

# “Food Village”: An Innovative Alternative Food Network

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Contributor: Chiara Paffarini, Biancamaria Torquati, Giorgia Giordani, Lucio Cecchini

Although the different alternative food networks (AFNs) have experienced increases worldwide for the last thirty years, they are still unable to provide an alternative capable of spreading on a large scale. They in fact remain niche experiments due to some limitations on their structure and governance. Max-Neef's Needs Matrix and Design Thinking (DT) tools were used to develop the design model. Applying the design method to the food chain is helpful to develop the concept of the “Food Village”, an innovative food supply network far from the current economic mechanisms and based on the community and eco-sustainability.

Keywords: alternative food networks (AFNs) ; human needs ; food sovereignty ; Civil Economy (CE)

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## 1. Alternative Food Networks: Past and Actuality

Following the first food scandals linked to large-scale distribution, and since the 1980s, there has been a radical change in consumer demand, the so-called “food turning-point” <sup>[1]</sup>, that has caused greater importance to be attached to the transparency of the production processes <sup>[2]</sup>. Meanwhile, the first environmental movements, ambitious to overturn the modernisation paradigm in the food sector, also contributed to this change.

Considering this background, a new way of thinking about the supply chain has begun taking shape. The organic system was the substratum on which national and international networks of producers and consumers were created. However, farmers have begun revealing the economic unsustainability of the large-scale distribution system and agriculture productivity. The loss of power along the supply chain and large-scale production has been determined to crush small- and medium-sized farms <sup>[3]</sup>.

By adopting more efficient production techniques and promoting high-quality products, the farmers redeemed their position within the agri-food system; this process, together with consumers' contribution in search of more sustainable food supply chains, has promoted the development of AFNs <sup>[4]</sup>. Among several definitions, Maye and Kirwan <sup>[5]</sup> (p. 1) described AFNs as “organised flows of food products connecting people (consumers) who care about the moral aspect behind their consumption practices. These people meet those (producers) who want a fair price for the way they produce food, far from the dominant (or conventional) logic of the market”. Jarosz <sup>[6]</sup> (p. 1) affirmed that “alternative food networks represent efforts to re-spatialize and re-socialize food production, distribution and consumption in North America, Europe and Australia”.

Terms such as AFNs and “Short Food Supply Chains” (SFSCs) are often used indiscriminately in such a way that the reduction in commercial nodes is the main feature of AFNs <sup>[7]</sup>. Instead, the “localisation” is given by an assortment of factors, and it is reductive to stop at the spatial conception alone. If taken individually as a criterion for evaluating the location of a given supply chain, the geographical configuration varies from radically local to radically global chains, with an infinity of intermediate cases in between. Therefore, for an exhaustive localisation analysis, several factors such as the product's identity (typicality, processing, tradition), management organisation of the supply chain, and technologies used <sup>[8]</sup> have to be considered.

From another perspective, Watts et al. <sup>[9]</sup> argued that AFNs are distinct from conventional supply chains based on their commitment and potential subordination to global chains (i.e., those supply chains that operate in a global neoliberal policy).

Another central aspect that outlines the boundary between conventional and alternative systems is the involvement of the consumer and the level of relationality established in the exchanges between the players of the supply chain <sup>[10]</sup>. Opitz et al. <sup>[11]</sup> stated that the interaction with producers is one reason that encourages consumers to choose AFNs.

Ilbery and Maye <sup>[12]</sup> affirmed that the boundary between conventional systems and AFNs is not clearly defined: neither operates completely autonomously and differently due to the economic motives pushing the alternative producers to operate in both systems. This is an increasingly widespread phenomenon of hybridisation and “conventionalisation” <sup>[13]</sup> within alternative supply chains <sup>[14][15]</sup>. “Conventionalisation” refers to the contamination of alternative supply chains, which take on some of the characteristics of conventional supply chains, from which they originally wanted to go away. This can also occur following the attempt of “conventional players” to expand their market by including some of the characteristics of alternative food supply chains.

Le Velly <sup>[16]</sup> recognised the AFNs’ promise of diversity that a different organisation of the supply chain components should distribute benefits among producers, consumers, regions, and the environment. The difference is the characteristic that triggers the specific rules’ definition interconnected with conventional rules. Therefore, Le Velly <sup>[16]</sup> proposed to address the question “from the perspective of the organisational innovation processes activated” (p. 9). These innovation processes could be implemented by adopting specific “alternative rules” that are new ways of relating between the producer and consumer as well as new methods of production, transport, and different contracts, among others. However, some rules adopted from conventional supply chain models are not excluded, such as the infrastructure and knowledge of wholesalers. Similar to others, Le Velly <sup>[16]</sup> also regarded AFNs as ongoing, both emergent and making, rather than already shaped systemic entities.

Even if the AFNs represent a concrete proposal for transition, the discussion regarding both the maximisation of the potential of these initiatives to spread their social, ecological, and economic innovations to transform food systems, and avoiding the erosion of their authenticity is open and animate <sup>[17][18][19]</sup>.

Indeed, Rossi <sup>[20]</sup> asserts that AFNs’ experiences are at a crucial point in their existence, also due to their growing interest in the demand side as well as the production; in fact, these experiences “on the one hand are both consolidating around their elements of alterity to the conventional food chains and, on the other, they are facing the challenge of growth and the interaction with the mainstream system” <sup>[17]</sup> (p. 4). Analysing five AFNs focused on community support agriculture, Rossi <sup>[20]</sup> argued whether the increase in AFNs could represent a way to enlarge the availability and affordability of the products by expanding the consumers’ access to these initiatives; equally there is the issue of conventionalisation.

## **2. A Comparison of Four Relevant AFNs**

The four relevant AFNs analysed are: Italian Solidarity Purchase Groups (SPGs), the Organised Group of Supply and Demand (OGSD, GODO in Italian), the Community Supported Agriculture (CSA), and the Food Coop Park Slope (FCPS) model.

Born in Italy in the mid-1990s, the SPGs are a collective food supply practice including consumers who cooperate by buying food products or common goods directly from local producers at a fair price for both parties. The group participants first define a list of products that they collectively intend to purchase. Based on this list, the different persons compile orders collected to define a group order, transmitted to the producer (almost always organic). Finally, goods delivered are divided among the group members, and each one pays for his share <sup>[21]</sup>.

The OGSD is a particular SPG where producers and consumers are associated with the Italian Association of Organic Agriculture (AIAB in Italian) to encourage matching the demand and supply of local organic products. It promotes responsible consumption based on seasonality, producer visibility, and product exchange without intermediation <sup>[22]</sup>. The OGSD facilitates purchases from member farms, manages product deliveries, provides information on the organoleptic and nutritional qualities of products, and promotes visits to member farms and training on organic farming <sup>[22]</sup>.

The CSA is a community that is committed to supporting agricultural activities by sharing the risks and benefits of production with the farmer. The community co-designs the production and purchases a share of the production before each growing season. Hence, the farmer receives working capital in advance, thus obtaining greater financial security and better prices. Depending on their contribution, in return, the members receive regular farm products throughout the season <sup>[23]</sup>.

The FCPS model is inspired by one of the oldest consumer food cooperatives in the United States, born in 1973 in New York. Its goal is to be a purchasing agent for its members, the only ones who can shop food and household items in the store. To have the possibility to buy into the selling point, all of them contribute with 2 h and 45 min of work every four weeks to the Food Coop. The FCPS focuses on sustainability and prefers selling environmentally sustainable products. Usually, the mark-up is only 21% compared to the wholesale price (26–100% in large-scale distribution) (See <https://www.grubstreet.com/2018/04/history-of-the-park-slope-food-coop.html>) (accessed on 10 November 2021).

Additionally, the members' work covers about 75% of the marketing costs associated with selling point employees (See <http://foodcoop.film/>) (accessed on 25 November 2021). Therefore, the Food Coop can be competitive and offer higher-quality products compared to large-scale distribution at lower prices. This model has also spread to Europe, where numerous cooperative supermarkets inspired by the FCPS experience have sprung up [24]. It has yielded significant results in creating social aggregation, a sense of community and solidarity, and promoting a fair and environmentally sustainable food supply.

As shown before, the literature on AFNs is vast and over time several authors have focused on different aspects. Recently, at the international level, there has been an open and growing debate on the social assumptions and on the characteristics of the economic processes necessary for the structuring, affirmation, and change in scale of the AFNs [25][26][27], among others.

Mount [25] wondered about the effects of the change in scale on the structure of AFNs, how this could affect the values that characterize them and the effectiveness with which they are able to translate them into coherent economic processes.

Wald, Hill [26] affirmed that reflecting on the scale concept helps both to perceive the development and the spread of food systems, and how certain alternative food system models could realize a "jumping scale".

Using a multi-actor perspective framework, Poças Ribeiro et al. [27] explored the limiting and facilitating factors impacting the emergence and consolidation of different types of AFNs in three different countries. They underlined the fundamental role of organizers concerning the development of AFNs and that, at the same time, a wide scope of actions by governmental and non-governmental stakeholders supporting the development of more AFNs are needed.

These four AFNs are characterised by being governed by a "sharing economy" system. Business models based on sharing can be very different. Still, social well-being issues and the positive effects on the sustainable use of goods are a priority for all. A comparison to highlight their features was made concerning five key components: (i) the localisation (or proximity); (ii) the consumer involvement degree; (iii) the reasons for joining; (iv) the effects on sustainability; (v) the limits.

Localisation or proximity is a discriminating aspect between the different forms of AFNs. In SPGs, the proximity between producer and consumer is high, as they collaborate to enhance local production, favouring organic or sustainable ones. In the OGSD, localisation is important (up to 80% in some cases) but not exclusive; supplying exclusively organic products often also involves farms located throughout the country. For CSAs and Food Coops, the proximity between supply and demand is not determined. In both cases, producers and consumers may never come into direct contact, and the mutual trust is based on the sharing of some fundamental values, such as product quality and fair prices. Despite this, in CSAs, proximity between producer and consumer is strongly recommended and it is usually the norm; sometimes, consumers support the production through manual labour.

Consumer involvement in SPGs is a fundamental part of the group: they voluntarily manage orders, deliveries, and quality control, among others, and the relationship between producer and consumer is constant and without intermediaries. Instead, in the OGSD, the consumer–producer collaboration either does not occur or occurs partially: consumers decide to subscribe to a specific organised group and support the producers through a membership fee. Sometimes, consumers can provide voluntary help at the headquarters of the local OGSD quarter. The supply–demand interaction occurs mainly through web platforms: orders are placed periodically, and then consumers can collect their shopping at the designated logistics points.

In CSAs, the producer is economically supported by the consumer; usually, at the beginning of the production year, they meet to co-plan the productions, and sometimes, the consumers contribute to manual labour helping the producers.

In Food Coops, the consumers' involvement is active and high because they have to work within the coop to be able to buy from the selling point; they also decide which products they should be selling and participate in assemblies with the directors' board.

In the SPGs, OGSD, and CSAs, the quality of the product, attention to the environment, and ethical–moral values are priority aspects for the members [22][28]. Specifically, the trust in the producer within the SPGs is what distinguishes the relationships before the support. Instead, in OGSD, the trust and support to the producer are based on the membership fee that each member–consumer pays to become part of it. In Food Coops and, particularly in Park Slopes, the desire to eat quality food and the possibility of being able to decide the provenience of the food supply unite people.

Concerning the impact on the environment, a critical aspect of CSA is that the consumer often overestimates their needs during the advance order, leading to food waste. Additionally, selling non-local producers' goods, the FCPS model has a bigger impact on the environment because it uses more long-range transport with respect to the other AFNs.

Regarding the limits, the SPGs satisfy a restricted number of families' demands: generally, no more than 50 families per group based on the territoriality feature of the productions. Therefore, if the requests exceed this threshold, a spin-off or a new group is arranged. Moreover, it is characterized by reduced product variability.

In OGSD, consumers can access a more varied product portfolio but still lower than the large-scale distribution.

In CSAs, inconsistencies between the ordered product and the one received often occur both in quality and quantity.

In SPGs, OGSD, and CSAs, the temporal and logistic accessibility limits consumers because the products could be withdrawn only during limited times of the week.

In SPGs and CSAs, the possible high involvement from all members could discourage many from joining; in the FCPS model, the high degree of involvement and work required could discourage many from joining.

It is necessary to develop an innovative model responding to all stakeholders involved in the supply chain, consumers, producers, and all operators, to surpass these critical issues and, thus, create a sustainable supply chain on a larger scale. Therefore, it is necessary to understand the economic principles and models that can form this innovative food chain structure. The next section reports the economic models that align with the principles and values underlying a new sustainable AFN.

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