

‘Values-based Territorial Food Networks’—Benefits, challenges and controversies

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Abstract

The special issue titled ‘Values-based Territorial Food Networks – Benefits, challenges and controversies’ and this introductory editorial aim to bridge conceptual and disciplinary differences within the literature on alternative agro-food networks and related concepts. In the editorial we outline a new umbrella term, *Values-based Territorial Food Networks (VTFNs)*, which synthesises the key commonalities that characterise alternatives to the mainstream food system. VTFNs are defined as *networks that connect agro-food and related stakeholders within a defined territory that operate according to a coherent set of ethical values centred on social justice and wellbeing, environmental integrity, participatory governance and economic fairness*. We discuss how VTFNs relate to earlier concepts, showing the evolution from ‘alternative’ to ‘values based’, from ‘local’ to ‘territorial’ and from ‘supply chains’ to ‘networks’. The editorial also gives an overview of the empirical case studies in the special issue, which explore 10 place-based food initiatives (from Austria, France, Greece, Germany,

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The Netherlands, Sweden, Norway, Hungary, Australia, Brazil and Japan) and address benefits, challenges, social learning and controversies associated with VTFNs. The cases are grouped into three thematic areas. 'Social learning and resilience' focuses on collaboration through diverse partnerships as a necessary condition for social innovation and for understanding new socio-technical practices. 'Agency, negotiations and food governance' explores the socioeconomic struggles, interrelations and negotiated values associated with VTFNs. 'Sociocultural environments, social capital and reflexive localism' discusses the interplay between the economic and sociocultural dimensions related to VTFNs. The transversality of VTFN allows us to think about these dimensions from a systemic perspective, thus advancing debates on the diverse sites and modes of agro-food sustainability.

KEYWORDS

alternative food networks (AFN), food governance, local food systems (LFS), reflexive localism, short food supply chains (SFSC), social learning and resilience, Values-based Territorial Food Networks (VTFNs)

INTRODUCTION

The need for sustainability transition processes in agro-food systems is increasingly at the forefront of research, practice and policy (Mcgreevy et al., 2022; Rockström et al., 2020; Webb et al., 2020). The unsustainable practices of the industrialised corporate food regime (McMichael, 2009) have been starkly exposed by the COVID-19 (Coronavirus disease) pandemic and by multiplying agricultural and food crises driven by climate change and by deepening economic and political instability (Clapp & Moseley, 2020). Over the past three decades, efforts to create more just and sustainable agro-food system configurations have given rise to a variety of socio-technical innovations that differ from mainstream food production and distribution practices and channels. These have been variously defined as alternative food networks (AFNs), local food systems (LFSs), short food supply chains (SFSCs) and civic food networks (CFNs). These distinct but often overlapping concepts (Reckinger, 2022) describe agro-food systems and networks that are associated with a range of benefits such as lesser environmental impact and cultural preservation-, ethical entrepreneurship-, social justice- and rural development benefits that have the promise of leading towards more sustainable and just systems of agricultural production and consumption (Bui et al., 2016; Forssell & Lankoski, 2014; Lamine, 2015; Tregear, 2011).

At the same time, the literature on alternative agro-food system configurations has focused either on the positive or ‘aspirational’ sustainability implications of such socio-technical innovations or voiced criticism about their ambiguous environmental and social outcomes, from the perpetuation of economic and social inequalities to ecological impact (Misleh, 2022). With this special issue, we aspire to deepen the discussion by highlighting ambivalences, dissonances and contradictions but also the opportunities and social learning processes that are either inherent to or contextual with such set-ups—and to show how they are being addressed or ignored in the everyday practices of agro-food system actors.

We do so by applying a novel conceptual framework, ‘Values-based Territorial Food Networks’ (VTFNs). This framework aims at bridging conceptual and disciplinary differences among different strands of alternative agro-food literature and bringing them together under a common umbrella that highlights their role as strategies for countering the global agro-food sustainability crisis (Reckinger, 2022). The VTFNs framework focuses on three key elements: the *values* that guide agro-food initiatives, their *territorial* or place-based dimension and the *networks* of co-operation that steer their governance.

This special issue and the concept of VTFNs is the outcome of a working group organised at the XXVIII European Society for Rural Sociology Congress,¹ which included 14 lightning talks that embraced a variety of countries and cases and an interactive participatory workshop that laid the foundations of the special issue. Beyond delivering a variety of international case studies, the participating authors engaged in joint examination of the different domains of alternative agro-food scholarship and contributed to defining the analytical framework. Therefore, the VTFN concept results from the joint effort of all researchers participating in this process. An iterative peer-review process and an online workshop were also organised to enhance coherence and synergy among the articles and validate the concept of VTFNs (for more details, see Reckinger, 2022). The individual articles showcase examples of context-specific VTFNs and document their diversity and complexity, leading to an empirically based theorisation of VTFN that delves into their strengths, weaknesses, opportunities and contradictions and the role of structural and contextual influences in shaping them.

In the first section of the editorial, we summarise the main alternative food system concepts and their salient features, showing how they reflect different areas of focus and shifting interests, connected to the growing complexity and interconnection of agro-food systems issues. We then describe the elements of the VTFN framework. Finally, we introduce the articles that are included in this special issue and comment on how they reflect the elements of the conceptual framework.

SITUATING AFNS AND RELATED CONCEPTS

The 1990s marked the emergence of a burgeoning body of literature on non-mainstream agro-food system initiatives, documented first in the Global North but now increasingly on a worldwide scale. Some of the earliest work focused on defining sustainable food production and consumption systems (Brklacich et al., 1991) and delineated the contours of food systems that are ‘rooted in particular places, aim to be economically viable for farmers and consumers, use ecologically sound practices, and enhance social equity and democracy for all members of the community’ (Feenstra, 1997, p. 28). Over the years, the expression ‘alternative food networks’ has gained most popularity, serving as an umbrella term for initiatives characterised by a variety of production systems and marketing channels, as well as by assemblages of different actors. The common feature of these initiatives is their ‘promise of difference’ (Le Velly, 2019) in relation to a global agro-food

landscape increasingly characterised by industrialisation, growth in scale and corporate dominance. Taken together, alternative agro-food practices value spatial and social proximity over distanced producer–consumer relationships; diversity, place- and cultural embeddedness over anonymity and standardisation; regenerative over extractive production methods and the principles of decentralised, participatory governance, food sovereignty and social justice over top-down control and socially damaging practices (Lamine, 2015; Lamine et al., 2019; Moragues-Faus & Marsden, 2017; Renting et al., 2003, 2012; Reckinger, 2022).

Terms other than AFNs can be seen as related concepts that centre on specific aspects or qualities of food systems or specific approaches to addressing the issues associated with the agro-industrial paradigm. LFSs, for example, emphasise the local dimension and its implications, although the process of (re-)localisation of relations of production, distribution and/or consumption is central to many alternative agro-food initiatives (Misleh, 2022). LFS was one of the first terms to be used (e.g., Feenstra, 1997), but over the years much criticism has been aimed at the concept of ‘local’ food and at the way the term is used—sometimes instrumentally—to implicitly or explicitly convey a positive and virtuous image (Born & Purcell, 2006). Furthermore, locality and localness themselves have been constructed in two main different ways (Allen et al., 2017). As ‘local food for local people’, locality is linked to forms of food provisioning where both production and consumption occur in geographically delimited areas. These can be associated with environmentally friendly forms of production (e.g., organic farming) and distribution, strengthened social networks, improved access to food and community-building (Alkon, 2008; Feenstra, 1997). The concept of local food, however, has also been used to foreground the sites of production themselves and the process of attaching specific characteristics and quality attributes to products based on their provenance. These products often become ‘local food for non-local people’, either by being transported to and consumed in places other than the area of production or by attracting visitors to the production areas. This conceptualisation of local food has marked much of European-based AFN research, in connection with rural development objectives (e.g., see Gilg & Battershill, 1998; Marsden et al., 2000). In both cases, however, an excessive focus on the local dimension has been critiqued for obscuring uncertainties associated with meeting social and environmental objectives (Alkon, 2008; DuPuis & Goodman, 2005; Schoolman et al., 2021). Finally, there is still no established way to quantify ‘localness’ (Schmitt et al., 2018), with different sources and policy instruments giving different definitions.

Another commonly used term, SFSCs, emphasises the reduction of the number of intermediaries between producer and consumer (Kneafsey et al., 2013) and ‘the fact that the product reaches the consumer with embedded information’ (Marsden et al., 2000, p. 425). This embedded information conveys meaning about different types of proximity, be it geographical, social, cognitive or organisational (Dubois, 2018). As such, spatially delimited consumption and transportation distance are not necessarily core features, as they are subordinate to the organisational characteristics of each SFSC (Renting et al., 2003). Marsden et al. (2000), for example, distinguished between face-to-face, spatially proximate and spatially extended SFSCs. The SFSC approach focuses on marketing channels and foregrounds the actors, elements and processes that constitute shortened agro-food supply chains, discussing how their social, organisational and cognitive proximity can lead to the formation of new economic models (Chiffolleau et al., 2019) and contribute to rural development objectives (Dubois, 2019; Marsden et al., 2000). As such, SFSC literature tends to emphasise the economic dimension: the shortening of supply chains is construed as contributing to the resilience of small and medium-scale farmers who can recapture value in the supply chain through the reduction or elimination of middlemen and the creation of alliances among supply chain partners (Ostrom et al., 2017). Like other conceptualisations of alternative agro-food

initiatives, SFSCs are also seen as strengthening the social values embedded in food exchanges, such as fairness, transparency and participation (Chiffolleau & Dourian, 2020).

In parallel, researchers have been interrogating and problematising the coexistence of alternative and conventional agro-food actors and modes of organisation within food supply chains (Misleh, 2022). Several recent pieces of work discuss the hybridity and complexity of SFSCs, especially considering the increasing involvement of large retailers and corporate actors in the alternative food scene (Bui et al., 2019; Chiffolleau & Dourian, 2020; Chiffolleau et al., 2019; Rossi et al., 2019), examining changing power dynamics and their influence on the transformative potential of agro-food initiatives and innovations (Zollet, 2023, this issue).

Finally, CFNs, perhaps the most recent (and least commonly used) concept, emerged in the 2010s in Europe (Renting et al., 2012) but has several commonalities with perspectives developed in other geographical contexts, such as the concept of 'civic agriculture' in the US (Lyson & Gupptill, 2004). CFNs emphasise the importance of reconnecting sustainable food production and consumption activities to civic life, while also reinvigorating democracy and participation at the local level (Alkon, 2008). The concept foregrounds the importance of collective action by civil society organisations and social movements for improving agro-food governance mechanisms. It also emphasises the centrality of the broader socio-political context, particularly in relation to the interplay of civil society with market and state actors (Andrée et al., 2019; Renting et al., 2012), and highlights democratic participation processes in agro-food governance through collective action (Holtkamp & van Mierlo, 2022; Zollet & Maharjan, 2021). CFN literature also focuses on the political dimension of creating new discourses and practices around agriculture and food and advocates for collective action to steer 'food policies and changes in regulatory frameworks aimed at creating more favourable conditions for small-scale farming systems, organic farming and innovative food-provisioning initiatives' (Renting et al., 2012, pp. 302–303). As such, it resonates with food activism literature and themes such as food democracy, food sovereignty, food justice and food citizenship (Hassanein, 2008; Levkoe, 2006; Maticena & Corvo, 2019; Smith, 2019; Tilzey, 2019) and with social and solidarity economy principles (Gibson-Graham & Dombroski, 2020; Rossi et al., 2021). With their focus on social movements and civil society initiatives, however, CFNs tend to overlook or ignore initiatives of an institutional or corporate nature.

As this brief overview shows, the overarching theme that connects all these concepts is the emphasis on a plurality of (ethical) values described or perceived as an alternative to those embodied by mainstream agro-food business, which focuses instead on economic value and profit maximisation. However, each concept focuses on different facets, actors and intervention levels, from the wellbeing of local community and environment through economic justice and ensuring that a fair share of added value stays in the hands of producers to food sovereignty and social justice more generally.

CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK: 'VALUES-BASED TERRITORIAL FOOD NETWORKS (VTFNs)'

Although we do not dispute the relevance of pre-existing conceptualisations for understanding transition pathways towards ethical, sustainable and resilient agro-food systems, we argue that they offer only a partial view of agro-food system dynamics. Furthermore, scientific dialogue frequently occurs within separate disciplinary silos, often ignoring overlapping themes. Despite their differences, however, such concepts also have substantial areas of overlap as has been evident since the early literature (e.g., see Marsden et al., 2000), and these commonalities are key

to understanding the pathways to sustainable agro-food system transformation. To foster a more integrated and coherent discussion, we introduce here the term VTFNs as a synthesis of the key commonalities that characterise alternatives to the mainstream food system (see Reckinger 2022 for a more detailed analysis). VTFNs are associated with a shift away from efforts to conceptualise the alterity that has characterised much AFN literature (Misleh, 2022) towards a more pragmatic approach and roadmap for agro-food system transformation.

We define VTFNs as networks that connect agro-food and related stakeholders within a defined territory, operating according to a coherent set of ethical values that centre on social justice and wellbeing, environmental integrity, participatory governance and economic fairness. Such values eschew the logic of profit maximisation that characterises the corporate food regime (McMichael, 2009; De Schutter, 2017) to embrace a more holistic concept of wellbeing. This conceptualisation facilitates the definition of what makes emerging agro-food configurations 'alternative' to the mainstream. The emphasis on the territorial dimension is useful for linking the values that drive these food initiatives through a spatial perspective (Stotten et al., 2017), more effectively conveying how they translate into strategies for sustainability transitions at a territorial level. The VTFN conceptual framework therefore rests on the following three pillars:

1. Ethical values, which underpin initiatives for the production, processing and distribution of food that position themselves as alternatives to mainstream food regimes. The former are often accompanied by an implicit or explicit shift in emphasis from (economic) value to holistic 'values', increased attention to processes of value negotiation, co-construction and contestations about whose values 'count'.
2. Territorial approaches, which foreground place-based agro-food economies that can deliver more sustainable, just and resilient forms of agro-food system organisation. This involves increasing emphasis on place embeddedness in socially and geographically co-constructed territories and the production and consumption processes that occur within them.
3. Networks of diverse actors and stakeholders, which highlight the centrality of the human-relational component in forming alliances within the agro-food system. A focus on networks also implies a shift from a supply chain approach towards more diffused participatory and democratic governance and co-operation practices in diversified and hybrid agro-food systems.

The VTFN concept has the advantage of incorporating into a common framework the diversity of pre-existing empirical initiatives and scholarly concepts by collectively framing them as efforts towards the sustainability transition in agro-food systems driven by ethical values (Brunori et al., 2019; Bui et al., 2019), place-based considerations (Blay-Palmer et al., 2018; Bowen & Mutersbaugh, 2014) and complex networks of interaction and participation (Chiffolleau et al., 2019; Moragues-Faus et al., 2020). In the following sections, we delve deeper into each of the three elements of the conceptual framework.

ELEMENTS OF THE VTFN CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

From 'alternative' to 'values based'

Research on alternative systems of food production and consumption has recently re-focused attention on the importance of ethical principles and values (Blumberg et al., 2020; Brunori et al., 2019) around which alternative agro-food initiatives constructed from the very start the 'promise

of difference' (Chiffolleau et al., 2019) that distinguishes them from conventional agro-food systems (Whatmore et al., 2003).

Although not always explicitly, proponents of such agro-food initiatives share a common belief that agriculture and food are necessary for producing or maintaining important social, ecological, cultural and aesthetic value beyond purely *economic* value. Embedding ethical values into economic endeavours creates new 'ethical foodscapes' (Goodman et al., 2010) and 'moral economies' (Psarikidou & Szerszynski, 2012). Putting the spotlight on values also implies a focus on 'how the actors involved redefine themselves, their activities, their interrelations and how, in so doing, they reshape food and the way it is produced, processed, distributed and consumed' (van der Ploeg, 2016, p. 7). This is also driving the establishment of *new ways of valuing* that are constructed both on the basis of cultural norms and discourses and on the values associated with products, which are variously conveyed through direct communication, prices, labels or standards (Kallio, 2020). Ethical values are therefore playing an increasingly important role in driving agro-food system change and steering food system governance (Brunori et al., 2019; Goodman et al., 2010; Kirwan et al., 2017; Lingham et al., 2022).

Various niche agro-food system initiatives, however, can be differentiated according to the specific sets of values they foreground, which depend on the specific issues that each initiative tries to address. This leads to contradictions and controversies not only between alternative and conventional systems but also between different alternative projects. Furthermore, attempts to embed ethical values into public and private initiatives give rise to a variety of trade-offs, as the same values can be interpreted in different ways, leading to different regulatory or policy frames (Brunori et al., 2019). It is therefore important to note that it is 'not the consideration of "ethics" itself in agro-food production and trade that challenges established power structures, but how ethics content is embedded in, and leveraged through, different conventions—with market-industrial elements more prone to hamper possible venues for progressive change' (Ponte, 2016, p. 18). The reference system of values can be made more explicit through a variety of classification systems, such as the four sustainability dimensions elaborated by the Food and Agricultural Organization (FAO)'s Sustainability Assessment of Food and Agriculture Systems framework (FAO, 2014) or the five principles of agro-food system transformation based on agroecology and post-growth approaches (McGreevy et al., 2022).

VTFNs and the concept of 'values' used here should not be confused with the pre-existing concept of 'value chains', meant as 'networks of partnering business enterprises working together to maximize value for the partners and end customers of a particular product or service' (Stevenson & Pirog, 2008, p. 120). VTFNs are also distinct from the similarly named 'values-based supply chains', developed mainly in US-based literature (e.g., see Feenstra & Hardesty, 2016), which refer to supply chains of (primarily) mid-sized producers situated in-between short and long agro-food supply chains. The concept of VTFNs is similar in its focus on multiple forms of value and in its inclusion of mid-sized supply chains and actors, but differs in its stronger foregrounding of non-economic values, in its explicit reference to a territorial scale of operation and to 'networks' of diverse stakeholders in relation to advancing just and democratic agro-food system governance.

From 'local' to 'territorial'

Place embeddedness plays a central role in many alternative agro-food initiatives. Locality is a useful departure point for researchers who seek to examine specific territorial contexts, for food actors (producers, processors, retailers or consumers) who wish to strengthen and leverage place-based

identities, and for policymakers who aim to tailor interventions to the needs of specific territories. Territorially rooted farming and food systems are also better positioned to supply services that are valued at the local level, such as environmental preservation, landscape amenities and cultural heritage preservation (Darnhofer et al., 2010). A pure spatial understanding of locality, however, is often not the most appropriate way to examine agro-food system sustainability. The concept of territory is useful for bridging micro and meso approaches and has started to become more widely used in studies of agro-food system sustainability (e.g., see Moragues-Faus et al., 2020). Territorial approaches can overcome the focus on fixed geographical scales and support 'a progressive sense of place that integrates discourses, scales, and interdependencies between geographies' (Moragues-Faus et al., 2020, p. 225) in the analysis of how new agro-food initiatives can lead to transformative change in established practices. This is in line with a growing literature on the 're-territorialisation' of agro-food systems as a strategy for addressing the multiple sustainability crises that global agro-food economies are facing (Berti, 2020). These strategies also reflect an ongoing shift from sectoral to holistic approaches to sustainable rural and territorial development (Stotten et al., 2017) that centre on sociocultural elements and the development trajectories of different territories as factors influencing local actors' ability to mobilise resources and drive change (Alberio & Moralli, 2021; Lamine, 2015).

In relation to ethical values, territorial perspectives also facilitate the process of viewing food ethics as systemic in nature (Bui et al., 2019). Systemic is meant here both as a principle for guiding the strategies and activities of agro-food system actors and as a systemic understanding of sustainability (*idem*). Adopting a territorial perspective also creates opportunities to implement agro-food policies that can lead to the strengthening of urban–rural linkages and generate reciprocal benefits (Zollet et al., 2021), although this requires broadening governance mechanisms to include a variety of actors such as local governments and civil society groups (Alberio & Moralli, 2021). These approaches have many elements in common with concepts such as foodsheds (Feagan, 2007), city-region food systems (Blay-Palmer et al., 2018; Zollet et al., 2021) and organic districts (Stotten et al., 2017).

Finally, a territorial focus also requires focusing on Indigenous, rural and peasant communities that use traditional and low-input production and provisioning practices for cultural or economic reasons, which are often omitted from the conversation about sustainable agro-food systems due to the urban focus of much AFN research. The role of such communities often remains invisible and under-examined in agro-food sustainability research. As an example, the Civil Society Mechanism of the Committee on World Food Security (CSM, 2016) promotes territorial food markets as a means of strengthening spaces for small-scale producers to market their products, as well as addressing food insecurity issues, and thus responds to the need for the creation of territorialised food economies at viable scales.

From 'supply chains' to 'networks'

Finally, a tendency to focus on linear supply 'chains' hinders our understanding of the multilevel and multi-actor relationships that exist within food systems and obscures the multiple linkages and interdependencies among agricultural landscapes, food and human and non-human wellbeing.

Emerging agro-food initiatives are characterised by increasingly distributed and interconnected organisational systems (Berti, 2020) and by the expansion of the number of actors involved in decision-making processes, with the inclusion of civil society groups and the creation of more

diffuse networks and communities of practice underpinned by shared visions of agro-food system sustainability (Zollet & Maharjan, 2021). A key role is played here by social infrastructure, meant as ‘the interactions between organisations and institutions that underpin collective action and determine how physical infrastructure is used and for what purpose’ (Moragues-Faus et al., 2020, p. 237). This emphasises the need for democratic and participatory food governance structures that can facilitate the coming together of various actors (including non-agricultural ones) in the collective construction of shared visions of sustainable, just and resilient agro-food systems (Bui et al., 2019). Building more inclusive and participatory governance systems also requires acknowledging the relational dimension of how ethical values are mobilised to shape new agro-food economies and how responsibility is allocated (Arnold et al., 2022).

Successful agro-food initiatives are also often characterised by assemblages of food and non-food actors operating across the mainstream/alternative divide, a phenomenon that draws attention to the role played by conventional stakeholders in VTFNs (Lamine et al., 2019). This strand of research has recently risen in popularity, leading to discussions about ‘hybrid’ systems (Chiffolleau et al., 2019; Zollet, 2023) and the interplay of actors within agro-food networks that combine conventional and alternative attributes.

In addition, many alternative agro-food economies are increasingly characterised by the blurring of the boundaries between producers and consumers (Alberio & Moralli, 2021) and by the establishment of communities of practice for co-operation and knowledge-sharing, supported by shared goals and principles, such as solidarity, care and the need for communal stewardship of agro-food systems (Chiffolleau et al., 2019; McGreevy et al., 2022), which adds a further values-based dimension to the concept of networks.

EMPIRICAL ACCOUNTS OF VTFNs

Through the participatory process of knowledge co-creation involving all the authors of this special issue, we have defined three—partially overlapping but still separate—thematic areas that can help with exploring the ‘benefits, challenges and controversies’ of VTFNs. These are: (1) social learning and resilience; (2) agency, negotiations and food governance and (3) sociocultural environments, social capital and reflexive localism. The 10 articles of the special issue discuss and contextualise VTFNs in nuanced ways, incorporating case studies from 12 European countries plus one each from Brazil, Japan and Australia. In the following sections, we provide a brief overview of the articles grouped by topic area.

Social learning and resilience—Collaboration and contested relations in diverse partnerships

The investigation of social learning (a necessary condition for and an important consequence of social innovation) and its impact on resilience is essential to understanding new socio-technical processes in the creation, development and operation of VTFNs. Several articles in this special issue shed light on social and political struggles that are shaping the process of the expansion of transformative innovations. They explore the much-discussed notion of ‘scaling up’, deepening understanding of the associated risks and contradictions. To become widely adopted, innovative initiatives need to be replicated and expanded, but in this process, many aspects—such as forms

of governance and collaboration, alliances and negotiation practices—change in ways that can undermine their original innovativeness and resilience.

‘The way of Mals’ described by Holtkamp (2023) concerns a VTFN in South Tyrol that focuses on localised production and consumption practices while foregrounding a participatory governance approach that aims at enhancing the development of a more sustainable local community. Niche and regime actors operating in the community share similar strategic values in relation to social capital, but they use them in diametrically opposed ways to further their respective agendas. Holtkamp highlights the importance of exploring how conflicts triggered during food-system transformation processes may be redirected towards constructive and collaborative solutions at the local level. Willingness and trust based on common values are needed to enter into dialogue—wherein positions can be negotiated and challenged—which in turn can pave the way to building resilience and a sustainable future.

In contrast, Milestad et al. (2023) focus on various strategies used by organic businesses in the process of scaling-up their businesses to build resilience and maintain their core values, embedded in their local, regional or territorial identities. The study compares the practices of four companies, one each in Austria, Germany, Norway and Sweden. Unlike in Holtkamp (2023), here the opposition between organic and conventional is not the main source of conflict rather occurs due to the process of business expansion. In this case, social learning and professionalisation through training, new management structures and the introduction of product quality standards have strengthened producers’ economic resilience. As a result, they have successfully renegotiated the relationship between organic production and distribution channels and developed an understanding of how ‘locality’ can be socially and geographically extended. This article presents different examples of how the meaning of territoriality can be adapted and transformed, and how two initially conflicting values (‘organic’ and ‘local’) can be renegotiated and reframed in ways that enhance resilience.

Nikolaidou et al. (2022) focus on how social learning, understood as a mutual learning process between producers and consumers, can facilitate consumers’ future physical or virtual engagement in bottom-up collaboration related to the ongoing negotiation of trust and social control. The article explores the development of a Participatory Guarantee System (PGS) among small agro-food businesses and farmers from the cheese-dairy sector in Thessaly (Greece). Taking an action-research approach, the authors helped develop a VTFN to explore: (1) how knowledge of the wider territorial context can be exchanged between farmers and consumers through a social learning process integrated into a PGS and (2) how a participatory certification approach involving consumers and producers can increase consumer awareness about food quality. They found that using visualisation and virtual reality greatly enhanced social learning, consumer engagement and the development of trust and cohesion within the region.

Prosperi et al. (2022) applies resilience thinking combined with the Business Model Canvas (BMC) framework to explore the diversity of small farms, which constitute important building blocks of VTFNs in Greece, Italy, Portugal and Spain. The authors support the notion that small farms play an increasingly crucial role in ensuring the resilience of LFSs and use the BMC framework to analyse management practices and demonstrate small farm diversity. Small farms in the Mediterranean can be described as a heterogeneous assemblage of diverse business models that populate farming systems and significantly contribute to their resilience, as well as to the development of VTFNs at different territorial scales. The study focuses on five different clusters of small farms (part-time, diversified, peasant, specialised and new enterprises). The authors offer an analytical framework that can be used to develop policy recommendations for enhancing the resilience of small farms that face different challenges (economic, environmental, social and

institutional). They conclude that the analysis of the interconnected steps of value dynamics (value creation, value delivery and value capture) of the business models of small farms generates a meaningful perspective with which to understand the potential and diversity that small farms have that can increase the resilience of farming systems.

Agency, negotiations and food governance

This section explores socioeconomic struggles, interrelations and negotiated values associated with VTFNs. The four articles discuss trends, actors and collaboration and competition processes that define the political circumstances, policy representations, power relations and control mechanisms connected with VTFNs, both from a bottom-up and top-down perspective.

The study by Zollet (2023) focuses on a little-explored aspect of VTFNs: the role of national and local-level policies in steering the direction of agro-food systems towards more (or less) sustainable configurations. Using the case study of Hiroshima Prefecture, Japan, the author analyses tensions between different dimensions of VTFNs—primarily their ‘localness’ versus their environmental sustainability. By highlighting both values and practices associated with food re-localisation and re-socialisation, the study shows how institutional efforts are co-opting and diluting the more radically transformative ideals of the Japanese organic farming movement. The article exemplifies the antagonism that can arise between the various values that co-exist in a VTFN and territorial actors and dimensions. The existence of hybrid networks (mixing conventional actors with alternative ones) in this case has a detrimental effect on the latter. In this conflictual situation, territorial bonds appear to be valued more than differences in farming practices, and there is little collective advocacy on behalf of the organic movement to distinguish their efforts from those that undergird the production of conventional ‘local’ food. Thus, territoriality, if reified, can constitute a threat to other VTFN-related values such as sustainability, social justice and food citizenship.

Might the explicit involvement of social movements and food advocacy actors help prevent the sort of distortions described by Zollet (2023)? Smith (2023) explores this question through a layered analysis of opportunities and dilemmas experienced by VTFNs in Australia. Her study describes how proponents of local initiatives seek to scale up through regional coalitions to become part of a national social movement of broader importance for transformative food system change. The broad aim of providing access to ecologically sustainable, healthy and fairly produced food for everyone is shared across scales. However, the adoption of specific guiding concepts—such as food sovereignty, food justice and advancing the right to food—and their practical applications have been contested. As such, values vary across scales and actors. The federative role of the more explicit value of fairness (as opposed to the less obvious notion of food sovereignty) has been instrumental in making shared values more visible across scales. A clearer social-justice agenda and shared proposals for structural-level solutions (such as food hubs, agroecology and policy change) could offer a solution to systemic issues born of government inaction, racism and colonialism.

Torre and Fonseca (2023) examine the opposition and conflict experienced by peri-urban agriculture in proximity to big urban areas through the example of the Metropolitan Region of São Paulo, Brazil. Peri-urban agriculture is becoming more and more important due to growing demand for products sourced from short supply chains and responsible agriculture, for houses surrounded by green or agricultural areas and because of the logistical fragility of global value chains, which could jeopardise the food supply of large cities. However, peri-urban agriculture is subject to intense competition due to other land-use options and the price of land. The valuation

of agricultural land dedicated to alternative uses, such as infrastructure, housing, supermarkets, industry and so forth is not comparable to its original value, resulting in opposition, tension and conflict, as well as pressure for urbanisation and artificialisation. In this case study, the increasing awareness and effort by associations and local authorities to preserve peri-urban agricultural land and practices are acknowledged. The authors make policy recommendations for the central government regarding how to enhance this process through central regulations and policies. They also suggest that their methodology for mapping conflicts and problems could be used in other locations too.

The article of Baumann Johnston and Oleschuk (2023) intends to connect meat production and consumption, normally funnelled into silos of agro-food and consumer-focussed research and scientific literature. Through the concept of cultural repertoires the authors aim to explore how meat producers understand the role of consumers in the ethical meatscape; in other words, how the values of ethical consumers influence the economic and cultural behaviour of small meat producers. They found that according to the farmers, consumers and consumer sovereignty are the most influential factors in the evolution of the sector. They claim that consumers' embeddedness is significant beyond the material dimension; there is a symbolic dimension of the consumer agency that holds tremendous emotional resonance, especially for small producers with powerful connections to the ideal of the autonomous individual. In the VTFN framework this means that ethical, social and environmental values, channelled through consumers' and producers' networks and social relations, are the main drivers of change.

Sociocultural environments, social capital and reflexive localism

This section explores questions concerning the interplay between the economic and sociocultural arena of VTFNs, including: what are the territorial dynamics of rural and urban spaces/sites? Who bears the costs and who benefits from local food production? How are social movements, food sovereignty and food justice involved? How do different development pathways divert and/or connect? Social capital and rural–urban dynamics play a significant role in both case-study articles in this section. These contributions show that rural–urban interrelations are based on various types of networks and form complex, reflexive realities in which values are negotiated, contested and performed and where power relations can shift. Food movements can adapt to diverse challenges through local action—for example, through the setting up of intermediaries such as local food hubs. However, the capacity for resilience can be limited, and some extra-local trends can be hard for VTFNs to adapt to.

For instance, it may be hard to become part of supra-regional development flows and local food movements. Tomay & Tuboly (2023) compare three Hungarian rural tourism initiatives in the field of gastronomic and wine tourism, exploring the reasons for their success and failure in taking advantage of the booming worldwide rural tourism industry. They argue that soft elements are crucial for understanding the divergent development pathways that lead to similar economic outcomes in the field of tourism. The importance of social capital represented by 'a strong local network and information sharing within the community, as well as [the] coordination of activities and collective decision-making' is confirmed by the success of gastro-VTFNs in Hungary. However, types of social capital can differ significantly, leading to diverse economic and social outcomes. In some cases, bonding social capital, a strong sense of community and shared social norms drive collective action. In other places, lifestyle entrepreneurs who move into a locality

introduce entrepreneurial values and networks, induce social capital and turn new ideas/creativity into economic success.

Smaal (2023) explores rural–urban dynamics and within them the role of partnerships, taking a reflexive approach to locality through farm-to-restaurant relations—a special case of VTFN in the city-region of Groningen in The Netherlands. According to Smaal, farm-to-restaurant relations are territorial and cultural and are built on experience, social relations, trust and reciprocity between participants. Local food suppliers and restaurants as buyers interpret local food and its values differently while trying to establish and maintain well-functioning relationships with each other. Solutions to emerging problems can be facilitated by intermediaries, such as local governments and food hubs. The latter can contribute to building bridges between the values and attitudes of both suppliers and buyers and to overcoming some of the perceived barriers, such as a lack of continuity or discursive gaps. Smaal (2023) suggests that any actors who aim to bridge such gaps need to create safe spaces for dialogue and mediate between the parties that are involved. Within these platforms, stakeholders can meet and negotiate their value-based goals (such as fairness and animal welfare), demands and interests in order to establish collaborations and maintain reciprocal and practical partnerships.

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The author has provided the required Data Availability Statement, and if applicable, included functional and accurate links to said data therein.

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ENDNOTE

¹'Rural futures in a complex world' (25–28 June 2019), Trondheim, Norway (<https://esrs2019.no/workgroup/wg31-benefits-challenges-social-learning-and-controversies-around-local-food-systems/>).

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