

## Article

# A Highly Condensed Social Fact: Food Citizenship, Individual Responsibility, and Social Commitment

Letizia Bindi <sup>1,\*</sup>  and Angelo Belliggiano <sup>2</sup> 

<sup>1</sup> Department of Social, Human and Learning Sciences, Center of Research BIOCULT, University of Molise, 86100 Campobasso, Italy

<sup>2</sup> Department of Agricultural, Environmental and Food Sciences, Center of Research BIOCULT, University of Molise, 86100 Campobasso, Italy

\* Correspondence: letizia.bindi@unimol.it

**Abstract:** The paper is based on the crucial value of food as “a condensed social fact”. The analysis focuses on food narratives, responsible consumption, battles for the food emancipation of subaltern and low-income subjects, and attention to the quality, fairness, and traceability of food products as an expression of individual agency, as well as an expression of public engagement with food democracy/citizenship conflicts and frictions. Preliminarily, the paper moves from a discussion of collective agency on food strategies and representations to a critical approach to food democracy and sustainable society. This public arena for food debates is then confronted with personal behaviors embodying food citizenship in the contemporary scenario of socio-economic and environmental transition. The paper addresses the following sustainable development goals: responsible consumption and production (SDG 12), ending hunger, food security, improved nutrition, sustainable agriculture (SDG 2), and health and well-being (SDG 3). Starting from the democratic/neoliberal dichotomy, the paper will consider food governmentality as a positive alternative to food emancipation and democracy, as well as a personal need and a neo-communitarian political approach opposed to agroindustry and food consumerism and dispossession. Three case studies, all situated in the central-southern Italian region of Molise, will discuss different models of food citizenship and governmentality, as well as the relationship between individual responsibility and desires and collective commitment and perspectives. These issues will be framed within a rural economy paradigm and articulated through an ethnographic methodology: local data collection, emic/ethic representations, participant observation, semi-structured interviews, and focus groups. This long-term observation has been realized in the framework of several projects that were coordinated and developed by the authors, who worked for several years in the regional territory, especially on projects focusing on local/regional/national policies of sustainable rural development and bio-cultural heritage conservation and valorization according to the mission of the research center, which they founded and coordinated over the last seven years. The case studies and discussion allow for some final consideration of the impact of individual and community agencies on the achievement of SDGs, the presence of not exclusively consumeristic and hedonistic behaviors, and the growing attention to ecological concerns being paid food producers and distributors, as well as new forms of rural-urban circularity and entanglements aiming toward greater awareness and democratization of food access, security, and sustainable agriculture.

**Keywords:** food citizenship; social innovation; rural development; territorial regeneration; governmentality; short food supply chains; responsibility; agency; ethnographic rethinking of sustainability



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## 1. Introduction

The last decade has marked the growth of a considerable debate on food, agriculture, and sustainability. Food has been qualified as “a condensed social fact” by Arjun Appadurai, speaking about “gastro-politics” [1].

This stratified and multidimensional meaning of food brings together social and political dimensions and community, as well as individual levels of relationships with and management of food and food production. This paper tries to outline some of the intersections between these different dimensions by taking into consideration the scientific literature that has accumulated over the last two decades on food, agriculture, and sustainability [2–6], including those centered on the global goals outlined by the sustainable development goals and 2030 agenda and micro-dimensional levels, as well as ethnographic descriptions of local agriculture and community and individual relationships with the consumption and production of food.

The background research that took place to address notions and fieldworks addressed in this paper is articulated in three main sections: (1) a critique of sustainable development; (2) food citizenship: sustainability as awareness, responsibility, and action; (3) the weight of biographies in the framework of global frictions.

- (1) *A critique of sustainable development.* The authors will address the interconnection between the role of food citizenship and sustainable rural development. Multiscale ethnographies help to provide a critical interpretation of individual and collective scientific and political processes aiming to increase awareness of food production and consumption and the realization of some SDGs starting from the local dimension.
- (2) *Food citizenship: sustainability as awareness, responsibility, and action.* The authors will present cases regarding agriculture and sustainable development goals, focusing on relatively recent debates and dissemination campaigns related to sustainable food, food sovereignty, and the specifically addressed concept of “food citizenship”, focusing on economic and socio-anthropological concerns.
- (3) *The weight of biographies in the framework of global frictions.* The authors will pay critical attention to the ambivalences that rural communities and local producers experience vis-à-vis the sustainability agenda, especially in Europe. Frictions are especially evident in individual biographies and personal choices in entanglements with institutional and societal frameworks concerning rural development and SDGs.

The paper will use a multidisciplinary paradigm to explore food governmentality and personal and communitarian engagements with SDGs, especially at the crossroad between socio-anthropological and political-economic insights. This will be achieved by observing local and global processes and frictions [7] in the production, distribution, and consumption of agrifood products within the framework of political ecology criticism.

### 1.1. A Critique of Sustainable Development

Since the publication of the Brundtland Report in 1987, the social sciences have contributed to transversal, comparative, and multidisciplinary/multiscale approaches to climate change, criticisms of different development/growth patterns [8,9], and a radical rethinking of individual/collective/institutional efforts to achieve sustainable development goals (SDGs) [8,10]. Most of the crucial questions about sustainability in the late-modern globalized economy of food are related to the notion of agency/agencies and ownership [11]. Shared collective choices about common property resources and the control and securitization of food provision are the key concepts needed to critically understand the relationships between economic progress and growing risks regarding the safety and well-being of human and non-human living beings [12,13]. The poet Andrea Zanzotto, who was strongly engaged in environmentalist activism, defined the post-capitalist “il progresso scorsoio” [14] (literally ‘progress slipknot’) during an interview. This expression refers to an idea of Western progress, capitalistic growth, and late modern development that, as it increases, will increasingly affect and destroy our potential for survival.

The social sciences, particularly social and political anthropology, have addressed sustainable development and food production and consumption with particular criticisms of the emphasis that global economies and politics, as well as national regimes, put on productivity and growth as the unique solution to feeding the world. Social sciences research has highlighted the extent to which this ‘extractivist’ approach increasingly leads

to land-grabbing, pollution, poverty, and the destruction of bio-cultural capital in many parts of the world, including many rural, disadvantaged European regions [15,16]. These processes mean that considerable portions of local populations are left behind [17,18] and depend on local communities and informal/small-scale forms of resilience to respond to territorial dismissal, fragility, and abandonment.

In the last decade, this multidisciplinary approach to human/nature entanglements has implied that there may be new forms of sustainable development within the framework of critical political ecology [9,19]. A partial distrust of the sustainable development goals and, more generally, the rhetoric of sustainability seems to have emerged. Sustainability could be reconsidered as a new, global, and dominant narrative that aims to mitigate the feeling of uncertainty and threat without actually producing a real change, as well as a reversal of priorities. This idea is put forward in the critical theories of capitalocene and hyper-extractivist neoliberalism [20]. Topics such as food democracy/sovereignty are increasingly entangled with global norms and framed through “narrating indicators” [21] and a biometric construction of sustainability [22,23] based on numbers and data more than local, collective, and individual storytelling [24]. Moreover, discourses on sustainable development contrast with the hierarchical policy framework and the neoliberal governmentality, orienting communities towards a circular economy, the shared management of common goods, and the equitable distribution of resources [25]. According to this de-constructionist approach, SDGs are essentially reframed as “epistemic infrastructures” of fluid concepts and contested terrains [23].

Responsible consumption, the food emancipation of subaltern and low-income subjects, and attention to the quality, fairness, and traceability of food products are declared as political goals, both national and global, as well as an expression of individual agency. Analogously, conflicts and frictions between agriculture and the distribution and control of access to food relate to the need for “zero hunger, food security, improved nutrition, and sustainable agriculture” (SDG 2), and they need to be achieved through great institutional and multiscale efforts, as well as the in-depth engagement of each citizen.

Agri-food power is becoming increasingly extractive and technocratic, a Foucauldian “micro-politics of bio-power” based on the capillary management of production and symbolic as well as concrete representations of food, but is also a set of strategies enabling institutional control of the food supply infrastructures. Finally, food plays a “distinctive” role in contemporary societies [26], separating individuals and groups and creating fundamental, cultural, and politico-economic divides.

The actor-network analysis allows for the addressed fieldwork to observe the intertwining between socio-anthropological knowledge and the economic considerations applied to SDGs [27–31], as well as the relationship between global transitions and the resilience of local groups, with their multifaceted and changing attitudes [32,33].

The first appearance of the global institutions’ debate regarding SDGs was at the 2002 United Nations Conference in South Africa, where the first official definition of “sustainable development” was provided, referring to a “socially responsible” form of economic development aiming to protect resources for future generations. A few years earlier, the highlights of contemporary sustainable agriculture had been established as:

“an integrated system of plant and animal production practices . . . that will, over the long-term: satisfy human food and fiber needs; enhance environmental quality and the natural resource base upon which the agriculture economy depends; make the most efficient use of non-renewable resources, and integrate, where appropriate, natural biological cycle and controls; sustain the economic viability of farm/ranch operations; and enhance the quality of life for farmers/ranchers and society as a whole”

(Definition of Sustainable Agriculture, USA: Code Title 7, Section 3103) [34].

This definition, however, was not free from criticisms, just like that of multi-functionality, an expression borrowed from the EU to underline, more rhetorically than practically, the

paradigm's shift in the CAP initiated in the new millennium [35,36]. In fact, an anthropocentric, objectifying, and marketed approach towards resources and nature is affirmed at present, which thinks of the sustainability of crops and plantations only in terms of risk and impact reduction (eco-efficiency) rather than on eco-effectiveness [37,38]. Little attention is paid to forms of resistance to an agriculture of predation or the implicit reaction of nature to predation and indiscriminate extractivism, which many have defined as 'plantationocene'. More recently, new studies about the depopulation of disadvantaged, mountainous, or peripheral areas have been developed [39]; this depopulation is, in effect, destined to influence even the smallest aspects of the daily life of human and non-human animals in an absolutely interconnected way [40,41].

### *1.2. Food Citizenship: Sustainability as Awareness, Responsibility, and Action*

This research focuses on contemporary examples of aware and responsible food production/consumption, observing specific and local cases, and farms orienting their personal and company choices according to SDGs' principles. The research was implemented through a multidisciplinary approach, developed and tested within the framework of the BIOCULT Research Center based on different theoretical and methodological approaches focusing on rural development actors, social innovation stakeholders, and environmental activists who are increasingly asked to deal with the growing population, food inequalities, injustices, and waste.

The studies encompassed both individual behaviors and collective orientations (environmentalists, animal rights activists, sovereigntists, deniers/revisionists of environmental problems), offering a range of possible, differentiated responses to the crucial issues of global sustainability, "one health" ontologies [42], and quality of life [SDG 3] [43].

Since the middle of the XX century, some anthropologists have focused their research on different societies' attitudes to the increasing emergencies posed by environmental pollution, land and soil abuses, and, more recently, climate change, critically observing the intrinsic contradiction, in many cases, of economic growth and capitalistic "extractivism" [44,45].

In the first phase of this debate, the rural economy and 'sustainability science' supported a form of social sciences that was oriented almost exclusively towards the analysis of the threats of climate change: pollution, drastic reduction in available resources, and risks to people's safety and subsistence, focusing on particular regions.

Only later did a more reticular notion of threat emerge, associating environmental risks with social and cultural ones, such as the growing depopulation of certain networks and their impact on rural practices and food habits, leading today to the hyper-consumerism of food and irresponsibility [46].

More recently, rural economists and human geographers have shown a growing scientific interest in these issues, addressing the public implications of some local economic practices linked to positive externalities associated with the phenomenon of 'alternative food networks' [47–56]. In this context, the active role of consumers is recognized, which goes beyond mere food supply [57–60]. Examples include local and organic food purchasing groups [61–68], bio-districts [45,69–72], and short supply chains [73–76]. Some ethnographies comparatively analyzed the connection between environmental crises and technological and industrial development, as well as an increasingly mechanized food production that is distanced from communities and people while conditioning the bodies and lives of human and non-human animals [77–79].

Sustainability necessarily implies a reconsideration of the "multispecies responsibility" [41] and a radical ecology of practices in agriculture, encompassing free access, the control and circulation of food, and a shared symbolic and commercial valorization.

This critical positioning and empowerment of individuals and groups vis-à-vis food provisioning can be synthetically defined as "food citizenship", as a further step with respect to the notion of "food sovereignty" or other definitions belonging to the first phase of the debate on the SDGs. Notions such as "respons-ability" [41] and "respon-

sustainability” [80] encompass a mix of agency, moral commitment to environmental respect, public policies, and skills management applied to agroecological practices [81–83]. Thus, the transformative power of social movements impacts re-territorialized food provisioning, inspired by embedded local practices of the past but also the interconnected and innovative alternatives of the present [84].

Against the background of food citizenship, there are new multidisciplinary debates explicitly committed to environmentalist activism, animal rights [85], a criticism against ‘extractivism’ in post-capitalist economies [86–89], and “more-than-social” movements [90]. Based essentially on Pellizzari’s recent work on “experimental practices”, more-than-social movements are presented as ways to escape the financialization of everyday life through the crafting of alternative forms of life, the so-called ‘alterontologies’, bringing about new forms of commons, decolonized from bio-financialization.

In this sense, the particular attention that is paid to single companies, local people, formal and informal consumer groups, and an ethnographic approach to local food systems lead back to the heart of anthropological interpretation: the “close observation of particular lives in particular places” [91].

Starting from the critical framework and from an ongoing idea of “food citizenship” [92,93], this paper intends to explore some main issues:

- Awareness and responsibility [41]: food awareness and responsible consumption as an individual ‘ability’ and as a sign of the political agency of communities at the local level (which is partially addressed, although with the limits outlined above, by SDG 12). People and communities express their will to decide about their health and wellness through choices about food: what to eat and how to select and preserve themselves by making the right choices about nutrition. Some communities are becoming increasingly aware of the political weight of their choices regarding plantations, how to preserve their traditional agriculture, how to reduce the use of pesticides, and how to contrast the energy choices that are destined to weigh considerably on their lives and health. This awareness is, in some way, the origin of full sovereignty in matters of agricultural choices and control over the resources available to the communities and the beginning of the process of defining full food citizenship.
- Safeguarding local knowledge and sustainable food heritage valorization and tourism (responsible-sustainable tourism) [80] as a contemporary form of promoting territories and leveraging local agricultures without destroying their traditional practices, and using and sharing their land/other resources without dismissing their social and economic-productive balance. Even in this case, the awareness and knowledge gained at the individual level, but enhanced through the sharing of bio-cultural heritage concerning cultivation and breeding practices and the conservation of biodiversity, further substantiates the agency of local groups. People become owners of their agriculture and their diets and, above all, are fully aware of the symbolic capital of these sets of practices as a driving force for the cultural and economic promotion of territories.
- Social and individual impact on the overall process of political and social engagement, increasing the sustainability of socio-economic organizations and how they deal with the real accomplishment of SDGs, especially insisting on ecological and environmental concerns, which are synthetically called “green transition”. This process is led and implemented by rural development policies and tendentially or at least officially designed and directed to address the needs and urgencies of communities; for example, the ‘Local Action Groups’, which are the local collective subjects of the rural and social development processes embedded in the concerned European Programs or the pilot projects established by the Italian National Strategy for Inner/Disadvantaged Areas. The participation of individuals in rural development programs or recovery and resilience projects represents an important link between individual commitment and public frameworks, as well as cooperation between citizens and local, national, and global institutions in the realization of sustainable rural development objectives.

Based on these three main areas of observation, this contribution aims to concretely articulate the relationship between the personal stories of farmers and breeders engaged at a local level and the implementation of the SDGs that are taken into consideration.

### 1.3. *The Weight of Biographies in the Framework of Global Frictions*

Food, as a highly “condensed social fact” [1], emerges through the analysis of food narratives. As some authors have noted, the value of narratives and storytelling is crucial in SDGs’ definition and SDG processes: it has the power to provide data and statistics with “meaning and soul”.

“Although quantification has been at the heart of shaping the debate on global goals in both the millennium and the sustainable development goals, the role of narrative-making has not been investigated in depth. Yet, narratives are key in enveloping and making sense of the data overload; they give numbers meaning and soul. As Shore et al. argue [94], policies are productive, performative, and continually contested. A policy finds expression through sequences of events; it creates new social and semantic places, new sets of relations, new political subjects, and webs of meaning”. It is, therefore, pertinent to examine the construction of the SDGs, not only as a new measurement agenda composed of metrics and quantitative data but also as the construction of a new ‘policy world’: “a new space of political processes, interactions and governing paradigms that become consolidated through the use of language and inscription” [23].

Special attention should be paid in this social sciences debate to the efficacy of individual behaviors and attitudes in orienting collective decision-building towards a more inclusive, post-colonial, and post-human approach. The radical critique of the Anthropocene pertains to the invasive and violent impact of human species on the environment, biodiversity conservation, and climate change [27,95]. Such an impact is historically based on the radically unsustainable divide between nature and culture, organic and inorganic, alive and dead, human and animal.

At the intersection of this multidisciplinary debate, a very important question relates to the weight that individual biographies should be given in the SDG implementation processes: this includes the cultural and social aspects of agriculture and food consumption and how biographies intertwine with local policies and shared planning for a circular economy.

At the same time, within the framework of the broader “Inner Areas National Strategy” discourse, particular attention should be paid to the theme of “new peasants” [96] or of “returnees”, i.e., those young and old local development actors who return or arrive in the territories from cosmopolitan training and exchange their experiences. These neo-inhabitants come back to disadvantaged areas, to the countryside and mountains, investing in material work and aiming to achieve greater harmony with the environment and nature. These individual biographies should not be thought of as a form of escape from late modernity and progress but rather as new ways of thinking about agriculture from an innovative and social perspective, as a form of reciprocity between individuals and community, and as a commitment to achieving greater sustainability in local production activities. The remote areas and cases addressed in this paper can be defined as “anti-fragile” [97], as they show a dynamic yet more than an adaptive and innovative way to deal with agribusiness and the unsustainable economic order. Sociocultural and economic regeneration is, therefore, deeply rooted in this capacity of communities and citizens to deal with changes and transformations, adopting a truly participatory posture in the moral economies of change, aiming to achieve a new sense of circularity and commonality.

In the considered case studies, we try to analyze three different means of “food citizenship and governmentality”, in which individual responsibility towards the SDGs is intertwined with the collective and normative commitment towards sustainability, without neglecting communities’ and individuals’ wishes and expectations of a better quality of life.

## 2. Methodology and Fieldwork

During the research, three main, intertwined methodological approaches were used: agricultural economics, ethnography, and the critical anthropological interpretation of data, according to other similar European research [98,99].

The authors decided to favor a substantially qualitative approach, considering the specific goals of the present work and the purely exemplary function [100] of the proposed three cases:

- Griot Farm in Bojano;
- The Melise company in Castel del Giudice;
- The OltreBIO company in Lucito.

The fieldwork were all situated in the Molise region, where the two authors are enrolled at a local university, studying the rural economy and social anthropology. Proximity to the companies and to individual/family producers created the conditions for the development of the ethnographies and analysis of the economic impact of rural development processes. As the authors were next to the fieldwork, although neither are natives of the region, they were put in a position to constantly monitor the regional/local policies and the overall governmental framework in which the companies developed, and to observe the particular strategies of adaptation to environmental changes and any discontent. The researchers were able to understand the political and social transformations of both urban and depopulated and disadvantaged areas, where abandonment fuels the loss of know-how and the abrupt interruptions to the circulation and transmission of local knowledge, which destabilizes social cohesion. In the increasing rarefaction of sociability, even the sharing of the same agricultural practices and the similar transformation of raw materials, as well as the connected conviviality of food consumption on festive and ceremonial occasions, are abruptly interrupted, as in a post-traumatic scenario.

The data and accounts were documented since 2016 through intense research and action in the territories and were developed within the framework of several projects in which these territories are involved. These data are partially video-recorded and conserved on the project EARTH website and its Teams Channel; in other cases, data are annotated and transcribed in authors' personal archives. Most of these ethnographies focus on food-citizenship-oriented productions and distribution/consumption practices have been addressed within the framework of the BIOCULT Research Center (Bio-cultural Heritage and Local Development Center) of the University of Molise, a multidisciplinary and inter-departmental research cluster aiming to achieve an in-depth territorial research-action and public engagement. Thus, research is part of the day-by-day cooperation and sharing with local institutions and citizens, allowing for a very in-depth insight into the local and regional dynamics and controversies of sustainable development. The case studies were all selected from a small southern-central region with quite homogeneous sociocultural characteristics: depopulated, economically depressed, fragmented, and with some elements of dated agricultural practices and lack of competitiveness, despite the numerous funds and supports obtained in the past two decades, especially from Europe.

The authors are surely aware of some limitations connected to the strictly regional context of the observation and the quite small sample being used to outline such a pivotal topic. Nonetheless, they are deeply convinced of the density of individual accounts, documented during long-term ethnography, and the insightful cooperation with local communities, as well as of the somehow ideal and typical nature of these cases in the specific context of this small, vulnerable, disadvantaged, and 'fragile' rural area.

The methodologies and steps adopted for the analysis of the cases encompass the following:

- Three semi-structured interviews on internal and external representations of the targeted subjects and their activities;
- Long-term participant observation of salient moments for targeted companies during the production/distribution or dissemination processes: visits by tourists and students at particular moments of the agricultural cycle, organic and niche food fairs

and markets, digital platforms/websites, and social media companies' presentation, workshops, and public initiatives shared among rural stakeholders, policy-makers, and academic experts;

- Three in-depth interviews with the owners/principal promoters of the targeted companies;
- Two focus groups realized within the framework of different projects carried out by the BIOCULT Center (EARTH Online International Course 2021, Cerealia Workshop 2022), involving farmers, policy-makers, activists, and researchers, aiming to test the impact of sustainable development actions on beneficiary communities and individuals.

The period of direct observation was:

- Between 2016 and 2022, for the Melise s.r.l.;
- A shorter period, between 2020 and 2022, for Griot Farm and OltreBIO, including the extremely rarefied, but also very significant, period during the ethnographic level of the pandemic and social distancing.

The selected companies and cooperatives were ethnographically observed, and their impact in terms of the rural development of the concerned territories was essentially interpreted through qualitative data to define their food governmentality profiles [101].

As mentioned above, the cases were selected in Molise, one of the smallest Italian regions. Located along the Apennine ridge of central-southern Italy, the region has a very low population density (70.3 inhabitants/km<sup>2</sup>) and is strongly threatened by depopulation. A large part of the territory (over 83%) is therefore recognized as an "internal area"; therefore, a large portion (over 80%) of the municipalities have been affected by SNAI [102] as they are mainly "peripheral" or "ultraperipheral", more than 75' distant from the urban poles on which they seem to depend not only for the so-called "essential services" (health, education, transport) but also for the increased food demand from segments interested in co-creation. The three case studies presented below appear to focus on these objectives of territorial regeneration and rural development.

### 3. Results: Rural Narratives and Ethnography of New/Old Means of Agriculture

The three cases that were taken into consideration, in addition to sharing a common geographical and sociocultural area, have some similar characteristics; for example, they focus their attention on organic products, have a strong commitment to sustainable agriculture and pastoralism, and have greater respect for people's rights, both in terms of fair access to food and communities' environmental rights and access to land. These companies are led by relatively young people (usually under 40), who, in almost all cases, are highly educated and returned to their territories of origin after foreign travel, animated by a desire for recovery and a commitment to the regeneration of the regions and areas in which they decided to set up their businesses.

Generally, this is combined with a personal attitude towards creativity, social and political commitment, as well as curiosity and protagonism in the arts. These traits show the relevance of individual biographies in the implementation of and commitment to SDGs, providing an interesting articulation of the intertwining between subjectivity and political choices, personal behaviors and cooperation with policies, and local, sustainable rural development.

#### 3.1. Case 1: The Griot Farm

##### 3.1.1. Place and Vision

The Griot Farm is a company located in Bojano, not far from the capital of the Molise Region, Campobasso, which was first created as a laboratory of inclusion for asylum seekers and soon turned out to be a promising form of work, assisting in the economic revival of the area through its agricultural activities and the market. On the opening page of the company's website, which has the title: "Km. 0 and the local market: relaunching internal areas and an antidote to climate change", the conscious positioning of the farm and the disruptive narrative is clearly declared in contrast to the extractivist agroindustry and unsustainable market for agricultural products. The company's constitution was significantly

based on an emblematic deed of incorporation: Luciano, a mature landowner who offered a portion of land at the foot of the Matese, the local mountain of traditional transhumances.

### 3.1.2. Citizens' Engagement and Participation

Thus, this triggers the structural circularity of the farm, which translates into a commitment to the transmission of knowledge and the training of new generations (educational farm). In addition, the short and very short supply chain was relaunched with the return to the markets' premises, in the squares, which was replaced by door2door services during the pandemic, to avoid solutions of continuity during the re-socialization of food, given the centrality of the vision of the founders of Griot Farm. Encounters with this diversity also translated into a search for the preservation and protection of agrarian biodiversity. The farm is engaged in the recovery of native seeds and fruits for the cultivation of some plants that were imported by the original members, who are not Italian. However, the diversity and resilient variety of this shared experience of social agriculture is also played out in individual stories. As an example, one of the founding members, Fabrizio Russo, is the founder and frontman of an Italian rock band, the Riserva MOAC, which, not without difficulty, combines the permanence and hardness of agricultural work with the mobility and curiosity of creative musical work in a coherent crossover with other traditions and cultures that are also practiced in the chosen form of social farming.

### 3.1.3. Food Production and Consumption Practices for Territorial Regeneration

In the case of Griot Farm, we are faced with an idea clearly centered, at least in the statements of its protagonists and coordinators, on food as a common good and against the idea of people as consumers. Instead, people are responsible, attentive, inclusive, and proactive custodians of a new form of agriculture, enabling reconnection between farmers and consumers as well as between both categories and their territories [103]. In fact, even if the most recent studies on the agro-food system have placed greater emphasis on the role of the consumer in value chains, this remains neglected in practice, where consumers are deprived of any possibility of participating in the choices (ethical and otherwise) of agricultural enterprises, processors and the great organized distribution [104].

The Griot Farm initiative focuses on the global interconnection between the weakening of agriculture and rural areas and climate change threats. This collective model of business was suggested to enable the combination of habits and values from the old rural civilization of Southern Italy (such as traditional food processing and the familiar transmission of recipes, as well as ancient forms of zero-waste methods) with quite innovative communication and distribution strategies consisting of a digital platform to book agricultural products and receive them at home through companies' Facebook and Instagram profiles. In this way, citizens participate in the choices and policies of the company. At the same time, for example, special conduct, such as the 'door to door' delivery of agrifood products, partially incentivized by the pandemic period, represents a form of traditional proximity, of familiar exchange between producers and final users that goes beyond the utilitarian seller-buyer relationship or the even most impersonal and mechanized/algorithmic method of delivery companies.

Griot Farm quite clearly shows the proactive interconnection between agriculture, social innovation, and cultural creativity, as expressed through a concrete path of the social inclusion of people from other countries. This takes place through proactive participation in several cultural projects in the region, such as festivals and cultural initiatives involving migrant people and asylum-seekers, who are temporarily placed in charge of the reception structures and programs present in the region. In terms of the narrative of sustainable development, the frequent reference to Riserva MOAC's musical activities and Fabrizio's other artistic engagements, which often involve multi-ethnic festivals, are generously mixed with information on the company's activities and products, allowing for a perfectly coherent promotion of the Griot Farm project as a flow of shared actions, which are consistent but not forced into the patterns and techniques typical of the neoliberal agrifood market.

### 3.1.4. Citizenship and Sustainable Development Relationships

The case of Griot Farm proposes a more responsible approach to agricultural production in Griot Farm's own territory and in rural areas more generally, practicing more conscious models of food production through the reintroduction and promotion of techniques enabling the restoration of the primordial functions of food: ecological (biodiversity) and social (solidarity and plurality).

The elective place for the action is, paradoxically, "the" market (and not "the" markets), which mainly comprises those urban spaces dedicated to small businesses. These urban spaces are now obsolete and/or abandoned but could become spaces in which consumers can directly encounter (new) farmers with whom they could exchange not only food but also information, discussing postures and/or tangible forms of commitment to the right to healthy, good and fair food (consistent with all the SDGs considered in this paper). In so doing, rural territories can be contrasted with the degradation of agroecosystems and depopulation processes.

During the pandemic, Griot Farm expressed its full potential relating to food citizenship, the hybridization of production and sociality, with home deliveries and communication through social media. It aimed not to interrupt but rather to corroborate, using different means, the difficult dialogue that had developed with urban communities.

### 3.1.5. Food Governmentality Profile

For Griot Farm, food not only has a nutritional function but also, and perhaps above all, makes visible some otherwise neglected economic and social issues: for example, the societal value of organic and traditionally produced food, the community value of proximity in door-to-door services or very local market distribution, the care for the environment, and the civic engagement of farmers against soil abuses and pollution, as well as the culturally rooted value of typical local food as a re-assessment of belongingness to the locality, coupled with creativity, cosmopolitanism, and multi-cultural exchange. In this first case, food can be traced back to the fundamental economy, within which the networks of food citizens seem to mature and expand, criticizing the neo-liberal extractivism at the origin of global and local inequalities and poverty. By sharing their knowledge and experiences of remote or forgotten food production and consumption practices, the members of this community make the ethical dimension of food more visible and feel deeply connected to the socio-environmental concerns underlying the SDGs.

## 3.2. Case 2: The Melise Agricultural Company

### 3.2.1. Place and Vision

The Melise agricultural company was established in 2003, focusing on the community's desire to transform the main resource, the land, into a site of economic activity that was better connected to the market. This was interrupted by the economic and personal contingencies of the original company founder, who unconsciously activated an extremely fruitful and positive process of social innovation [105], which strongly impacted the local community identity [106]. Shortly after the new election of the Mayor of Castel del Giudice, an entrepreneur from northeastern Italy, one of the most developed agricultural areas of the country, by chance, found the ideal context to carry out his ambitious project to introduce new apples to southern Italy, aiming to enhance production through the marketing channels themselves.

After the initial phase of the creation of the first fruit company in Castel del Giudice, some personal and company vicissitudes arose, which determined that the same municipality took over the cultivation of apples and other species under the organic farming system [107].

### 3.2.2. Citizens' Engagement and Participation

Through the supply of raw materials to a leading European company in the production of food for early childhood, Melise began to venture into the production of juices and

preserves with her own brand. Melise engaged in the marketing of fresh juices and preserves through alternative food networks that the Joint Buying Groups (GAS in the Italian language) explicitly connected to the concept of solidarity markets [108]. These markets are ideal for high-quality agricultural products, such as Melise apples, which are obtained through good management practices: not only from the agronomic and economic perspectives of the company but also from the ecological and social context of the territory.

The company also prioritizes its respect for the integrity of the territory and the valorization of the landscape and nature according to the criteria established for organic farming. Sustainable, non-polluting, and profitable production are focuses based on a deep knowledge of all components. All these principles converge in a product of intrinsic quality and place added value on the plane of ethical and responsible consumption.

### 3.2.3. Food Production and Consumption Practices for Territorial Regeneration

In recent years, Melise has shown a clear will to enhance, protect, and improve the territory of Alto Molise, whether in terms of environmental and landscape safeguarding or in its claim to curb rural depopulation by offering new generations the opportunity for qualified employment. It has aimed to improve agriculture and promote commercial activity linked to the production chain.

Melise's choice/strategy foresees slightly higher management costs, as well as the benefits of organic production in terms of environmental impacts and consumer protection, which will be achieved by paying extreme attention to the traceability of all components using the logic of growing security for the consumer and improvements in market transparency.

At the same time, continuous research has allowed the farm to diversify the products it offers through the recovery of numerous autochthonous species that confirm their interest in the conservation and appreciation of the territory's specificity, history, culture, environment, and landscape. This variety is gathered within an extraordinary catalog called "Giardino delle mele antiche" (Old Apple Garden), which, in addition to embellishing the entrance of the farm as a small business for direct sales, constitutes a formidable cultural attraction as a true symbol of the Castel del Giudice model, founded on agricultural and endogenous resources.

This diversification and attention to territorial specificity, one of the latest initiatives of the company regarding the local territory, is supported by the Joint Buying Groups. These groups aim to integrate and diversify the firm's offer, sharing her principles and commitment and resulting in the birth of a new branch of the company, which specializes in the production of agricultural beer from traditional raw materials found in the area, establishing an entirely local product [109]. This agricultural beer is created using the hops and barley grown in the area, close to the site of organic apple production (substituting the recent cultivation of barley as forage), and its name, Maltolento (slow-malt), highlights its adherence to the Slow Food Movement principles [110]. This brand is the first "agricultural" beer from Molise. However, in this case, the scheme is the same as that adopted by local stakeholders for all actions of socio-economic regeneration and enhancements of cultural cohesion. The synergy between production at a strongly local level and investment, in this case, was established by an entrepreneur from a neighboring community to Castel del Giudice and strongly rooted in Milan, who decided, by virtue of what the mayor defined as "affective entrepreneur", to bet on this small reality for its resistance to the abandonment that has historically dominated in peripheral territories. In so doing, a real process of neo-endogenous development was established.

The narratives inherent in the diversified agrifood production of Castel del Giudice exalt, in a particularly effective way, the value of the recovery of biodiversity and the relocation of a form of cultivation that, in principle, seems to derive from the independent initiative of substantial external capital. Even the name of the company plays on the idea of belonging and territorial roots, and the "native apple garden" aims to reposition the company within the idea of sustainability and the recovery of the biodiversity and typicality of the products. Similarly, the launch of the agricultural brewery as a further business

branch is again narrated by the protagonists as a path of return to the original territory and local products, with barley and hops produced exclusively on-site. Except for hops, everything is produced organically at present. The biographies of the protagonists are again considered stories of long detours, essentially showing their aim to obtain special know-how and skills, framing their return as a choice and an opportunity, exalting the clean environment, slowness, and sustainability of life and production on-site. Lastly, the most recent initiative of the community apiary is based on experience. In addition to enhancing the cooperative, shared, and circular dimension of this form of production, as well as its value as a sentinel of environmental health, the apiary aims to establish a tourist experience, focusing on the bees' landscape and honey production to safeguard the territory. It also aims to establish a network of cohesion between beekeepers and provide an opportunity for people to remain in the region without needing to leave to find job opportunities elsewhere. Thus, the narrative is centered on the relatively young age of the honey-gatherers, their skill, their expert knowledge, their cooperation, and their openness to visitors and tourists, as well as customers and locals who are curious about this sustainable rural activity. Individual biographies are part of an overall representation and local storytelling based on sustainability, commitment to the soil, and environmental conservation, love for animals and forests, and interest in biodiversity, mixed with in-depth local knowledge and biocultural heritage awareness.

#### 3.2.4. Citizenship and Sustainable Development Relationships

The cultural value of organic farming is at the basis of the social innovation process experienced by the small rural community that welcomes Melise and which has participated not only financially but, above all, politically in the very constitution of the company. Despite having wide margins to corroborate its positioning on the conventional food markets, it has decided, strongly believing in its testimony on the relationship between agriculture and natural and rural resources (consistent with the principles of SDG 3 and 12), to reorient the commercial destination of its productions towards alternative market networks, such as responsible purchasing groups (especially in large cities such as Rome and Naples), engaging in a broader project. This is also probably the most evident example of the food citizenship process in Italy. Furthermore, the recent diversification of the company, with the new production of the agricultural (and organic) beer "Malto Lento", which also shares a name with a food product, albeit a hedonistic and convivial name, transmits a clear message regarding the fundamental role of agriculture and organic farmers in the processes underlying food citizenship and its values, such as the time of biological processes and human relationships.

#### 3.2.5. Food Governmentality Profile

Melise is a *sui generis* company in which the social dimension seems to prevail over the productive one. In fact, this has guided the food (and non-food) attitudes and behaviors of all the citizens of the small village in which it is located, which, among other things, has contributed in a symbolically significant way to the constitution of the foundational company's share capital. Through the experience of organic farming, the inhabitants of Castel del Giudice became aware of the social and political value of food: high-quality organic food, biodiversity conservation, community-building, and increased citizenship cohesion around the local companies' rural activities, ensuring a sustainable path to community revitalization. This implies that local tangible and intangible resources can be oriented toward the creation of a real food community. Therefore, many of its (food)-citizens are not only protagonists and witnesses of the process of social innovation triggered by the company in case 2 but are somehow involved in its care or management, as well as in the promotion of territorial regeneration focused on the evocative and socially cohesive power of food. Such processes often imply external cooperation initiatives, which are also facilitated by the broader ecological orientation underlying the production model. Thus, both the owners and the company's stakeholders progressively, and sometimes unknowingly, entered into

a broader project of citizenship committed to creating a sustainable and fair food system based on circularity, access to resources, and awareness of the social and environmental implications of a fair agrifood production. This seems to envisage a wider and shared strategy aiming to offer new development opportunities to the communities of the most fragile inland areas.

### 3.3. Case 3: *Oltrebio.it Online Organic Farming Shop*

#### 3.3.1. Place and Vision

Oltrebio.it is the first online organic farming shop in the Molise region, conceived and started by Cinzia and Matthieu, an Italian–Belgian couple who significantly define themselves, on the front page of the company's website, as “citizens of the world”.

They explicitly affirm their commitment to environmental concerns and the main aim to leave a “healthy planet to future generations”, which is a paraphrase of the SDGs' general aim. What is very interesting in this proposal is the link established between the need for global engagement for a cleaner and healthier environment and the need for an increase in the awareness of food consumers and willingness to offer opportunities for local, sustainable, and biological provisioning of food in a region which was previously little committed to this kind of place-based purchase group [111]. The shop aims to improve the short food supply chains between urban and rural areas and enhance the consumption of local biological products as a way to concretely support the conservation of biodiversity and preservation of natural resources and to encourage people to eat healthy food.

#### 3.3.2. Citizens' Engagement and Participation

Even in this case, as previously noted for Griot Farm, the ‘door-to-door’ distribution of food orders is a way to create a strong sense of proximity between the communities of the consumers and producers. These groups are connected by the collectors/distributors of the food orders who, in this case, frequently visit the farms and the companies who produce their basket of products, trying to create a relationship of trust and commitment among all these local actors. Among all the activities and choices that Cinzia and Mathieu are making, special attention should be paid to the reduction of any kind of waste and the efficient use of energy in their partner farms. Analogous attention is paid to eco-packaging and mobility/transport optimization, using urban hubs, usually cultural centers (bookshops, music clubs, cafés, and pubs) as privileged forums of discussion to solicit and facilitate debate and confrontation among the consumers and between the consumers and the producers. ICTs are systematically used by the company to calculate the shortest distances required for the distribution of products or the use of a digital platform to book and show the products, constantly tracing them, building customer loyalty, and shortening the distance to the farms, creating a purchasing group identity.

The two company's conceivers and promoters explicitly affirm this resilient aim of the company: they speak about what they conceive of as “an act of resistance of who believes in the very uniqueness of this small region” based on global and historical references such as Gandhi's philosophy of “enacting the change that you want to see in the world”, supporting all kinds of processes of “return to the earth” and the agriculture of young people (<https://www.oltre-bio.it/content/9-chi-siamo> (accessed on 21 December 2022)). They chose to base their company in this region because it is small and strongly linked to a healthy food style.

#### 3.3.3. Food Production and Consumption Practices for Territorial Regeneration

From Brussels, where they were both working in the non-profit sector, the company's founders moved in 2017 to Lucito, the small village in which Cinzia was born. Their relationship and the emotional dimension of their choice are quite transparent and structurally part of their company's familiar form of storytelling. Their special commitment and collaboration were activated by the recuperation of ancient seeds and the so-called “evolutionary populations of cereals”. The company concretely encouraged the sowing of the “miscuglio

di Aleppo”, a mix of almost 2000 different genetic varieties of wheat, representing great biodiversity and perfectly adapting to each kind of territory and soil, preventing the diffusion of weeds without the intervention of any kind of pesticide. This specific action led the two young entrepreneurs to develop cooperation with an organic farm and an organic bakery that processed these cultivations under the attentive control of the famous international plant genetic expert Salvatore Ceccarelli, who was the first to recover and regenerate such a mix, together with the agronomist Stefania Grando, after a long and important period of research on an ancient Mediterranean mix of seeds developed at the International Institute of Research ICARDA in Aleppo. The “Miscuglio di Aleppo” and the fundamental concept of extreme biodiversity conservation as a means of conservation and safeguarding healthy and resistant cultivation, spreading from the selection of the most adaptive seeds according to the specificity of the soil, is a philosophy for a new possible agriculture. By mixing and multiplying the variety of seeds, cultivation can become healthier and more resistant: diversity is a strength; diversity is something from the past becoming useful and adaptive to the present and future of more sustainable agriculture.

#### 3.3.4. Citizenship and Sustainable Development Relationships

This case is rooted in the experience of food citizenship lived by the two founders of Oltrebio in Brussels. Although the experience was gained in an eminently urban context, it has happily been transfused into a peripheral region such as Molise, becoming, probably for this same reason, the driving force behind the revitalizing development of rural territories and an opportunity for a critical reconsideration of the ecological and social implications linked to food consumption patterns in urban areas, in line with the inspiring principles of SDGs 3 and 12. In fact, the region in which the company operates has only recently and unknowingly assimilated the logic of mass food supply, promoted by a belated diffusion of large-scale retail trade compared to the rest of Italy (1990s), inducing supply needs that are not justified by the rhythms and lifestyles of the residents.

The case brings out the importance of a more structured, professional, and economically efficient organization of the distribution underlying the processes of food citizenship, a segment often overlooked in the analyses and studies on the same. This is entrusted to the self-organization capacity of food citizens based on their strong motivation, which could also prove to be the main limiting factor for the greater diffusion of more conscious and sustainable food practices.

#### 3.3.5. Food Governmentality Profile

OltreBIO shows how a regional food system could be organized, proposing an interconnected network of producers, processors, and consumers, within which it mediates, facilitates, and promotes synergistic and (re-)generative relationships between the various actors. In this third case, the market mechanisms appear more relevant, considering that the ethical dimension of food takes on a monetary value, the attribution of which is granted to the producers and not to the distribution. Instead, in the neo-liberal models, this takes advantage of the negotiating asymmetries towards both suppliers and consumers by concretely generating and distributing value for companies and for the communities in which they are inserted. The production and consumption practices promoted by OltreBIO have an intrinsic regulatory value in the relationship between city and countryside or, more broadly, between center and periphery, reaffirming the benefits of reciprocity, including those connected to the health and wellness of local communities and the ecosystem services guaranteed to territories, as well as new ways to achieve the re-activation of the regional economy.

#### 4. Discussion

The analysis of the cases and contexts briefly outlined here shows the important commitment of these cooperatives and companies to the present processes of changes and transition in the agricultural sectors regarding the production of sustainable food based on ecological concerns and biodiversity conservation. Thus, the observed stakeholders are committed to using agroecology and organic farming to maintain local territories and communities' wellness, but also copying economic circularity and food citizenship. It is important to consider that, among the concerns that characterize the attitude of these companies, there are also behaviors inspired by a greater democracy and inclusion of workers of migrant origin, respect, and the will to subvert the historical relationships of domination and force that have often characterized the agricultural sector, as observed in the first case. Moreover, the concerns about organic farming and agroecology, observed in the other two cases, often correspond to an even greater respect and attention to all other living organisms (animals and plants), which often leads to production choices inspired by post-human concerns, although these were not explicitly or rhetorically expressed by the actors interviewed.

The frictions between food citizenship and governmentality that would seem to emerge from the case studies result in a heterogeneous set of practices and food productions in different consumption regimes, progressively transforming consumers (objects of power) into food citizens (subjects of power) through their increasing recovery of margins of food sovereignty with respect to the overwhelming pressure of conventional systems, especially in remote and disadvantaged areas.

The three analyzed cases, and the communities of food citizens underlying them, can therefore be placed in a gradient of food governmentality defined by declining the four typologies proposed by Jhagroe [101], as indicated below:

- Territorial food governmentality: based on the systemic food–territory connections underlying the communities' traditions of food consumption/production;
- Ethical food governmentality: based on the sharing of social values and ethical norms;
- Regulatory food governmentality: based on legal practices and regulations;
- Neoliberal food governmentality: based on the commodification of food underlying the individualistic behaviors typical of competitive markets.

In Table 1, a comparison of the observed cases clearly brings out the differences between them, which are mostly attributable to the greater centrality of social values and the radical application of ethical norms in case 1 compared to cases 2 and 3, which instead seem more disposed to accept some compromise with the commodification imposed by the market, moving towards forms of territorial and normative governmentality, respectively.

**Table 1.** Food governmentality.

Food Governmentality	Case 1	Case 2	Case 3	Food Conventional Market
Territorial	***	*****	***	*
Ethical	*****	***	*****	*
Regulatory	*	***	*****	***
Neoliberal	*	**	**	*****

\* not at all; \*\* not much; \*\*\* quite; \*\*\*\* much; \*\*\*\*\* totally. Source: Authors' elaboration.

The standardization of food and the progressive growth of the competition to rural companies on the market have progressively shifted the attention of the latter from the merely technological aspects of production to strategies of commercial communication. This shift aims to condition the consumer's purchasing decisions, assuming that they were exclusively based on the application of the hedonistic principle of economic theory. The examined cases instead reveal the existence of different practices [112] under-

lying a complex combination of individual actions of a reflexive nature [113,114] of social relationships [47,115] and forms of self-regulation [116], which can be traced back to the ethics of food choices, which are particularly evident in case 1. The promoters of Griot Farm, in fact, do not address only the market and that segment of (elitist) demand that seeks “clean and fair” food but use food as a tool to sensitize ordinary people to the ethical values of which the company itself is a witness and bearer, emphasizing the value and political power of food choices, typical of the concept of food citizenship [117].

Case 2, while showing greater attention to the ecological issues underlying food production [118], testified by the ‘militant’ practice of organic agriculture, which takes the form of the more recent and highly symbolic apiary of communities, presents a food governmentality that is more oriented towards the territory and engaged in the regeneration of small communities in inland areas. The main aim is the recovery and enhancement of the intangible cultural heritage regarding agricultural biodiversity and traditional food-processing practices [119–121], whose economic sustainability can only be ensured by participation in various forms of alternative food networks [122]. The market for organic products, in fact, is not sustainable or ethical as such [123], considering that retailers, by selectively appropriating consumer demand, tend to build new definitions of food quality that respond to their own interests [124], even conventionalizing organic products [125], which correspond to the logics of minimum efficient scale and assessments of competitiveness by the producers. As observed in case 2, these are difficult to escape. The implications for the more fragile rural territories to which it belongs are important, considering that the relevant economic context is made up of small agricultural enterprises that are poorly structured and often linked to small artisan processing workshops [126]. The latter are practically devoid of negotiating power over distribution and dependent on local demand, which is continuously declining due to depopulation.

Case 3 tries to combine these critical issues by relating the enterprises (agricultural or artisanal) of the most remote areas of rural Molise with urban demand in order to stimulate consumption practices that are attributable to food citizenship [127]. By selecting its assortments on the basis of the product’s compliance with the organic regulations, the third case denotes a purely regulatory approach, with a food governmentality based mainly on regulatory constraints, substantiated in the choice to distribute exclusively certified organic products. More specifically, the adoption of this policy does not allow case 3 to be completely indifferent to neo-liberal food governmentality, as the company is forced to deal with subtle practices of the commodification of organic products, albeit in the narrowest segment of e-commerce, from which it defends itself by communicating the ethical implications of its suppliers’ practices and weaving networks between them and between them and consumers, aiming to establish participatory research projects and/or co-production practices [128,129].

## 5. Conclusions: More-than-Sustainable Streams for Ever-Faster Transitions

Evidently, the critical consideration of the discourses that have developed in the last 30 years around sustainability and, more recently, around the green transition and the SDGs translates into counter-narratives from these alternative worlds/the means of agriculture underlying the three case studies. What emerges, even from this small sample focused on organic agrifood companies in the small region of Molise, is an attention to individual stories, a personalization of food production that is also connected to a personalization and tailoring of food ad personam, and a strengthening of networks and solidarity between producers, processors, distributors, and consumers (especially in cases 2 e 3) that no longer puts one in constant tension and conflict with others, but thinks of food as a “total social fact”. This enables the creation of networks and conveys collective changes through widespread behaviors (practiced and, above all, expected in case 1). A new idea of ‘food citizenship’ arises, which implies the empowerment of manufacturing companies (as observed in case 2), and the stronger perception of citizens’ ability to decide on their own (solicited in case 3), their companions, and their environment’s food and health, as well as

to envision and ensure what they leave behind to their children (emphasized above all in case 1).

Among the anthropological concerns that emerged from these stories and cases, despite their limited extension and number, there is a fundamental issue of applied anthropology: communities benefiting from regeneration interventions and policies that are more or less imposed by local, national, and supranational levels of development actions, are often unable to adhere to and consolidate the behaviors necessary to provide continuity to the undertaken actions if they have not been involved in decision-making processes from the outset. This is evident, for example, when observing the practices of social innovation that were experimented with in the last 20 years by the local community of case 2. Communities and individuals often do not understand the intrinsic logic of development actions; they do not ‘feel’, one might say, what institutional policies try to build and produce regarding their lives and habitats, their quality of life and well-being, other living beings, and the landscape and environment in which they are immersed. In this case, which is common in rural Italian territories, multiscale policies produce a sort of sterilized, distant governmentality, which is unable to trigger new collective narratives of the common good, however rational they are in terms of the conventional food market on which they remain inexorably dependent. This implies the failure and consequent distrust and abandonment of the same policies by the local populations.

Sustainable development narratives increasingly refer to a pact, which is at the very heart of every sociocultural study, because it dances around the always very delicate and crucial issue of the relationship between the individual and the community, between “ecological minds” [128] and local governance of development, and between ontologies and practices, constantly questioning the potential of subjectivity and individual agency to trigger collective changes and proactively influence policies.

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