

## **From agroecological production to responsible consumption: innovative experiences between producers and consumers to overcome the environmental crisis**

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**Resumo:** O objetivo deste documento é contribuir para o debate científico internacional sobre Redes Alimentares Alternativas (AFN) e Redes Alimentares Cívicas (CFN). Estas experiências, que estão a ser consolidadas em várias partes do mundo, referem-se a processos sociais inovadores envolvendo produtores agrícolas, consumidores e outros atores da cadeia de abastecimento empenhados na construção de alternativas reais destinadas a implementar um modelo diferente de produção, comercialização e consumo. Uma das principais experiências da AFN e da CFN é a realização de pactos sociais entre atores (produtores agrícolas, consumidores e outros atores da cadeia de abastecimento). As experiências e práticas identificadas na AFN e na CFN e analisadas no presente documento podem ser consideradas caminhos particularmente significativos para repensar os significados e práticas alimentares a nível comunitário e político. Tais experiências de pactos locais vão claramente para além da redefinição da relação entre produção e consumo de alimentos. A socialização das atividades agrícolas é um fenómeno importante, que poderia contribuir para a construção de um modelo capaz de unificar outras funções e objetivos, tais como serviços de ajuda mútua, diferentes relações entre cidade e campo, promoção da biodiversidade ambiental e alimentar, oportunidades para as empresas e empregos locais.

**Palavras-chave:** redes alimentares alternativas, redes alimentares cívicas, consumo responsável, pactos locais, agroecologia.

**Abstract:** The aim of this paper is to contribute to the international scientific debate on Alternative Food Networks (AFN) and Civic Food Networks (CFN). These experiences, which are being consolidated in various parts of the world, refer to innovative social processes involving agricultural producers, consumers and other actors in the supply chain engaged in the construction of real alternatives aimed at implementing a different model of production, marketing and consumption. One of the main experiences of AFN and CFN is the realisation of social pacts among actors (agricultural producers, consumers and other actors in the supply chain). The experiences and practices identified in AFN and CFN and analysed in this paper can be considered particularly significant paths of rethinking food meanings and practices at a community and political level. Such experiences of local pacts clearly go beyond redefining the relationship between food production and consumption. The socialisation of agricultural activities is an important phenomenon, which could contribute to the construction of a model capable of unifying other functions and objectives, such as mutual aid services, different relations between town and country, promotion of environmental and food biodiversity, opportunities for local businesses and jobs.

**Keywords:** alternative food networks, civic food networks, responsible consumption, social pacts, agroecology.

### *Introduction*

In recent years, the process of innovation in the agri-food system has been identified in the development of localised and sustainable food networks (BRUNORI, ROSSI, 2011). Scholars have developed the concepts of Alternative Food Networks – AFN – and, more recently, Civic Food

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Networks – CFN – (RENTING et al, 2012; ROSSI et al, 2013), which highlight the “civic” component of the new relationships between producers and consumers. The purpose of these networks is to support the so-called peasant production model (PLOEG, 2018, 2006), which guarantees, on the one hand, a higher quality of production as for the genuineness and freshness of products, as well as the ability to reproduce natural resources (i.e., land, water, plants), and on the other hand, the possibility for consumers to have healthy food. According to some recent studies (ETC, 2017) farmers are the main or only providers of food for more than 70% of the world’s population, while the industrial food chain, among the major contributors to greenhouse gas emissions, provides food for the remaining 30%.

The scientific debate on small- and medium-scale farms is increasingly linked to the role they can play in local territorial contexts. Indeed, while on the one hand there are those who argue that a restructuring based on specialisation, adjustment of farm size and the introduction of new technologies with a strong industrial matrix is necessary for agriculture, other research (BRUNORI, 2012) show that small-scale enterprises, that have been able to adapt to the contexts and to the emergence of new social needs related to food and agriculture through new social relations with a variety of subjects, can overcome dimensional criticalities by adopting strategies (e.g. diversification, agroecological production) and organisational models capable of reconciling productivity and sustainability, innovation and tradition, competitiveness and solidarity.

These considerations give rise to a series of broader reflections on the relevance of small-scale and family farming as an opportunity to foster sustainable local food systems (DANSERO et al., 2019). Several studies (CALORI, 2009; POTITO, BORGHESI, 2015; VULCANO, 2018) show that in every part of the world there are experiences that have been able to effectively decline the themes of the centrality of social relations over the instrumentality of economic relations, contributing, therefore, to the creation of forms of marketing and production based on solidarity and trust relationships (POTITO, BORGHESI, 2015).

The interpretative key that is proposed for the enhancement of the model of small-scale local agriculture can be traced back to the presence of collective social relations that imply forms of organised solidarity between producers and consumers, who produce, sell and buy quality local products that are increasingly integrated with the local agro-climatic environmental characteristics.

The methodology of this paper is based on a decade of experience on the issues proposed in this paper, and in particular: (i) an in-depth analysis of the literature with a focus on the results of recently carried out studies and researches that investigated innovative experiences between producers and consumers, together with other broader studies on Alternative Food Networks and Civic Food Networks; (ii) the participation in national research groups on local sustainable food

systems and the carrying out of specific surveys; (iii) the direct experience in innovative activities between producers and consumers in Italy.

### *Alternative food networks and civic networks*

The dominant agrifood system, as widely recognised by numerous studies and researches (ANGELINI, PIZZUTO, 2021; UNEP, 2016; IPCC, 2019; HLPE 2017), has a strongly negative impact in ecological, social, cultural and economic terms. The current model has resulted in a substantial dependence of the agricultural sector on external factors, both upstream and downstream of the production process, and has led to the affirmation of the ‘agricultural modernisation’ paradigm that, for the first time in the history of agriculture, has created a progressive decoupling of the farm from its ecosystem and social and local context (PLOEG, 2006). Recent years have witnessed an enormous concentration of the agribusiness and agrochemical industry. A few large multinational corporations are increasingly able to dominate every link in the agri-food production chain, sustaining the prices of their products, keeping the prices of the agricultural products they buy low, and essentially destroying all forms of local production and markets (PLOEG, 2006).

The recent COVID pandemic has further contributed to increasing inequalities, ecological and environmental risks, and injustices caused by the dominant agri-food model. In a consolidated framework of environmental crisis and increasing social and economic vulnerability, the transition towards alternative and more sustainable models is particularly urgent, and the need for a systemic approach to overcome the current crisis is increasingly evident (ROSSI et al, 2021). During the last three decades, food movements all over the globe have denounced the “failures” of the globalized world economy of food, demanding and proposing changes in how food and agriculture are conceived and managed (ROSSI et al, 2021). The remarkable development of networks of relationships between agricultural producers and consumers in various parts of the world that aim to re-socialise and re-territorialise food by linking it directly to local contexts (SONNINO; MARSDEN, 2006) has been analysed in the scientific debate through the concept of Alternative Food Networks (AFN) and more recently by the concept of Civic Food Networks (CFN). These practices oppose the dominant agri-food system by promoting the production and distribution of quality, ecological, territorially defined products distributed through short supply chains (SEVILLA GUZMAN et al., 2002). Indeed, in recent years, AFNs have been at the centre of interdisciplinary debate on a range of issues, such as local and rural development, local sustainability, alternative economic theories, and so on (BARBERA et al, 2014; CARROL 2012; TREGGAR 2011).

AFNs can be divided into three main types (MARDSEN, BANKS, BRISTOW 2000): (i) face-to-face: consumers purchase the product directly from the producer/processor on the basis of direct personal contact); (ii) spatial proximity: goods are produced and retailed in a specific region or place

of production); (iii) spatially extended, in which local value and regional identity are embedded in the product itself and transmitted to consumers outside the region.

These networks and experiences have been analysed in the scientific debate from two perspectives. The first in relation to changes in consumption patterns (REBUGHINI, SASSATELLI 2008), the second for their connection with the new paradigm of territorially-based rural development and with the revitalisation of rural areas (PLOEG et al., 2002, 2000; VENTURA, MILONE 2005). The strand of studies with respect to the first perspective (relating to changes in consumption patterns) has focused on the analysis of food networks as an expression of conscious consumer choices that purchase local products, which pay attention to the environmental and social sustainability of production and the protection of biodiversity. Analyses and studies have referred to the concepts of critical and alternative consumption (LEONINI; SASSATELLI, 2008), ethical and solidarity-based consumption (MANCINI, 2003) and alternative consumption styles. The strand of studies related to the paradigm of territorially-based rural development and the revitalisation of rural areas has focused on the role played by producers within alternative food networks. According to this perspective, AFNs are interpreted within the framework of strategies developed by agricultural producers to cope with the increasing economic and social unsustainability of modernised agriculture. Indeed, the current model leaves no room for existence for small farms caught between industrial concentration and the growing interconnection between industry and distribution (PLOEG, 2006).

Steadily increasing costs and decreasing revenues have pushed small producers to look for alternative solutions to continue resisting the market. The theorisations that refer to the new paradigm of territorially-based rural development identify three processes at the micro level: (i) broadening, i.e. the offer of new services in the logic of agricultural multifunctionality; (ii) regrounding, which concerns the redefinition of farm management in order to maximise the mobilisation of internal resources and (iii) deeping, which includes practices that increase the added value of the product such as on-farm processing, organic production and precisely the development of alternative food networks (PLOEG, 2006). Participation in alternative food networks on the one hand allows producers to cope with the growing economic and social unsustainability of modernised agriculture, and on the other hand enables them to implement innovative initiatives and activities that, by connecting with consumers' needs, feed on the stimuli they receive from them and from rural development processes based on resocialisation and re-territorialisation of food (SIVINI, 2008, VITALE AND SIVINI, 2018).

It seems that most of the scientific literature concerns European experiences (BARBERA et al., 2014). Some studies (MARSDEN, 2004; PARROT et al., 2002) have shown the differences between northern and southern European AFNs. In northern European countries (e.g. the UK, the Netherlands and Germany), the growth of FFA 'is often based on modern and more commercial

definitions of quality, emphasising environmental sustainability and animal welfare, and on more innovative forms of marketing' (SONNINO; MARSDEN 2006); in southern European countries (particularly Italy), food culture is based more on regionalised production involving many small family farms, and on a focus on quality (even if defined more in cultural than formal terms) that lasts over time, and on direct sales both on the farm and on urban or local markets. In general, in European countries, it emerges that AFNs connect producers, processors and consumers through a common vision and values that go far beyond mere production for the market (GOSZCZYNSK; KNIEC 2011, BARBERA et al, 2018).

In recent years, the role of civil society and local communities has become an important focus in analyses of the transformations affecting food networks. In particular, the category of civic networks (CFN) has been developed as an attempt to account for what some authors read as a new form of interaction between producers and consumers (RENTING et al., 2012). It originates in the active citizenship practices that develop around food and is specified by the new proactive role of the consumer. It is assumed that the emergence of these phenomena marks a change in the relationships between food networks and the political and economic mechanisms of food governance, intervening in the sense of their transformation.

In the broad panorama of grassroots innovations in food, this paper focuses on some experiences of AFN and CFN at an international level, with the aim of trying to fill the gap in the literature, which sees the prevalence of scientific studies relating to the European context. The following section presents a review of some experiences identified in different countries, which are united by the collaborative relationship between agricultural producers, consumers and other actors in the supply chain.

### *Beyond consumption and production: different stories, similar motivations*

On an international level, new forms of relationships based on collective social relations have spread, resulting in pacts between producers, consumers and other territorial actors in the supply chain. The most organised practices have developed since the 1960s in different parts of the world.

In Japan, a group of consumers organised themselves for the collective and concerted purchase of quality local agricultural products. In 1965, in order to cope with the spread of food produced with pesticides imported from the United States of America, and to counteract the decline of the local population engaged in agriculture, they promoted a direct relationship managed by local farmers. This organisational model has been called *teikei*, a term that can be translated as “pact”, “exchange relationship”.

Similar experiences spread in European contexts under the influence of Steiner's ideas, based on the harmony between man and nature, which stimulated the birth of communities of people

motivated to find a direct relationship, in the work in the fields, for a biodynamic agriculture<sup>2</sup>. In 1985, the first *Community Supported Agriculture* (CSA) group was founded in Massachusetts. The CSAs have since developed in various parts of the world, from the United States, Australia and New Zealand to Great Britain, Holland, Denmark and Hungary. In Germany, the Rural Economy Collective movement started off from the experience of rural banks (*Landwirtschaftsgemeinschaftshof*), while in France, relations between producers and consumers on a local basis started in 2001 with the creation of the first Association for the maintenance of local agriculture (*Association pour le maintien de l'agriculture paysanne – Amap*), following the experience of the CSAs. Since 2004, the experiences of *teikei*, CSA and Amap, have created the worldwide network *Réseau International URGENCI*<sup>3</sup>, which unites different realities and experiences of organised collective relations between producers and consumers, engaged in the local distribution of food (CALORI, 2009).

From the 1970s onwards, tools began to spread that could encourage the sustainable development of local markets, such as *Participatory Guarantee Systems* (PGS), as they contribute to the joint construction of a system of knowledge and periodic checks between the actors involved, with the help of shared technical support. This initiative, which is supported at international level by the *international federation of organic agriculture movements* (Ifoam), is seeing an increasingly broader participation of producers and consumers all over the world.

Another experience is represented by the *Food cooperatives* (Fc), which originated in the United States, in which all members, in their roles as owners, managers and customers, devote a share of their time to running the business. They represent democratic food distribution outlets where cooperative members collectively make decisions regarding food production and distribution. In most cases, food cooperatives consider sustainable agricultural practices as their priority (KNUPFER, 2013).

*Community exchange systems* (Ces) are also worth mentioning as they are based on the principle of reciprocity and can be very useful for the development of food networks. In fact, the communities involved trade and exchange their goods and services, both locally and at a distance, operating without money. Ces can be considered the heirs of the Anglo-Saxon *Local exchange and trade systems* (Lets), based on 'social currencies' (BIOLGHINI et al, 2018).

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<sup>2</sup> The theoretical basis of biodynamic agriculture can be found in the Anthroposophy of Rudolf Steiner, a late 19<sup>th</sup> century Austrian philosopher known for his applications in medicine, pedagogy (Waldorf schools), economics, agriculture and art. More information can be found at <https://www.rudolfsteiner.it/>

<sup>3</sup> URGENCI is the international grassroot network of all forms of regional and Local Solidarity-based Partnerships for Agroecology (LSPAs), of which Community Supported Agriculture (CSA) is the best-known iteration. URGENCI is an acronym standing for An Urban-Rural networks: GEneration of New forms of exchanges between CITizens. As a social movement, Réseau International URGENCI brings together citizens, small-scale food producers, consumers, activists and researchers representing Local Solidarity-based Partnerships for Agroecology networks and initiatives in over 40 countries.

In Italy, innovative experiences of producer-consumer relations can be seen in the panorama of 'social and solidarity economies', which since the 1990s have been the cultural sphere in which the discourse of social relations as an integral part of consumption practices is most developed. The characteristics of this world shape a more general sense and stable ties that go beyond the simple act of selling and buying. The most relevant experience of direct forms is represented by the *Solidarity Purchasing Groups* (SPGs), which, from a system of values and reference rules, organise collective purchases of food, but not only. The concept of solidarity refers to different spheres of intervention, ranging from preference for small local producers, to care for environmental effects, working conditions linked to production, etc. The diffusion of these experiences led to the creation of the *Solidarity Economy Network* (RES) in 2002, which promoted the creation of *Solidarity Economy Districts* (DES).

In recent years, in the wake of social and solidarity economy practices, forms of production and distribution that refer to the experiences described above have been experimented in the national context. In particular, there are *Participatory Guarantee Systems* (PGS), *Community Supported Agriculture Groups* (CSA), *Food Cooperatives* (FC) and *Community Exchange Systems* (CES).

The characteristic that unites the experiences mentioned so far is that they are linked by pacts, as a type of relationship that binds producers and consumers. Through these forms of mutual assistance, with respect to the characteristics of production, quantity, type and price of products, transparent and fair forms of dialogue are established between producers, consumers and other players in the chain, allowing consumers to discuss with producers to define together the different interests between the parties. In most experiences, these agreements are formally signed and are often the result of shared paths and participatory planning, during which the specifics of the pact were defined. These experiences proved to be resilient and strong even during the COVID pandemic (COSCARELLO; SIVINI, 2020).

There are various motivations for actors in the supply chain to enter into cooperation agreements. A first example is when producers commit to agreeing with a group of buyers on the quantity and quality of products to be supplied, or when consumers commit to advance payment for part of the production by agreeing on a 'fair' price, sharing risks and benefits. A second motivation concerns consumers who are looking for healthy, organic products, cultivated with particular methods. Finally, a third one concerns the social and environmental aspects of the production method, e.g., when there is an agreement on the respect of the working and living conditions of the farmers, on the possible impacts on the environment in the different steps of the chain (use of chemicals, transport methods, waste generated, etc.) and on ethical motivations (CALORI, 2009).

The relationship between producers and consumers, therefore, cannot be ascribed to a single model. It can be said that, in general, all experiences are distinguished by the investment in a direct

relationship between those who produce and those who consume, by transparency on production costs and the collective construction of economic accounts, by the planning of production, by the strong link with agro-ecological production dynamics and by the intense investment in the food sovereignty<sup>4</sup> of territories, both in terms of food products and the construction of sustainable value chains (BIOLGHINI et al, 2018).

Such collaborative strategies offer the possibility of retaining part of the value of production on the farm, but also of opening up new market spaces related to a demand for product quality, on which new consumption patterns are formed, based also on direct relationships that include three dimensions of proximity: *geographical*, i.e. the physical distance between producers and consumers; *social*, identifying a communication relationship between those who produce and those who consume able to generate sharing of knowledge and values; *economic*, by which we want to understand that the circulation of value takes place within a community or a territory (BRUNORI; BARTOLINI, 2013).

#### *The transformative power of producer-consumer partnerships*

Activities that move in the direction of building local ‘communities’ based on pacts seem to demonstrate that “[...] *collective experience through practices becomes the tool to transform everyday life [...]*”, and that “[...] *building communities from reflections and practices on food means putting relationships at the centre [...]*” (POTITO; BORGHESI, 2015).

The reflection proposed in this paper intends to investigate what changes can be generated when the relationships between producers and consumers, their respective roles and the relationship between them and the context are transformed. Looking at the many experiences around the world, some main issues can be identified that show how the rooting of supply chains within local relationships can generate a series of relevant changes (CALORI, 2009).

A first transformation is linked to the variety of agricultural products. In fact, the local supply chain refers to local rules, so that a community can choose the type of crops it wants to grow, taking into account the varieties that are best suited to the particular conditions of that place. It is, therefore,

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<sup>4</sup> From Nyéléni’s statement at the International Forum on Food Sovereignty held in Mali in 2007 “[...] *Food sovereignty is the right of peoples to nutritious and culturally adequate, accessible, sustainably and ecologically produced food, as well as the right to be able to decide their own food and production systems. This places those who produce, distribute and consume food at the heart of food systems and policies and above the demands of markets and corporations. It defends the interests and integration of future generations. (...) It provides guidelines for food, farming, pastoral and fishing systems to be managed by local producers. Food sovereignty prioritises local and national economies and markets, prioritises family farming, traditional fishing and animal husbandry, as well as the production, distribution and consumption of food based on environmental, social and economic sustainability. Food sovereignty promotes transparent trade that can guarantee a decent income for all peoples and the right for consumers to control their own food and nutrition. It ensures that the rights to access and manage our land, our territories, our water, our seeds, our livestock and our biodiversity are in the hands of those who produce the food. Food sovereignty implies new social relations free of oppression and inequalities between men and women, peoples, races, social classes and generations [...]*”.



a phytospecificity that is linked to symbolic and relational aspects related to food and the impact these have on food spaces (homes, markets, etc.), and is one of the foundations on which the concept of food sovereignty is based.

In local food circuits, environmental biodiversity is associated with food biodiversity. The proximity link provides an incentive for producers to use production methods that are more environmentally friendly and therefore use fewer chemical inputs, favouring an integrated or organic method over the conventional one, which is often used by large companies. In other words,

[...] the possibility of growing and consuming food with different nutritional and organoleptic qualities is the main precondition for healthy eating. Therefore, if the local relationship is the precondition for biodiversity, the availability of diverse foods and healthy eating is also a product related to these same relationships [...] (CALORI, 2009 p. 38).

Linked to this concept is another issue that characterises direct relationships centred on quality local food between more structured producers and consumers and, in particular, the concept of changing lifestyles towards sustainable communities. The new direct relationships and links of proximity (*geographical, social and economic*), foster networks of trusting and mutualistic relationships specific to local communities. Moreover, the increased perception of the social and ethical effects of one's consumption choices has contributed to the creation of other alternative practices, such as justice budgets, aimed at reorganising family management with respect to products according to criteria and principles of environmental and social justice; the experience of fair trade (SIVINI; CORRADO, 2013). The preference for local products is an individual choice that takes place in the social relationship and, therefore, it is this same relationship that makes economic change possible on a local basis. In many cases, the choice of local products is progressively linked to other forms of exchange: non-agricultural products, services, time, help, objects, etc. The choices of direct relationships show that a relevant product of local pacts can be the social relationship, understood as a relational good enjoyed by all those involved.

Therefore, thinking of relational goods as specific products of more mature food circuits may allow us to define what the products of these pacts are. The more general theme is that of public goods. *“The activity of caring for places and social relations that is, to all intents and purposes, a local product that is generated within the local economic circuit is a public good, which is enjoyed in a collective way and with repercussions also in the long term [...]”* (CALORI, 2009 p. 38). Thus, the main effect of these experiences is the social space that is created within the local mutualistic relations between local agricultural production and the public goods that are generated within this 'niche'.

The experiences of pacts that have a greater capacity for aggregation on both the supply and demand sides, according to some research (CALORI, 2009; VULCANO, 2018), are those that invest:

(a) on organisational aspects (constitution of consortia, relationship modalities, certification/marks/guarantee systems, communication, etc.); (b) on the provision of local logistics (dedicated sorting centres, sharing of means for distribution, etc.).

In 2017 the European Economic and Social Committee (EESC, 2017) has recognised the important role that these initiatives play, as by establishing closer links between producers and consumers, on the one hand they create opportunities for local businesses and new jobs, and on the other hand, they re-establish the relationship of communities with their food. All experiences of community-supported agriculture, short supply chains, alternative food networks, consumer cooperatives, local farming systems and direct sales can play a key role, as they ensure a close relationship with the community and a focus on social, educational and environmental aspects.

### *Concluding reflections*

This work aims to demonstrate how the needs of producers and consumers (that of the farmer, who adopts a production method that is integrated with the local agro-climatic and environmental characteristics, and that of the consumer, who is increasingly attentive to the search for quality food) can be used to build a relationship based on solidarity, which favours a different market and allows the strengthening of a production model that is more attentive to the care of the land and water.

The experiences and practices identified in AFN and CFN and analysed in this paper can be considered particularly significant paths of rethinking food meanings and practices at a community and political level. They are, in fact, food experiences and practices engaged in the construction of real alternatives aimed at implementing a different model of production, marketing and consumption. These transformative features appear significant in a transition perspective towards a post-neoliberal economy. The conscious search for alternatives is even more significant when considering the ability of corporate power to appropriate and co-opt any form of innovation in the dominant food system and, thus, the risk of weakening any transformative potential (ROSSI *et al*, 2018).

One of the main experiences of AFN and FCN is the realisation of social pacts between actors (agricultural producers, consumers and other actors in the supply chain). This local social pact makes possible rules that incorporate the production of environmental and territorial quality in the form of public goods. Such experiences of local pacts clearly go beyond redefining the relationship between food production and consumption. The socialisation of agricultural activities is an important phenomenon, which could contribute to the construction of a model capable of unifying other functions and objectives, such as mutual aid services, different relations between town and country, promotion of environmental and food biodiversity, opportunities for local businesses and jobs.

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