."*

A direct relationship would probably involve sharing of knowledge that would help achieve widespread awareness of each other's needs and criticisms. Logically, this would facilitate the implementation of systemic corrections.

However, what emerges from the interviews is that the division between the two sides of the chain is not only due to divergent positions of the various stakeholders but also due to a certain self-celebratory narrative that describes Trentino as an idyllic, flawless, and peerless place. Although the general situation is probably better than other Italian realities, as we have seen in the chapter dedicated to the context, there are quite a few problems and the interviewees themselves note this discrepancy.

For example, an urban planner and a civic association member (Int05), comments as follows:

*"Trentino lives, it is something that denotes it very deeply, a dual reality. It presents itself as a particularly welcoming place, particularly natural, but, the reality, especially in the urban area, is that some realities of the territory are disappearing, that the close relationship that is advocated is struggling to survive."*

A Solidarity Purchase Group member (Int12) also notes this dyscrasia between the way Trentino is usually described and what it is:

*“Trentino is and always has been guilty of a great presumption concerning the fact that it is always ahead of everyone else and has nothing to learn from others. In my opinion, it should look around a bit and see what is happening elsewhere and start to dismantle some prehistoric approaches that leave little room for innovation.”*

This excerpt is particularly significant because it points out a problem of lack of innovation, almost confirming the suspicion that the transition process is indeed proceeding slowly. What makes this passage even more damning is the fact that the interviewee was talking about an alternative cooperative model to the current one, the community cooperative. As shown previously, the conventional co-operative model has ensured prosperity for the sector, but it has also proved a cultural inflexibility to more sustainable approaches [56].

In some cases, interviewees explicate these cultural delays in Trentino by comparing the local situation with that of the neighboring Autonomous Province of Bolzano, in South Tyrol.

For example, according to an other independent farmer (Int19), the centrality of the theme of territorial protection in South Tyrol is not the result of a regulatory effort, but a mixture of economic, social, and cultural elements typical of the German model, which has been able to enhance the figure of the agricultural entrepreneur and, thus, protect the landscape.

*“I think, for example, in South Tyrol, it works like this: the protection of the landscape, which has become one of the themes of territorial marketing, did not happen by building law to protect the environment, like the Bolzano Hill. How did it work? Great importance was given to the work of the farmer, so there was no overbuilding, the city did not expand on the hill. The peasant in this role was also helped and favored as an entrepreneur and farmer. In this way, a very complex and successful economic system has been built up, which has generated a very coherent landscape that tourists like so much. Without building law to protect the land, it was decided to protect the person. People remained on those steep meadows because the administration gave them a central role in defending that land, and even financed it. It's not that agriculture survives without funding, but the result has been this: less money spent on hydrogeological disruption and a longer-lasting overall result, among other things, because it goes beyond electoral and legislative dynamics, because the father passes the farm to his son, it prospers and therefore also becomes a possibility for continued employment and these are effective tools. South Tyrol is a world apart, it is a German world with German law and care for nature that comes from the Nordic countries, which is, however, an important sociological and economic model that should be taken into account.”*

The Trentino strategy, on the contrary, does not even follow an economic logic. On the contrary, quoting again an aforementioned independent farmer (Int18), it even adopts anti-economic attitudes that lead to a highly distorting food policy based on provincial subsidies with obvious sustainability problems.

*“Just think that in Trentino intensive breeding is favored. There are 2,000,000 euro sheds where the Province gives a 50% contribution for construction, money which is not paid back because the milk is sold at 40 cents per liter, so try to imagine (...). The province gives you a million euro to sell the milk at 40 cents. In Alto Adige, they say: do you want to make milk? Do you want to be sustainable? Look, five cows, you can open a farm restaurant, a farm holiday center, you can do it. You can do it. Your income comes from tourism and the farm restaurant, you sell your milk for €1 per liter instead of 40 cents, the land is all clean, there are all nice houses, all fenced in, all tidy. Why? Because there is a different political thought behind it, which focuses on the well-being of people and animals. Because in a farmhouse with five cows there's work to be done, but imagine a shed with 100 cows to be milked twice a day, with trucks coming and going.”*

A clear portrait of the cultural context emerges from the review of these extracts. According to the interviewees, Trentino has probably started on a transitional path, but it is

burdened by certain rigidities that hinder the adoption of innovative practices. At the same time, these are not always justified by a true economic logic, but rather by a phenomenon of path dependence that has led to an inefficient equilibrium situation.

The combined effect of poor interaction between the parties and the exaltation of a model that in reality presents critical issues may have strengthened Trentino's structural inflexibility. In this case, there is no discordant interpretation among the respondents, but between them and the rest of the population.

#### 4.1.4. Political Context

The political context also generates a clear division on the solutions that should be adopted to correct the distortions in the food supply chain. In this case, two factions emerge, with most producers and trade representatives on one side and activists on the other, although there are exceptions in both cases.

The main diatribe concerns the role of the state, in its various forms, with the majority of producers and agricultural representatives advocating a reduction in the presence of the public administration, regulations, and subsidies. On the contrary, activists consider the role of the state to be fundamental and call for it to play a central role in steering the sector toward the desired objectives.

Starting to present the producers' position on public intervention, we quote once again an independent farmer (Int19):

*"The state? I don't think it should have a guiding role, indeed in many cases, it has caused disasters in our sector. I would say it should be an accompaniment. It should participate, but not primarily, it should be one of the actors."*

*"It comes from an observation: all the systems of legislative protection have not worked overtime, indeed in many cases, they have generated the death of what was being protected or its slow extinction."*

Resuming his discourse on the South Tyrolean strategy to protect the environment and the farmers, the interviewee completely distrusts the regulatory intervention of the government and its role as a regulator.

Connecting the discourse on the perception of the State with a theme already discussed in the previous section, an independent farmer and agroecologist (Int20), criticizes the policy of contributions, subsidies, and public funding.

*"The state? It shouldn't drug everyone with contributions, because the agricultural entrepreneur, as well, is an entrepreneur. He must have the business risk. You can't tell me that if he doesn't have the money from the CAP, the money from the subsidy, he won't stand and shut down tomorrow morning. Then maybe he changes jobs because he becomes state-farmed, foraged, salaried. But this happens in all areas. We discovered it with the pandemic, and I was very disappointed. They go around Italy and everyone says "wow, you come from Trentino, that is, you come from a region that is doing well, it is safe, there is stability". It's all bullshit, in two months Trentino has failed. If Trentino failed in two months, it meant that it was steering by sight."*

*"They all want to be farmers as long as there's public funding, as long as there's public aid and whatever else. Entrepreneurship means having a business risk."*

The vision that emerges is clear: this approach is condemned as a strongly distorting element, as it removes responsibility from the farmer and does not allow the sector to develop to the point of remaining autonomous even in moments of crisis, such as the COVID pandemic of 2020 which, according to the interviewee, revealed the weakness of the sector and Trentino in general.

Subsidy policy is not, however, the only concern of producers in the Trentino context. For example, the director of a farmers' union (Int15), and the president of the same association (Int16), mentioned in particular the bureaucratic burden on agricultural enterprises.

*“I think we need a great deal of simplification, a great deal of simplicity of action, a great deal of fairness. This is fundamental, otherwise, it becomes complicated. Let the companies work.”*

*“For years we’ve been calling for deregulation, for years! Unfortunately, we talk about simplifying and reducing bureaucracy and we get the opposite effect. As the director always says, they simplify for themselves and complicate things for others. This is what has happened and this is what politics must do: give us a way to work, because we have reached the point where a farmer has to deal more with the bureaucracy than with the countryside and this is unacceptable.”*

The problem of bureaucracy in Italy is well-known and does not only concern the agricultural sector. In this area, however, it seems to be particularly central. According to a research by De Devitiis and Maietta in 2013 [67], the problem between bureaucratic burden and lack of innovation is evident in Italy. Commenting on a survey conducted in 2010 on a sample of 1200 farms, the study revealed a declining trend of farms open to innovation. This percentage was 61% in 2007, 38% in 2008 and 35% in 2009, and 29% in the year of the survey. Besides, the survey explored the reasons why farms decided to innovate or not. Among the companies that decided against investing in innovation, the excessive bureaucracy was reported as the third main reason, behind the lack of access to external finance and market instability.

A farmer and representative of farmers’ union (Int06)—one of the main trade associations—at the Nutrire Trento table, held a very different opinion. The interviewee does not consider state intervention negatively. On the contrary, in his interview he strongly criticizes the market paradigm that has led to various imbalances, favoring low-quality and environmentally harmful products from other countries and disadvantaging local products instead.

*“The role (of the state) should be to identify these costs and project them onto the product because most people do not see the hidden costs behind the tomato. These should be identified by the state and projected onto the product, then in two days the world changes.”*

Paraphrasing these words, it can be deduced that the task of the state should be to balance this relationship, indicating through price the true social and environmental costs of a product, encouraging the purchase of more sustainable, fair, and healthy goods.

Activists, on the other hand, are almost unanimously in favor of an active role for public institutions in the process of transition toward sustainability in the agri-food sector and the economy in general. In this regard, I would like to mention three unequivocal and significant interventions. The first is again by a member of a Solidarity Purchase Group (Int12) the second by a member of a Food Recovery NGO (Int08), i.e., a voluntary association promoting access to food and education and fights food waste by recovering it from large-scale organized distribution and other retailers offering it to those in need of food assistance, and the last by a civic association member (Int21).

*“Support all these forms of new economies, not as residual forms, but as the only possible future. (The state) cannot afford to let these forms of economy, but also of welfare, go to waste, as fantasies or as proposals of informal groups with unconventional ideas. It is the future. So, active support and participation.”*

*“The state has to take charge of this, and then make laws that go in this direction, favoring a series of thoughts from the circular economy, to the discourse of non-waste and the environment, considering what it means to have no attention regarding these problems, the consequences are in the process of free fall so here we have to create the conditions in these levels.”*

*“I don’t believe in opposing the state. On the contrary, we need more aware administrators, politicians with less propaganda and more capacity. I think there should be a dialogue with the institutions.”*

All these interventions underline once again the problems that the Table has to face since neither orientation nor a convention has emerged to unite the various stakeholders in a single strategy to overcome the problems of the territory.

## 5. Discussion and Conclusion

Urban Food Policies are expanding worldwide because of the establishment of policy arenas, such as the Food Policy Councils, where public administrations and the stakeholders find spaces for debating and cooperating. An increasing sensitiveness toward sustainability and food sovereignty has led institutions and activists to demonstrate a growing commitment to overcoming food supply chain distortions with the relocalization of food production.

However, the work of these actors is constantly conditioned by a complex interaction of factors. First of all, critical issues exist in food movements and alternative food networks that have already been widely described and debated in literature. The difficulty in expanding networks and spreading more sustainable practices and routines [5,8] was indeed detected also in this analysis, due to a self-referential and purist attitude of these actors. This phenomenon became evident with the Round Table's decision to involve conventional producers as well, leading to the withdrawal of those activists, especially from Solidarity Purchasing Groups, who demanded that only organic producers be involved.

Sometimes these fractures are linked to the local context. The set of environmental and morphological factors, roles and economic interests, cultural backgrounds, social relations and political structures, leads to different orientations and visions, which can be contrasting and conflicting.

The economics of convention concept has been applied in the analysis of the Food Policy Council of Trento, i.e., Nutrire Trento. This theoretical paradigm states that in collective actions, competent actors rely on specific conventions to achieve shared meanings and interpretations and to achieve common goals. The more a convention is shared in the classification and quantification activities of a certain group, the more the interpretations will overlap and the chances of success of collective action will increase.

Contextual data review and the stakeholders' interviews analysis show barriers—such as the geomorphological context, the average age of farmers, and high land value—to the Nutrire Trento Roundtable actions and projects. Moreover, the same phenomena are interpreted differently by the involved actors from an economic, cultural, political, and environmental point of view. This fact produces contention and more importantly causes the constant formation of variable geometries of alliances and fractures. These dynamics could constitute further obstacles to the success of the initiative and the pursuit of an Urban Food Strategy.

The Municipality of Trento signed the Milan Urban Food Policy Pact (MUFPP) composed by general principle and best practice to gain a sustainable food supply chain development. The local context peculiarities should be taken into account in the transformation of the MUFPP principles into actions, projects, and rules, considering the increasing awareness of the influence they have on the process. Moreover, with the closed relationship between the city of Trento and its surroundings, a dialogue concerning the sustainability of the food supply chain with actors and administrations at the Province level, could be useful in addressing structural problems and so prevent efforts and initiatives remaining marginal.

Further research is needed to assess the extent to which alternative food networks and urban food strategies are capable of making a significant difference on how contemporary food systems work and could work. In particular to continue to critically investigate such efforts in terms of their inclusiveness and capacity to “scale-out” and diffuse more sustainable ways of producing and consuming food. This will require work to be done in future research since, as highlighted in this article, such efforts involve far more than a matter of producing, distributing, and eating as they regard issues of justice, safety, distribution, equity, and care.

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## Appendix A

### In-depth interviews:

- Int01 Local Solidarity Economy representative, female; date of the interview: 30 January 2020
- Int02 Shopkeeper, female; date of the interview: 31 January 2020
- Int03 Independent farmer, female; date of the interview: 31 January 2020
- Int04 Civic association member, female; date of the interview: 3 February 2020
- Int05 Civic association member, female; date of the interview: 3 February 2020
- Int06 Farmers’ union representative, male; date of the interview: 4 February 2020
- Int07 Civic Association member, female; date of the interview: 4 February 2020
- Int08 Food Recovery NGO activist, male; date of the interview: 5 February 2020
- Int09 Food Recovery NGO activist, female; date of the interview: 5 February 2020
- Int10 Solidarity Purchase Group member, male; date of the interview: 15 February 2020
- Int11 Trento City Council representative, male; date of the interview: 15 February 2020
- Int12 Solidarity Purchase Group member, female; date of the interview: 23 April 2020
- Int13 Local catering cooperative employee, female; date of the interview: 29 April 2020
- Int14 Solidarity Purchase Group member, female; date of the interview: 30 April 2020
- Int15 Farmers’ union representative, male; date of the interview: 28 May 2020
- Int16 Farmers’ union representative, male; date of the interview: 28 May 2020
- Int17 Trento City Council representative, female; date of the interview: 29 May 2020
- Int18 Independent farmer, female, 7 attendances: 10 June 2020
- Int19 Independent farmer, male, 5 attendances: 11 June 2020
- Int20 Independent farmer, male, 4 attendances: 17 June 2020
- Int21 Civic association member, female; date of the interview: 08 July 2020
- Int22 Municipal representative, female; date of the interview: 21 July 2020
- Int23 Farmers’ union representative, female; date of the interview: 10 August 2020

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