

Hybrid food networks and sustainability transitions: Shared and contested values and practices in food relocalisation and resocialisation

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Abstract

Processes of food relocalisation and resocialisation occurring within alternative food networks (AFNs) are seen as fundamental to fostering sustainability transitions in agro-food systems. Criticism of the alternative-conventional dualism typical of much AFN literature, however, has resulted in the emergence of the concept of hybrid food networks. This article looks at the Japanese context to critically engage with current debates on relocalisation, resocialisation and hybridity, particularly regarding the conditions under which they can serve as a means of transitioning towards more sustainable food systems. The study employs a qualitative approach to explore the interplay between the values and practices of small-scale organic farmers with those of mainstream agro-food actors operating in hybrid food spaces. The findings highlight two characteristics of hybrid contexts where actors characterised by different degrees of alternativeness ‘share space’ in the local food system: first, the tensions and contrasting meanings that emerge in the practice of food relocalisation and resocialisation; second, the way in which institutional efforts to relocalise food consumption co-opt and dilute more

radically transformative projects but at the same time can rapidly amplify incremental changes connected to the uptake of more sustainable practices.

KEYWORDS

alternative food networks, food resocialisation, hybrid food networks, local food systems, organic farming, sustainability transitions

INTRODUCTION

Increasing evidence of the negative environmental, social and economic impacts of conventional agro-food systems has brought attention to the urgency of a radical reorganisation of the way we produce, process, distribute and consume food (Rockström et al., 2020; Willett et al., 2019). Consequently, food system configurations that represent ‘alternatives’ to the conventional, most commonly referred to as alternative food networks (AFNs), are attracting growing interest (Forsell & Lankoski, 2014; Michel-Villarreal et al., 2019; Tregear, 2011). Despite recognition of AFNs’ transformative potential, critiques have been advanced in relation, among other aspects, to the emphasis placed on alternative-conventional dualism, despite evidence of the complex nature of agro-food networks, in which conventional and alternative actors and practices interact and co-exist in dynamic ways (Chiffolleau et al., 2019; Le Velly, 2019; Sumberg & Giller, 2022).

In addition, the theoretical constructs underpinning AFNs have been developed mainly through Western European and North American case studies. Given the global scale of agro-food sustainability issues, however, the scope of AFN studies needs to be expanded to different geographic and cultural contexts. This implies going beyond the dominant practice that ‘deems studies conducted in the periphery of the Global North lacking in potential to produce more generally valid insights’ (Jehlička & Daněk, 2017, p. 274). This article examines current debates on food system relocalisation and resocialisation—and the associated values and practices—in the Japanese context, with a focus on small-scale organic farmers participating in alternative and hybrid food system configurations. It also discusses how apparent ideological similarities among alternative and conventional actors mask differences in terms of practices and goals, differences that become apparent when these actors interact in hybrid food networks.

The first section of the article discusses the concept of hybridity as a more nuanced take on alternative-conventional dualism, while the second examines how two key concepts in the AFN literature, relocalisation and resocialisation, have been framed and critiqued in relation to their sustainability outcomes. Next is an overview of the development of AFNs in Japan. The fourth section outlines the methodology, while the Results section describes how values and practices of relocalisation and resocialisation are articulated and performed by different actors involved in Japanese hybrid food networks. The discussion section examines points of convergence and divergence emerging from the results, with a focus on how the case study contributes to a more nuanced understanding of the alternative-conventional interplay within values-based territorial food networks (introduced in the editorial to this Special Issue). The article concludes by discussing the implications of the study for our understanding of how hybridity affects the potential of steering agro-food systems towards more sustainable configurations.

Beyond 'alternative versus conventional': Hybrid food networks

The alternative-conventional divide often found in agri-food system studies is increasingly considered inadequate to capture the blurring of boundaries that occurs in the development of AFNs, and the usefulness of the term 'alternative' has itself been questioned (Chiffolleau et al., 2019; Holloway et al., 2007; Le Velly, 2019). This divide can hinder the understanding of agri-food system interactions occurring between conventional and alternative actors (Forney & Häberli, 2016; Holloway et al., 2007; Rossi et al., 2019). Therefore, hybridity is increasingly identified as a central aspect of agri-food system studies (Chiffolleau et al., 2019; Maticena & Corvo, 2019).

Hybridity has been conceptualised in two major ways: the first pertains to physical spaces, practices and processes within food supply chains, such as when alternative producers' upstream sourcing or downstream processing/retailing occurs through conventional chains (Forsell & Lankoski, 2014) or when conventional producers engage with alternative markets (O'Neill, 2014). Access to infrastructures belonging to conventional systems can be beneficial or necessary for alternative actors, particularly when alternative distribution channels are missing or inadequate (Filippini et al., 2016). Importantly, hybridity should not be understood as occurring only at the point of sale, as it also concerns production practices undertaken by farmers. For example, conventional producers may adopt more sustainable practices without identifying with 'alternative' farming movements (Sumberg & Giller, 2022; Sutherland & Darnhofer, 2012).

The second—but interrelated—way in which hybridity is discussed revolves around the logics and values involved. The characteristics attributed to AFNs (such as quality, embeddedness, trust and sustainability) tend to be associated with small-scale producers, who are considered more sustainable than large capitalist-oriented actors (Holloway et al., 2007). Conversely, the involvement of actors driven by conventional market logics—particularly when AFNs generate significant economic value—is often depicted as problematic. A classic example is conventionalisation in the organic sector, where agri-business is appropriating increasingly larger shares of added value, abandoning many non-mandatory sustainable agronomic and marketing practices advocated by the organic movement and crowding out—or taking over—smaller-scale actors (Guthman, 2004). Another concern is the co-optation by conventional actors of discourses typical of alternative agri-food movements (Johnston et al., 2009).

The notion of hybridity is useful to critically engage with these concerns because it does not negate the existence of distinct categories or completely erase their opposition, but rather allows us to articulate their distinction and linkages across a more nuanced spectrum of values, practices, geographical contexts and typologies of actors within agri-food supply chains. For example, initiatives originating from conventional actors may involve values or practices coherent with those of AFNs, such as conventional producers formerly associated with supermarket chains turning to local retailers (O'Neill, 2014) or mainstream retailers increasing their offer of local and/or organic products out of commitments to ethical, local and sustainable sourcing practices (Blake et al., 2010; Zwart & Wertheim-Heck, 2021). Conversely, alternative actors may also operate according to conventional logics, at least partially (Maticena & Corvo, 2019; Orsini et al., 2019; Tregear, 2011).

One further reason not to fully abandon the concepts of 'conventional' and 'alternative' has been advanced by Le Velly (2019), who argues that alternativeness should be evaluated based on the projects promoted by actors rather than on essentialised definitions of the concept. 'Project' in this context refers to 'the reasons and ends that a collective gives itself to turn its action toward a desired future' (Le Velly, 2019, p. 4). In this sense, organic farming movements and AFNs 'can be analysed as alternative networks not because their practices truly break with conventional

systems, but because of the promise of difference that is contained in the projects of the collectives that are implementing them' (Le Velly, 2019, p. 4).

In addition to examining the projects advanced by food system actors and whether they align with sustainability objectives, it is also crucial to investigate the social processes that underpin different food network configurations and the degree to which they can bring transformative change (Chiffolleau et al., 2019). This implies a focus on the 'relations of power and struggles over how food production and consumption should be arranged in a society' (Holloway et al., 2007, p. 5), which can emerge in hybrid food spaces. It also connects to the debate on the value of incremental— as opposed to transformative—change to create alternatives to the dominant agri-food system and achieve sustainability goals (Duncan & Pascucci, 2017; Forney & Häberli, 2016).

Relocalisation and resocialisation in AFN literature: Sustainability potential and pitfalls

As discussed in detail in the introductory article to this special issue, the promise of difference underpinning alternative agri-food initiatives is often described in terms of food relocalisation (or reterritorialisation) and resocialisation processes. These in turn are connected with notions of spatial and social embeddedness and proximity (Dubois, 2018; Hinrichs, 2000; Kirwan, 2004). Direct marketing practices are seen as central to these processes because they enable locally rooted, face-to-face interactions that can lead to increased trust and solidarity between producers and consumers (Giampietri et al., 2016; Hinrichs, 2000; Kirwan, 2004; Maticena & Corvo, 2019; Randedelli & Rocchi, 2017). In this sense, AFNs ideally represent a way to reorganise food supply chain relationships around stronger ethical values, leading to increased food system sustainability across its multiple dimensions (Forssell & Lankoski, 2014). This values-based approach is perhaps better emphasised by the concept of values-based territorial food networks (VTFNs).

From an environmental sustainability standpoint, AFNs are usually associated with decreased food miles and with producers' commitment to more sustainable forms of food production and distribution (Giampietri et al., 2016; Jarosz, 2008). From a socioeconomic perspective, spatially and socially embedded food systems offer opportunities for producers to build stronger linkages with citizen-consumers (Buttel, 2006) and can also provide smaller-scale farmers, increasingly cut out from mainstream supply chains, with new economic infrastructures and opportunities (Maticena & Corvo, 2019; van der Ploeg, 2008). Benefits for consumers are less commonly addressed, but they have been described in terms of increased affordability, accessibility and availability of healthy food (Forssell & Lankoski, 2014). Most importantly, AFNs can also foster change by enabling citizens' democratic participation in the food system (Andree et al., 2019; Zollet & Maharjan, 2021b).

These positive sustainability outcomes, however, have also received much scrutiny (Forssell & Lankoski, 2014), especially concerning the conflation of spatial and social relations in the local sphere (Goodman, 2004; Hinrichs, 2000). Previous studies show that the 'local' is constructed and negotiated differently by different agri-food actors, not only in relation to its spatial boundaries but also in terms of the values it is associated with (Forney & Häberli, 2016; O'Neill, 2014; Schragar, 2021). Previous studies show that the local dimension cannot be acritically associated with safety, trustworthiness and environmentally and socially sound practices (Born & Purcell, 2006; Forney & Häberli, 2016; Goodman, 2004; Tregear, 2011; Winter, 2003). Similarly, alternative food initiatives can contribute to reproducing existing power relations, inequalities and 'defensive localism' (DuPuis & Goodman, 2005; Goodman, 2004; Winter, 2003), challenging the conflation

of AFNs with progressive politics. From an economic standpoint, access to food characterised by 'quality' attributes (organic, local) is often limited to privileged income groups (Goodman, 2004). Contradictions also arise between the concurrent goals of ensuring a sufficient income for farmers and guaranteeing broad and affordable access to quality food (Guthman et al., 2006).

Finally, attempts to examine alternativeness/hybridity and the associated processes of relocation and resocialisation should not be divorced from an analysis of the context in which food production and consumption take place (Holloway et al., 2007). The characteristics and forms taken by AFNs are context-dependent, geographically specific, and shaped by different cultural understandings around agriculture (Sutherland & Darnhofer, 2012), food (Matacena & Corvo, 2019), localness (Forney & Häberli, 2016; Schrager, 2021) and 'alternativeness' itself (Holloway et al., 2007). As an extension of this argument, the application of Western-based conceptualisations of hybridity to non-Western contexts needs to be critically examined to offer a more nuanced understanding of these concepts.

The Japanese agri-food system

Although Japan is rarely discussed in international AFN studies, it is arguably one of the non-Western Global North countries with the longest documented history of alternative agri-food initiatives. To discuss the characteristics and development of AFNs in Japan, a brief overview of the country's agri-food system structure is necessary (for a detailed examination, see Hisano et al., 2018).

The Japanese agricultural sector is mainly composed of small-scale, part-time farmers—the average size of farm holdings in the country is 1.77 hectares, and 67% of farmers also engage in non-farm occupations (MAFF, 2019c). The national-level organisation of farmers into the Japan Agricultural Cooperative (JA), which carries out collective purchasing and centralised marketing and distribution practices and controls prices, is one of the main reasons why small-scale farmers are still the majority (Hisano et al., 2018). The near-monopoly exerted by JA on the upstream and downstream markets, however, has made farmers heavily reliant on the cooperative's local branches for external inputs (chemicals, machinery), information and marketing. Moreover, the persistent decrease in the number of farmers and widespread farmland abandonment issues have raised strong concerns, especially regarding food security, as the country's food self-sufficiency ratio is currently 38% on a calorie basis, down from 73% in 1965 (MAFF, 2019b).

Addressing these issues is a priority of government policies on both the production and consumption sides. The main goals of recent agricultural policies are strengthening domestic production and increasing productivity and efficiency, mainly by facilitating farmland consolidation, increasing the number of large full-time farms and developing technological innovations (Hisano et al., 2018; Jentzsch, 2017; Muramoto et al., 2010). On the consumption side, the Japanese government has been promoting initiatives to boost the consumption of domestic agricultural products, particularly those seen as the hallmark of Japanese traditional food culture (such as rice), whose consumption has declined because of the gradual westernisation of diets (Kimura, 2011; Kimura & Nishiyama, 2008). Finally, to counter agricultural abandonment, particularly in marginal areas, Japan has been adopting policies inspired by the European Common Agricultural Policy (CAP). These are based on the recognition of the multifunctional role of agriculture and exemplified by the introduction of payments for ecosystem services and efforts to promote sustainable forms of farming, including organic agriculture (Nishizawa, 2015). Overall, however, policies continue to prioritise neoliberal and productivist-oriented interventions. Despite the Act on the Promotion of

Organic Agriculture, enacted in 2006 (MAFF, 2019a), there has been thus far little institutional support for organic farming (McGreevy et al., 2021; Nakajima, 2017). More effort has been put into the promotion of various forms of so-called ‘environmental conservation’ farming practices (*kankyō hozen-gata nōgyō*). These involve the partial decrease of the amount of synthetic pesticides and fertilisers used in agriculture by an amount defined independently by each prefecture, and since they do not require a commitment to eliminating synthetic inputs, they can be more easily integrated with the JA system¹ (Zhenmian et al., 2013).

Alternative and hybrid food networks in Japan

The development of AFNs in Japan started in the 1960s with the emergence of the *sansho-teikei* system (literal translation, ‘producer-consumer cooperation’; hereafter *teikei*). *Teikei* emerged from the initiative of small citizen groups in cooperation with farmers willing to switch to organic agriculture and is credited with being a major inspiration behind the subsequent development of Community Supported Agriculture initiatives in other parts of the world (Kondoh, 2015; McGreevy & Akitsu, 2016). The *teikei* system was based on trust relationships born out of direct exchanges, mutual help and economic risk-sharing. The Japan Organic Agriculture Association, founded in 1971, later codified the values of *teikei* through the “Ten principles of *teikei*”, describing *teikei* as the foundation to create a food system based on local self-sufficiency, where much of the food is grown, produced, processed and consumed within the same area, with the ultimate aim to create an equitable and sustainable society and maintaining the vitality of rural communities (JOAA, 1993).

The participation of farmers and consumers in *teikei* peaked in the 1980s but has since then progressively declined as a result of changing societal dynamics and increased competition from new and more convenient marketing channels (see Kondoh, 2015, for an account of *teikei*’s evolution). While many organic farmers still share *teikei* values and engage in direct-to-consumer sales through vegetable box schemes, many elements of *teikei* have lost their centrality, such as group deliberation, volunteer work and self-distribution among members (Akitsu & Aminaka, 2010). At the same time, organic farming in Japan is expanding at a much slower pace compared to Europe and the US, with certified organic products representing only 0.25% of domestic agricultural production (MAFF, 2019a); moreover, the introduction of the Organic JAS certification in 2001 cut many small-scale producers out of mainstream distribution channels due both to the high certification cost and to farmers’ unwillingness to participate in a certification system that does not reflect their values or benefit them (Kondoh, 2015; Muramoto et al., 2010). Nevertheless, the area of non-certified organic farmland is estimated to have grown by 43% between 2009 and 2017 (MAFF, 2019a), and these uncertified organic farmers still rely primarily on alternative distribution networks (McGreevy et al., 2019; Zollet & Maharjan, 2021a).

In contrast to the slow growth of the organic sector and its associated alternative food distribution networks, there has been a significant increase in the popularity of food defined through ‘local’ attributes. A major reason was the emergence of the *chisan chishō* (literally ‘local production for local consumption’) movement in the 1990s, out of concern surrounding imported food scandals, the decline of Japan’s agriculture and food self-sufficiency, and the loss of traditional food culture. Like organic farming, *chisan chishō* originally developed as a grassroots movement, but its values better aligned with the Japanese government’s objectives concerning the revitalisation of domestic agriculture and rural areas in the face of growing trade liberalisation pressures (Schrager, 2021). Furthermore, unlike the organic farming movement, it did not strongly

antagonise the JA system or operate outside of it. This is because it emphasised primarily *where* the food was produced (locally) rather than *how* (organically) (Iizaka & Suda, 2010; Kimura & Nishiyama, 2008). In the early 2000s, the Japanese Ministry of Agriculture, Forestry and Fisheries (MAFF) established *chisan chishō*-related laws and regulations, and prefectures were required to develop *chisan chishō* promotion plans.

The success of *chisan chishō* is shown by the exponential growth of direct sale markets of agricultural products (*sanchi chokubaijo*; henceforth 'direct sale markets'). These are permanent stores where local farmers bring their produce, pre-packaged² and priced. The facility displays the produce and takes a commission on the amount sold (Iizaka & Suda, 2010). Direct sales markets can be established by a variety of actors—generally local JA branches but also private corporations and local producer groups.³ These stores have rapidly multiplied over the past two decades. In 2004, there were 2982 direct sale markets throughout Japan, located mainly in rural and peri-urban areas, while recent MAFF data place their current number at 24,000, and the annual sales amount to 1.1 trillion yen (about 7 billion euro). In comparison, the total amount of (certified) organic food sales in Japan amounts to 1804 billion yen (about 14 million euro; MAFF, 2019a).

As part of *chisan chishō* efforts, since 2009 the Japanese government has also been promoting the development of so-called *marché* (farmers' markets) through the 'Marché Japon' Project (Marché Japon National Secretariat, n.d.). *Marché* are inspired by farmers' markets in Europe and North America and are meant to be a temporary⁴ and urban-based version of direct sale markets, where farmers can meet consumers directly. This kind of farmers' market existed before the launch of the government project (Ojima et al., 2015), but the project is responsible for kickstarting the spread of *marchés* around Japan and for the popularisation of the term itself.

This strong institutional support for *chisan chishō* has had some tangible outcomes, such as drawing attention to locally produced food and increasing its consumption (Iizaka & Suda, 2010). Besides, direct sales markets are more accessible to farmers selling small or seasonal amounts of diversified produce because grading standards are less strict compared to JA's wholesale markets, and farmers are not required to deliver produce to the facility regularly (Yoshino, 2010). *Chisan chishō* initiatives, however, have also been criticised, especially because they do not encourage active forms of food citizenship and show little to no commitment to environmentally friendly agricultural practices (Kimura & Nishiyama, 2008). A more in-depth critical examination, however, is still lacking.

To contribute to this debate, this article explores *chisan chishō*-related initiatives as examples of hybrid food spaces into which the projects and practices of small-scale organic farmers intersect with those of conventional food system actors. The article seeks to answer the following questions: How do the projects of mainstream and alternative actors involved in *chisan chishō* initiatives describe processes of food relocalisation and resocialisation, and how are these put into practice? What similarities, differences and contradictions emerge? Finally, under what conditions does hybridity serve as a vehicle of transformation towards more sustainable food systems?

METHODS

The study was conducted in Hiroshima Prefecture (Western Japan), which is known for its manufacturing industry, while agriculture is marginal in economic terms and characterised by small-scale farming and high rates of farmland abandonment (Su et al., 2018). Hiroshima Prefecture is also a relatively 'cold' spot in the Japanese VTFN landscape, unlike long-established clusters of alternative production and consumption, such as areas near Tokyo or Kyoto

(McGreevy et al., 2021). This, however, makes it representative of many similar peripheral regions across Japan.

Empirical data for the study were collected as part of a research project about new entrant organic farmers. Respondents were selected purposively to include a variety of farm typologies and engagement with AFNs: two of the main selection criteria were (a) farmers' self-identification⁵ as organic (or similar unregulated terms common in the Japanese context, such as natural farming) and (b) participation in alternative/local sales channels. Baseline information to evaluate the compatibility of the farms with the target criteria was obtained either by checking farmers' online presence or through direct contact.

The sample used in this study includes 26 interviews conducted between 2017 and 2019 (Table 1). Most of the farmers were newcomers to the agricultural sector (three-fourths had no farm family connections), a situation increasingly common among new Japanese organic farmers (McGreevy et al., 2019; Zollet & Maharjan, 2021a). Most were in their 30s and 40s and had relocated to rural areas from urban centres after quitting their previous jobs and taking up farming. Farm sizes were typically under 2 hectares (1.4 ha on average), in line with the average farm size in Japan. Most were full-time farmers who relied mainly on family labour, engaged in vegetable production and sold small quantities of diversified seasonal produce through direct-to-consumer channels, in a way similar to the 'diversified organic market garden farmers' model (see, e.g., Dupré et al., 2017). The prevalence of this model is a legacy of the *teikei* system, which was originally meant to provide consumer groups with enough seasonal vegetables for everyday consumption throughout the growing season. As shown in Table 1, however, marketing channels have become more diversified compared to the early *teikei*. Nearly all the interviewees sold their products through more than one type of direct-to-consumer channel, with the top three channels being farmer markets (*marché*), restaurants and vegetable box schemes (delivered in person or by shipping, the form closest to the original *teikei*). Sales to local direct sale markets, on the other hand, were less common.

In-depth qualitative interviews were used to explore farmers' values and practices. The interviews, originally in Japanese, were transcribed by a native speaker and translated into English. The results of this article refer to a subset of questions: (a) motivations to engage in organic farming and VTFNs, (b) marketing practices and (c) values surrounding localised consumption, VTFN participation and social interaction with customers. Relevant information was also collected through participant observation during on-farm events, regular visits to farmers' markets and direct sales markets in Hiroshima Prefecture, and participation in two open forums on local food and farming organised by the Higashi-Hiroshima local government in January and November 2019. Information on institutional *chisan chishō* discourses and activities was collected from official *chisan chishō* campaigns at the prefectural level, particularly the website of JA's Hiroshima branch,⁶ which also describes the activities of *Hiroshima Toretate genki ichi*, one of the largest direct sales markets in the prefecture; the website of the Agriculture, Forestry and Fisheries division of the prefectural government⁷; and the Hiroshima Prefecture Chisan Chishō Promotion Council⁸ website. An intrinsic limitation of the research is that it was not possible at the time of the study to conduct interviews with the conventional actors involved in *chisan chishō*, which makes it difficult to gauge their understanding of the alternativeness of their project.

Interview data, field notes and other source materials were analysed through thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006). A constructivist epistemological approach to thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006, p. 81) was used to examine conventional and alternative actors' agro-food discourses and the related practices. The analysis focused on two groups of themes: first, the values and goals underpinning the projects of different actors in relation to the sustainability dimensions of food

TABLE 1 Participants' sociodemographic characteristics, production type, marketing channels and percentage of products sold within Hiroshima Prefecture

	Number of farmers
Age (at the time of interview)	
20–29	1
30–39	9
40–49	9
50+	7
Part/full-time (principal manager)	
Full-time	19
Part-time, agriculture main occupation	1
Part-time, agriculture secondary occupation	6
Land size (ha, average)	1.4
Farming family background (access to family land)	
Availability of family land	20
No availability of family land	6
Relationship to place/migration pathway (of principal manager)	
I-turn (urban to rural migrant)	19
U-turn (return migrant)	7
Type of production	
Diversified vegetables	11
Diversified vegetables + rice	7
Rice (+ others)	2
Citrus fruit	4
Other single crops (honey, table grapes, garlic, wheat)	2
Certified organic	
Yes	4
No	22
Marketing channels (multiple answers)	
Farmers' markets (<i>marché</i>)	13
Restaurants	13
Regular vegetable box delivery to households (<i>teikei</i> -like)	11
Supermarkets/wholesale channels	8
Online sales through own website or e-commerce platforms (excluding <i>teikei</i> -like regular deliveries)	7
Direct sales markets (<i>chokubaijo</i>)	7
Small retailers (greengrocers, organic shops)	6
Other	4
Sold in own physical shop or processed for own restaurant	1
Percentage of produce sold within Hiroshima Prefecture (average)	73.8%

production and consumption; second, the practice of respatialization and resocialisation and the associated ideas of local and social embeddedness.

RESULTS

Mainstream actors in hybrid food spaces: The construction of the *chisan chishō* project and its actualisation through direct sales markets

Most of the *chisan chishō* activities in the prefecture are co-ordinated by the ‘Hiroshima *Chisan Chishō* Promotion Council’, established in 2007, whose website provides most of the insights for this part of the analysis. Production and marketing activities are primarily carried out by the prefectural and local branches of JA in partnership with local governments. The Council defines *chisan chishō* as ‘the consumption of products within that same area in which they are produced’ and refers to it as a ‘movement’ (*undo*). The stated aim of *chisan chishō* is

to create a stable supply system of fresh, safe and secure (*anzen anshin*) agricultural and livestock products from within the prefecture and for the realisation of healthy eating habits of all citizens.

The Promotion Council’s project sees a re-examination and deepening of people’s relationship with local food as instrumental to protect local agriculture, traditional food culture and the natural environment, with the ultimate goal of ‘creating a vibrant regional society’. The superiority of eating produce from within the prefecture is also described in terms of quality: products coming from other parts of Japan will lose freshness and taste through long-distance transport. Food imported from abroad presents the additional concerns of higher food miles and virtual water consumption and is therefore described as less environmentally friendly. Therefore, consumers should not rely on distant production places and choose ‘food independence’ (*shoku no jiritsu*) by purchasing locally. The Promotion Council website continues by invoking citizens’ sense of responsibility in ‘protecting the place where they were born and raised’ and passing on a ‘flourishing Hiroshima’ to future generations.

Direct sales markets are described as the privileged place for this relocalisation of consumption and for reconnecting consumers and producers. As a demonstration of the success of *chisan chishō* discourses and efforts, there are currently 44 direct sale facilities in Hiroshima Prefecture, 30 of which are connected to local JA branches. JA’s *Hiroshima Toretate genki ichi*’s webpage describes these markets as a ‘communication plaza’ (*kōryū hiroba*): not only places where to purchase products but also sites of personal and information exchanges. Consumers can learn ‘directly from producers’ how to cook and eat farm products in the tastiest way and ‘understand producers’ feelings and thoughts [*omoi*] directly’. Producers, on the other hand, can become more attuned to the needs of consumers and their way of thinking. At this site of exchange and reconnection, producers and consumers can ‘come together to revitalise (*genki ni shite iku*) Hiroshima’s agriculture’.

On the information page for producers interested in selling at the facility, this sense of reconnection with consumers is further emphasised:

It would be a great encouragement [for you as a farmer] to be able to obtain information on the freshness of the products you grew by selling directly to consumers. Wouldn’t you like to feel the joy of [...] interacting with consumers?

This reconnection, however, is primarily realised by having the producer's name on each product (made possible by the fact that produce is individually bagged and has the producer's name or logo on it). Many direct sales markets also display producers' photos as part of the *chisan chishō* slogan of 'being able to see the producer's face', which in turn is implied to facilitate reconnection and trust. Occasionally, a brief description of the farm or recipe cards written by the farmers are available next to the produce. In addition, local produce itself is frequently codified as trustworthy and 'safe', especially through the ubiquitous word *anshin* (relief, sense of security)—a word that conveys 'peace of mind' rather than objective or measurable safety (*anzen*).

Another way to promote trust and reconnection in practice occurs through certifications and marks, which have proliferated in recent years. The *Anshin! Hiroshima burando* ('Safe! Hiroshima Brand') certification system, for example, is meant to certify production practices at the prefectural level. The system includes three types of certification: a 'traceability' certification that informs consumers about production history; a 'special cultivation' (*tokubetsu saibai*) certification, which denotes agricultural products produced with less than 50% of the amount of synthetic pesticides used on average in the prefecture; and an 'eco-farmer' certification, which refers to farming practices that integrate the use of compost with a reduction—not clearly defined—of the use of chemical fertilisers and pesticides. The most recent addition is the 'recycling, resource, repeat' ('3-R') certification, which certifies the recycling of resources within the prefecture. The certification for rice and vegetables, for example, requires the use of a certain amount of manure or manure-based fertiliser from livestock raised within the prefecture. Some products (but not all) also have environmental requirements, such as the reduction of pesticide use by 20% or more in rice farming. Again, it is emphasised that choosing '3-R' products will 'help protect the local environment and at the same time create a future for the region'. All these certifications, which fall under the label of 'environmental conservation' farming, follow standards set at the prefectural level by the local JA branches, and farmers are encouraged to contact JA's extension experts for information on compliance requirements and application procedures. Prefectural level data on farmers' uptake of these certifications and their presence in the local market are not available; visits to different direct sales markets in the prefecture, however, revealed only a minor to negligible presence of products utilising these sustainability certifications.

Relocalisation and resocialisation from organic farmers' perspective

All the organic farmers interviewed for this study saw direct sales as the ideal form of marketing their produce. For many, this represented an explicit rejection of the highly centralised and JA-dependent system of production and distribution that still dominates Japanese agriculture. Most chose to opt out of the JA model because of its rigid control on farmers' choices and its standardisation of produce, which did not allow for quality and price differentiation between conventional and organic produce and among individual farmers. As one respondent pointed out,

I don't want to sell to JA. The price they pay is too low. Also, when I give [my produce] over to JA, I don't know where it goes and who buys it, even though it's something that I made. [...] They don't even let me sell it as 'organic', it gets mixed up with everyone else's. [...] My goal is to go directly to the consumer. (Male, 30)

As a result of the JA system, it is challenging for individual farmers to connect to consumers, who are not accustomed to buying produce directly from farmers. The legacy of the *teikei* system,

however, has provided even newcomers—most of whom do not strictly follow the *teikei* practices of the earlier generations of organic farmers—with a blueprint for how to engage with people interested in organic produce. Nearly half of the interviewees sold produce through vegetable box schemes, which can be seen as a simplified version of *teikei* and a compromise between the aspiration to connect with consumers and more practical organisational considerations. While vegetable box schemes do not require the same level of economic and ethical commitment from citizens as *teikei*, farmers emphasised the deeper connection and mutual support born of these interactions. Several interviewees also organised free on-farm events (such as rice or vegetable planting and harvesting) for their customers. As one farmer commented:

What I'm doing now is similar to *teikei*. For example, once someone orders from me, I keep sending vegetable boxes every week or every 2 weeks. I decide what goes in the vegetable set, and I keep sending it until the customer says stop. Also, without the understanding of the people [who buy from me], this model of agriculture would not be able to continue. For today's rice planting, I just put the word out and several people came. [...] It's more of a give and take relationship [than a purely economic one], and this allows me to get help from customers. (Male, 38)

Resocialisation is seen as crucial to advance organic farmers' values, which include environmentally friendly farming, a sense of solidarity and mutual help between producers and consumers that extends beyond monetary relationships, and the desire to support rural communities:

Consumers don't see the sites of agricultural production; they only buy things at the supermarket. There is a complete disconnection. [...] By knowing where things are grown, children and mothers (sic) can think about why it's important not to pollute the water of the rice fields, they can learn many things about the environment. Producers can sometimes ask for consumers' help too, create a society where we help each other. [...] If the society is based only on monetary relationships, it will be difficult for producers and rural areas to continue to exist. (Female, 44)

When discussing *chisan chishō*, farmers often stressed the difference between the concept itself (producing locally for local consumers) and its institutionalised form. Farmers saw relocalisation as part of organic farming principles, not only in terms of relocalising consumption but also, more broadly, of relocalising resources; many interviewees highlighted the importance, in their farming philosophy, of sourcing inputs and selling their products as locally as possible. In this sense, 'local production for local consumption' was part of the model of farm sustainability they were trying to implement. Moreover, several farmers believed that people buying their produce were interested both in the production technique (organic) and in the site of production (as local as possible):

The idea of organic farming is basically that the more local, the better. If inputs you bring into [the farm] are things you can find nearby, local things, it's better. The place where you sell should also be local. In that sense, I think it matches 'chisan chishō'. (Male, 37)

People who want organic products are oriented towards health and the environment [...] so among them the tendency to consume local products is also high. (Male, 53)

Most farmers, however, did not deliver vegetable boxes to people in their immediate locality. It is significant, for example, how no participants sold produce at the farm gate. Conversely, delivering freshly harvested vegetables by express courier to distant urban destinations such as Tokyo and Osaka was relatively common. While interviewees sold on average almost 75% of produce within Hiroshima Prefecture, several depended on external sales, as they stated that consumers in large cities, especially Tokyo, tended to be more interested in acquiring organic produce (even if uncertified) and be willing to pay the corresponding price premium. Despite this spatial distancing between organic farmers and consumers, their relationship remained based on frequent information exchanges and personal interaction. The spread of communication technology is especially crucial, as it allows for ‘virtual’ reconnections (Bos & Owen, 2016) through emails, blog posts and social media. Moreover, most farmers included a newsletter with their weekly shipment, in which they talked about the farm, their production methods and ways to cook the produce without waste. This direct connection and communication of practices were considered sufficient to create a trust-based relationship and was one of the main reasons why most respondents did not feel the need to acquire the organic certification.

Alternative actors in hybrid spaces: Organic farmers’ engagement with direct sales markets

While direct sales markets might seem ideal for small-scale organic farmers to sell produce locally, very few interviewees sold primarily through this channel. Participants were critical of the way relocalisation and resocialisation are performed in direct sales markets and indicated several obstacles in relation to organic produce in particular. Direct sales markets are explicitly constructed as places where to buy ‘local’ products, while the production method is less emphasised. This was confirmed by direct observation as well: during regular visits to different facilities across the prefecture, organically grown produce (either certified or uncertified) was nearly absent. Moreover, several interviewees stated that many direct sale markets do not allow farmers to label their produce with terms such as ‘pesticide free’—which are not regulated by the organic certification—arguably because it would introduce an ‘unfair’ element of differentiation from conventional produce. This policy, however, makes it challenging for small uncertified organic farmers to convey their values and production methods and justify the price premium, and for consumers to access organically grown local produce in these venues. These limitations added to farmers’ belief that the *chisan chishō* system is promoting a ‘shallow’ concept of resocialisation between producers and consumers. Some respondents also questioned Japanese people’s tendency—encouraged by *chisan chishō* practices—to consider produce accompanied by a photo of the producer more trustworthy:

They [direct sales markets] put the picture of the producer on the vegetables, but that doesn’t mean anything. We still don’t know the producers personally; we don’t know how they grow vegetables. But Japanese people, when they see a picture, think it’s trustworthy. (Male, 47)

A further issue indicated by interviewees was consumers’ tendency to associate local products with higher safety in terms of production methods, thus negating the need for purchasing produce labelled ‘organic’. This lack of interest in organic produce was also frequently associated with people located in more rural areas, or even in regions (such as Hiroshima Prefecture itself)

considered ‘peripheral’ to the ‘centre’ represented by Tokyo and other major urban areas. This rural/urban and centre/periphery dynamic was frequently discussed by farmers, especially when talking about the price and quality of their produce:

Since organic produce is expensive, customers in places like Tokyo, where prices are high in general, tend to order organic produce from relatively cheaper areas [such as Hiroshima]. [...] Here [locally] I cannot find customers who will buy my vegetables as ‘organic’ produce. So, I have a lot of unsold vegetables [...] that I have no choice but to sell for a lower price. (Male, 53)

This situation often forced farmers to choose between accepting to sell produce locally—but at overly low prices—or engaging with distant urban consumers, a ‘delocalisation’ process that was usually perceived as negative, although inevitable. Direct sale markets were seen mainly as venues to market produce that farmers were unable to sell through other channels. During one of the public forums on local food and agriculture, one organic farmer (not included among the original interviewees) complained:

I hate the price competition at direct sales markets. Prices keep getting cheaper and cheaper. Many people sell the surplus of their home gardens there, and when I sell eggplants in summer, my price must be less than 100 yen (approx. 0.80 Euro) [per package] [...]. It’s not even worth the hassle of packaging [...]. And it is not possible to sell as ‘pesticide-free’ in direct sale markets. So, I end up selling there only when I have a surplus. (November 2019, female organic farmer, 30s)

This is a view that—although from a different perspective—is shared by conventional commercial farmers as well, if this quote from another food and agriculture event is any indication:

[In the JA wholesale purchase system] Class A [the highest quality] produce goes to supermarkets in big cities, Class B produce goes to local supermarkets [within the prefecture], the rest is discarded. I think this level of stringency is necessary. Now consumers can go to direct sale markets and buy cheap misshapen cucumbers, but farmers wish this would stop. It’s better to buy straight and clean/beautiful (*kirei*) cucumbers at a fixed price. Otherwise, the price of vegetables [for the farmer] will not increase. (January 2019, male conventional farmer, 40s)

Interesting here is the equation of quality to appearance, and the implication that the best (in terms of appearance) produce is destined for major urban areas, where high-value consumption is centred. This farmer also expresses the view that allowing out-of-standard vegetables to be sold in direct sale markets penalizes commercial farmers because it diverts consumption away from higher-priced products and lowers farmers’ income. In this instance, direct sale markets are implicitly associated with cheap and lower quality produce. The concept of ‘quality’ itself, although, is nuanced: While locally produced food is still considered of high quality by consumers in terms of safety, the kind of quality referenced here is mainly an aesthetic one, deriving from the high importance placed on the appearance of the produce.

This portrait of the tensions between alternative and mainstream actors in the arena of local food is not universal and monolithic: as commented upon by some interviewees, the

characteristics of each JA branch play an important role, with some branches being more supportive of organic farming. This is especially true in areas where organic farming groups have a long history or where organic farming is seen as conducive to rural revitalization (Zhenmian et al., 2013). Corporate actors in some cases can also act as allies: In August 2020, for example, one of the largest direct sales markets in Hiroshima Prefecture created an ‘organic corner’ in partnership with local certified and uncertified organic farmers—including some of this study’s interviewees—where organically grown vegetables are labelled as such and distinct from conventional produce (Roadside Station “Lakeside Village” Fukutomi, 2020). The organic corner includes a detailed profile of each farmer, an explanation of their production methods and contact information. Crucially, the facility is managed by a private company not connected to JA and outspoken in its project to support organic farming in the area.

One final aspect regarding organic farmers’ interaction with institutionalised forms of *chisan chishō* relates to the growing popularity of *marché* (farmers’ markets). While *marché* were initially promoted through government projects, much of their subsequent expansion has occurred through grassroots initiatives, often by local organic farmers’ groups and non-profit organisations (Ojima et al., 2015; Zollet & Maharjan, 2020). Table 1 also shows that farmers’ markets are the most common marketing channel among the respondents, although the interviews revealed that farmers did not see them as a major income-generating channel but rather as spaces for (re)connection and resocialisation. As discussed more thoroughly in Zollet & Maharjan (2020), *marchés* are especially important for beginner organic farmers, as they offer new spaces for direct interaction with, and exposure to, a larger number of local consumers, especially those not necessarily seeking ‘organic’ produce but who become more aware of its availability through the market. *Marchés* also tend to be more ‘organic friendly’, as they—unlike direct sales markets—do not limit farmers’ possibility to label their produce. Some farmers’ markets also specifically limit participation to producers growing in environmentally friendly ways (Ojima et al., 2015; Zollet & Maharjan, 2020).

DISCUSSION

Hybrid food networks: Amplifying or co-opting alternative practices?

As shown in the results, the projects of mainstream actors involved in *chisan chishō* initiatives and those of organic farmers share some common goals, such as the transition towards more sustainable agricultural practices. This is a potential point of convergence, as shown by the expansion of environmentally friendly farming certifications in connection with *chisan chishō* initiatives. Despite this, organic farming is rarely—if ever—mentioned or outright supported, and is replaced by environmentally friendly production practices that do not radically challenge JA’s dominance as a source of farming knowledge and inputs. *Chisan chishō* is also appropriating some of the language—such as the concept of local circulation of resources in the 3-R certification—which has been used by the organic farming movement since its inception and is a foundation of Japanese organic production principles (JOAA, 1993). Furthermore, the claim that consumers can contribute to protecting the local ‘rich natural environment’ simply by eating locally produced food shows the conflation of ‘local’ with ‘environmentally sustainable’ and the way environmental conservation is simplistically equated with farmland and agricultural preservation (Kimura & Nishiyama, 2008). Moreover, this kind of claim shifts the burden of environmental conservation to consumers, implicitly lessening farmers’—and by extension, JA’s—responsibilities. Finally, issues

such as food miles and the consumption of virtual water are only described as associated with imported produce, thus suggesting that domestic Japanese produce is intrinsically more environmentally sustainable. This can also be interpreted as an instance of defensive localism (Winter, 2003) tinged by nationalistic leanings, which are often interwoven in Japanese agro-food policies and public discourse around food and farming (Kimura, 2011).

At the same time, increases in the consumption of organic products at the local level are hindered by forms of competition and exclusion arising from *chisan chishō* initiatives. These processes of exclusion, however, do not apply in the same way to all forms of hybrid food spaces that stem from the *chisan chishō* project: this is chiefly a result of the different levels of engagement of JA, one of the most powerful conventional food system actors, and whose practices act as a barrier to entry for farmers who operate outside of its system. *Marchés*, for example, have evolved independently from other *chisan chishō* initiatives and are one case in which grassroots actors – including organic farmers – have been able to reclaim a local consumption space (Hara, Tsuchiya, Matsuda, Yamamoto, & Sampei, 2013; Zollet & Maharjan, 2020).

Policy priorities also play a key role in influencing the development of food systems towards different types of ‘alternative’ configurations; some countries, such as Austria, saw a rapid increase in the uptake of organic farming following the increase in state support (Darnhofer et al., 2019). In Japan, policies have prioritised support for ‘local’ over ‘organic’ food, as localisation was better aligned with the primary goal of boosting domestic agriculture. Even the new Green Food System Strategy recently announced by the Japanese government, which aims at expanding organic farming to 25% of the total agricultural land area, is underpinned by support for scale enlargement and corporatization (McGreevy et al., 2021).

Another aspect where the projects of mainstream and alternative actors converge is the revitalization of domestic agriculture and rural communities through local consumption. In this respect, the project and ‘promise of difference’ endorsed by both sets of actors mainly concern the response to the negative consequences of a globalised and neoliberally oriented agro-food system on (Japanese) farmers and rural areas. JA itself, despite being a major player in the Japanese conventional agri-food system and a supporter of centralised agricultural markets (Kimura & Nishiyama, 2008), has started to endorse (re)localisation and resocialisation ideas in ways that resonate with (or, depending on the perspective, co-opt) pre-existing and more radically alternative agri-food projects, such as those associated with the organic farming movement.

This shift has various consequences on the social and economic sustainability dimensions of Japanese agro-food systems. From a social perspective, while *chisan chishō* does not mention goals such as the affordability and accessibility of local food for citizens, in practice, the lower prices that generally characterise produce sold at direct sale markets indirectly support these aims. This aspect, however, clashes with the stated goal of maintaining farmers’ income and preventing a further decline in domestic agriculture. As the results show, direct sales markets can become a terrain of price competition among local farmers with different degrees of commercial orientation, which was considered problematic by both organic and conventional producers.

The situation appears especially detrimental for small-scale organic farmers, who do not have the safety net provided by JA and rely mainly on direct sales. The association of local food sold at direct sales markets with safety, environmental friendliness and affordability weakens the importance of organic production as a determinant of quality and—by extension—a justification for price differentiation. This is likely one of the reasons behind the slow growth of organic farming in Japan and the persisting image of organic produce as ‘niche’ products for affluent urban consumers. At the same time, although it has been argued elsewhere that *chisan chishō* had the merit of giving back dignity to the ‘local’ (Kimura & Nishiyama, 2008), the narrative of peripheral

areas being subordinated to Tokyo and other major cities is perpetuated within—or despite—the growth of *chisan chishō*. In an interesting contrast with associations made between local food sold in local markets and higher quality, often found in Western literature (see, e.g., Kirwan, 2004), in the Japanese context, local food sold at direct sales markets can sometimes become synonymous with lower quality food for people at the periphery.

Together with relocalisation, alternative and conventional actors also foreground resocialisation as a way to realise their projects, although in different ways. The strategy employed in direct sale markets is primarily the use of photographs as a proxy for real face-to-face interaction. While this practice may not sound sufficient to create the kind of social embeddedness that can give rise to trust, it is effective in the Japanese context. Compared to other countries, Japanese consumers have a stronger positive reaction towards the use of producers' photos and tend to consider products more trustworthy as a result (Hall, 2010; Hara et al. 2013; McGreevy & Akitsu, 2016). This is amplified by the aforementioned tendency, not exclusive to Japan (see, e.g., Forney & Häberli, 2016), to associate food product attributes such as 'local'—or even 'domestically produced'—with increased safety and trustworthiness (Kimura & Nishiyama, 2008; Takeda, 2008). An important implication is that claims of safety and environmental friendliness can be implied rather than stated explicitly. This calls into question the degree to which effective and transparent information exchange can be achieved (Tregear, 2011) since there is usually no meaningful communication occurring between producers and consumers, and consumers' perceptions are further influenced by the setting (such as the ubiquitous use of the word *anshin*).

Organic farmers, on the other hand, have put in place stronger accountability systems to create and maintain social embeddedness and trust—even when reconnection occurs in 'virtual' forms—due in large part to the legacy of the *teikei* system. The stronger emphasis on solidarity, together with the tendency to ideologically reject certifications as sole signifiers of good farming practices, requires finding other ways to demonstrate the legitimacy of farmers' practices and gain consumers' trust. This results in more intense social and information exchanges, which lead to higher transparency despite the spatial distance and limited face-to-face interaction. Moreover, organic farmers are active in creating opportunities to meaningfully interact directly with people, and the organisation of on-farm events is a common resocialisation practice (Kondo, 2021).

In other words, *chisan-chishō* promotes resocialisation chiefly as a function of relocalisation; organic farmers, while recognising the importance of localisation, frame resocialisation as a practice that can occur *despite* the lack of localisation, indicating how spatial, social and cognitive proximity (Dubois, 2018) do not necessarily go hand-in-hand. In this respect, the organic farming movement has long denounced how the slogan '*kao wo mieru kankei*' (interaction where consumers 'can see the producer's face'), which originally referred to actual face-to-face interactions occurring in *teikei* groups, has been appropriated by hybrid and even mainstream market channels, leading to its loss of meaning (Kansai Organic Farming Group, 1988).

A final dimension of resocialisation is citizens' ability to participate in and shape agro-food initiatives; even though *chisan chishō* is described as a (social) movement by its institutional proponents, it is almost entirely a top-down project, and citizens' involvement is largely limited to their consumer role. Alternative initiatives such as *teikei* and the organic movement itself, however, have not succeeded in strengthening their ability for collective action and their capacity to interact with and influence institutions and major agri-food actors (Fomsgaard, 2014). This is also partly a consequence of the broader marginalisation of civil society contestation in a country where citizens have grown averse to being associated with social movement activities or political advocacy (Chiavacci & Obinger, 2018).

CONCLUSION

This article has discussed the interaction of alternative and mainstream actors within a hybrid food system configuration, represented by *chisan chishō* initiatives. As shown, the ‘promise of difference’ (Le Velly, 2019) contained in the projects of each set of actors relates both to the promise of creating new ways to organise the agri-food system and to the consequences of these changes, described here as sustainability outcomes. Concerning the transformative potential of hybrid food networks, the results show elements of convergence between alternative and mainstream actors. This implies that there can be scope for cooperation, as conventional actors have the means to scale up sustainable practices and facilitate their uptake among producers and consumers. For example, institutional efforts to promote food relocalisation have led to a rapid increase in the popularity of locally produced food and to more co-ordinated efforts to create a local production and consumption system, a goal shared by alternative agri-food actors.

At the same time, the analysis has uncovered the inherent tensions and contradictions embedded in this process, highlighting the spectrum of values associated with the local dimension and questioning the assumption that initiatives to foster localisation also imply a stronger commitment to ecological sustainability, ethical consumption and more participatory and democratic forms of agri-food system organisation. This is exemplified by the difficulties encountered by the organic farming movement to establish local food networks based on sustainable practices and underpinned by values such as solidarity and participation. The situation partly originates from power dynamics and processes of exclusion occurring within local hybrid food networks, which result in the unwillingness or inability of alternative actors to access these spaces. In this sense, both the transformation of the *teikei* system and the engagement of small-scale organic farmers in non-local markets can be understood as forms of negotiation and compromise, brought on by pragmatic considerations that aim at social and economic reproduction (Matacena & Corvo, 2019).

This leads us to question the extent to which hybridity should be seen as a solution to creating sustainable agro-food systems (Forssell & Lankoski, 2014; Hinrichs, 2003; Kimura & Nishiyama, 2008). On the one hand, if the positive outcomes of more radically alternative projects remain confined to small networks of producers and consumers, they will fail to counter the drivers and reproduction mechanisms of conventional food systems (Buttel, 2006). On the other, the participation of conventional actors in hybrid agri-food systems configurations tends to hinder transformative change. At the same time, however, these actors can quickly amplify incremental changes, as seen in Japan with the spread of localisation initiatives. Alternative projects, therefore, play a key role in introducing ‘seeds of change’ (Forney & Häberli, 2016) within the conventional food system, with many concepts coined by the organic farming movement gradually being integrated into policy objectives (Fomsgaard, 2014). This is especially relevant in contexts where grassroots action in the form of organised social movements plays a marginal role in the political and social sphere, such as Japan and other East Asian countries. Alternative agro-food projects have thus far failed to appeal to larger shares of Japanese citizens also because Japanese agriculture—again, not unlike other Asian countries—has until now modernised without significant scale enlargement (Hisano et al., 2018), contributing to perpetuating the myth that Japanese agricultural products are safer and more sustainable (Schrager, 2021). In this context, changes made by established (albeit conventional) actors can help to quickly disseminate new practices among both producers and consumers.

Finally, even in contexts where the expansion of AFNs has been comparatively slower, the growing attention towards global and local agro-food system sustainability issues represents an

opportunity for alternative actors to connect with consumers through hybrid food networks. In Japan, the popularisation of the concept of *chisan chishō* has contributed to the spread of a diversity of initiatives, such as *marché* and online platforms focused on the direct sale of organically grown produce (Lichten & Kondo, 2020) and of new forms of organisation among organic producers (McGreevy et al., 2021). The new paths that hybrid food system configurations can generate in specific geographic, socioeconomic and cultural contexts may therefore be a more important aspect to investigate than hybridity itself.

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CONFLICT OF INTEREST

The authors declare no conflicts of interest.

DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

The data are not publicly available due to privacy restrictions.

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ENDNOTES

¹ Although the denomination of ‘co-operative’ may suggest a grassroots farmer organisation, JA was initially established by the Japanese government, included all farmers in the country, and had control over most of the economic activities of farming communities. JA later grew into an independent powerful organisation and farm lobby, whose power rests upon its near-monopoly of both ends of the supply chain (from the sale of agricultural inputs to that of end products) and its political influence. Policies aimed at the reduction or elimination of pesticides and other synthetic inputs would therefore go against JA’s interests as the main provider of such inputs (Mulgan, 2000).

² A problematic aspect of this system is the overuse of single-use plastic, although overpackaging is the norm in Japan and a poorly addressed issue that concerns alternative and conventional food systems nearly equally.

³ Direct sales markets, especially smaller and more rural ones, sell mainly fresh produce and rice, in line with the production characteristics of most Japanese farmers. Larger facilities also sell meat, fish, milk and processed products, mainly from larger-scale producers within the prefecture. Unlike in Europe, small scale meat and dairy production are uncommon, including among organic farmers.

⁴ Direct sales markets are permanent brick-and-mortar facilities, while *marchés* are weekly or monthly markets with stalls, close to the Western concept of ‘farmers’ market’. Japanese scholars writing in English, however, occasionally use the term ‘farmers’ market’ to refer to direct sales markets as well (see, e.g., Iizaka & Suda, 2010). The two are similar in that farmers bring their products directly (not through a wholesaler) to sell and can set their own prices. In direct sales markets, however, the facility acts as an intermediary and farmers do not, in fact, meet consumers face-to-face. Despite this, they are still called ‘direct’ sales market in Japanese and this is accepted as a form of direct producer-consumer interaction (see also McGreevy & Akitsu, 2016).

⁵ As just a minority of farmers interviewed had acquired the organic certification (a common characteristic of Japanese organic farmers), not using synthetic pesticides and chemical fertilisers was used as baseline criteria

for screening, and this claim was then triangulated against farmers' agronomic practices as described in the interviews and observed during field visits.

⁶ <https://www.jazhr.jp/>

⁷ <https://www.pref.hiroshima.lg.jp/soshiki/84/1278890500341.html>

⁸ <https://www.hiroshimakensan.org/tisantisyo/>

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