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Review

Social and Solidarity Economy and Social Innovation in the Agri-Food Sector: A Conceptual Synthesis of Contributions to Sustainable Local and Rural Development

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Abstract

The dominant agri-food system's well-documented failures—biodiversity loss, deepening rural inequalities, and the erosion of small-scale farming livelihoods—have elevated SSE initiatives and social innovation in the agri-food sector and bioeconomy from a niche policy concern to a structural priority. This paper examines how SSE arrangements drive meaningful transformation in agri-food chains while advancing sustainable development at local and regional scales. Through a narrative review of interdisciplinary peer-reviewed literature and key institutional sources, the paper synthesizes evidence that SSE initiatives generate transformation through three interconnected mechanisms: (a) the reconfiguration of governance structures; (b) the deepening of producer–consumer relationships through spatial proximity and relational transparency; and (c) the more equitable redistribution of value across agri-food territories. These findings suggest that place-based SSE models occupy a central—rather than peripheral—role in sustainability transitions and local development. The paper presents a structured analytical framework linking SSE practices to agri-food chain transformation and develops nine concrete policy implications for scaling and sustaining SSE innovations through coordinated collaboration among public, private, and social economy stakeholders. The findings contribute to a sharper understanding of the conditions under which SSE-driven models can foster sustainable, socially inclusive, and community-oriented agri-food systems and of why the solidarity dimension, rather than organisational form alone, is the decisive criterion for identifying genuinely transformative initiatives.

Keywords: social and solidarity economy; social innovation; local and rural development; agri-food systems

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Academic Editor: Rocco Frondizi

Received: 15 February 2026
Revised: 5 April 2026
Accepted: 7 April 2026
Published: 13 April 2026

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1. Introduction

The adverse environmental, social, economic, and cultural impacts of dominant agri-food production, processing, and distribution systems are now widely recognised. These impacts—including biodiversity loss, greenhouse gas emissions, resource depletion, and deepening social inequalities—signal the urgent need for alternative, socially innovative approaches. Within the broader context of environmental crisis and complex socioeconomic pressures, the transition towards sustainable and equitable agri-food systems has become a matter of structural necessity rather than mere policy preference.

Over recent decades, the structural flaws of the global food economy have attracted sustained scholarly and policy debate and have mobilised social movements advocating for systemic change. These movements propose solutions and advocate for radical transformations in the production and distribution of agri-food products and bio-based resources. Such solutions often draw on the framework of Social and Solidarity Economy (SSE), which challenges the dominant development model and emphasises community-driven, cooperative, and ethical approaches. The concept of bioeconomy is equally central to this discussion. The bioeconomy concept enters the analysis in connection with social innovation, referring to an economic model that uses renewable biological resources—plants, animals, and microorganisms—to produce food, materials, and energy. It integrates sectors such as agriculture, forestry, and biotechnology to replace fossil-based systems, with the aim of achieving sustainable development, reducing environmental impact, and effecting a transition to a circular economy (D'Amato et al. 2017).

Against this backdrop, the article examines how SSE initiatives in the agri-food chain function as mechanisms of social innovation that foster local, regional, and rural development. The concepts of Degrowth and Buen Vivir are used as complementary theoretical lenses, providing insight into why local-scale initiatives can generate broader social, ecological, and economic transformations (Gudynas 2011). The article proceeds by first clarifying the core characteristics and definitions of SSE, then framing social innovation as a lens for understanding institutional and relational change, before discussing illustrative approaches—such as short food supply chains, Fair Trade, cooperatives, community-supported agriculture, and alternative food networks—highlighting their development potential and governance implications. This discussion addresses ongoing debates in the literature regarding whether these initiatives can truly scale without losing their social and ecological objectives (Defourny 2001; Moulaert and Mehmood 2010).

To guide the analysis, the article addresses three interrelated research questions: (i) How is SSE conceptualised in relation to agri-food chains, including organisational forms, values, and coordination across production, exchange, and consumption? (ii) In what sense can SSE initiatives be understood as social innovations—that is, as changes in practices, relationships, and institutional arrangements that respond to social needs while reconfiguring value creation and governance? (iii) What implications arise for local and regional development and agri-food governance, including the roles of public authorities, SSE actors, and private stakeholders in enabling, scaling, or sustaining these initiatives?

This study advances understanding of how local-scale SSE initiatives drive social innovation in agri-food systems, demonstrating the potential for sustainable, socially inclusive, and community-oriented development. The findings suggest that while these initiatives offer transformative potential, effective collaboration and robust governance are critical to securing their long-term impact.

2. Theoretical Framework

2.1. Social and Solidarity Economy: Characteristics, Concepts, and Definitions

Globalisation and recurrent economic crises have fostered an alternative economy embedded within everyday activities, household structures, and environmental contexts—precisely the spaces where the private and public sectors fail to respond adequately, owing to indifferent or narrowly self-interested approaches to economic activity (Block and Somers 2014). This alternative economy, often invisible within conventional economic frameworks (Gibson-Graham et al. 2013), adheres to a performative conception, whereby "identity remains perpetually under construction, constituted partly through quotidian and discontinuous practices that create apertures for (re)invention and 'deviation'" (Kavoulakos and Gritzas 2015). It represents an economy in continuous interaction with the environ-

ment and temporality, which, whilst susceptible to influence from other economic forms, maintains its presence and operates through diverse forms of initiative across all sectors of the economic cycle (production–exchange–consumption). This model functions with considerable autonomy from the state, guided by objectives and principles predicated on social welfare, cooperation, and solidarity (Utting et al. 2014), that is, the social and solidarity economy (SSE).

Broadly conceived, the social economy constitutes the economic sector that bridges the gap between the public and private sectors, serving as a "common ground" of economic activities situated between state and market. It typically emerges in contexts where these traditional sectors are unable or unwilling to pursue economic activity with social objectives. It should be noted that there is no single, internationally recognised definition of the social economy, and terminology varies across contexts. Related concepts include the "non-profit sector," the "third system," the "third sector," and the "solidarity economy." The social economy encompasses all economic activities conducted by associations, cooperatives, mutual insurance societies, foundations, voluntary and non-profit organisations, social enterprises, and analogous entities. These organisations operate according to principles of justice, independence, democracy, free participation, solidarity, equality, and sustainability, prioritising the welfare of members and communities over private profit. Their activities aim to provide social, economic, and supportive services in areas such as employment, entrepreneurship, local development, social inclusion, health, environmental protection, and community welfare (Amin et al. 2002; Defourny 2001; Defourny and Develtere 2009; European Commission 2013; Georgmas and Kostas 2018; Kostas 2022; Laville et al. 2007; Nyssens 2006). The scale of this sector is considerable: as of 2023, the OECD estimated that approximately 2.8 million SSE entities were operating across EU member states alone, collectively employing over 13.6 million people—a figure that underscores the structural rather than marginal significance of SSE within contemporary mixed economies (OECD 2023).

More specifically, SSE is grounded in the renegotiation of the economy through ethical and social frameworks, democratically designed from within and from the bottom up through direct citizen participation, with horizontal decision-making processes, aiming to address and resolve problems at both local and governance levels (Kioupkiolis 2014). SSE initiatives are frequently constituted by citizen groups that assume responsibility for needs neglected or inadequately addressed by the public sector, including the direct provision of goods and services of broad community interest. This efficacy stems from SSE's capacity for structural transformation, which does not rely on hierarchically imposed guidelines grounded in private-interest assumptions but rather in existing practices of workers, producers, consumers, and communities worldwide (Wright 2010). At the United Nations Conference on Sustainable Development, more than 370 social organisations characterised SSE as "a social movement which, together with others, contributes to the establishment of genuine economic and political democracy" (Dinerstein 2014). A clear distinction should be drawn between the broader "social economy" and the more specific "social and solidarity economy." The social economy, in its wider sense, covers non-profit and cooperative organisational forms that operate between state and market. The word "solidarity" in SSE adds a distinct political and relational dimension; it signals a commitment to making economic life more democratic, to challenging asymmetries of power, and to connecting economic activity with social movement goals (Utting et al. 2014; Dinerstein 2014). In the agri-food context, this distinction matters in practice. It is what separates a commercially successful agricultural cooperative from a community-supported agriculture scheme that shares risk between producers and consumers, or a Fair Trade network that builds norms of equity and reciprocity into its trading relationships. The solidarity dimension is therefore the decisive criterion for identifying which agri-food initiatives genuinely belong within the

SSE family and, by extension, which can be considered potentially transformative social innovations, rather than simply more efficient forms of private economic organisation.

In recent years, the economic crisis drove a notable expansion of SSE activity. Those most severely affected—predominantly lower-income social strata—responded by creating new SSE initiatives, spurring the emergence of multiple bottom-up initiatives, such as social cooperative enterprises, social groceries, time banks, markets without intermediaries, self-managed urban fields, collective kitchens, eco-communities, self-managed cultural spaces, among others (Kavoulakos and Gritzas 2015).

Although these categories may overlap in practice, they are conceptually distinct and are used here as concrete examples through which SSE principles find expression and take on a recognisable form as social innovation at the local level. For the purposes of this paper, the following working definitions apply: (a) Short Food Supply Chains (SFSCs): arrangements that reduce the number of intermediaries between production and consumption, increasing transparency and the closeness of the producer–consumer relationship (Jarzębowski et al. 2020). (b) Alternative Food Networks (AFNs): relational networks that re-embed food provisioning in social and ecological values through collective organisation collective organisation (e.g., consumer cooperatives, solidarity markets) and participatory governance (Corsi et al. 2018). (c) Fair Trade: a standards-based trading system (often certification-backed) designed to improve terms of trade for producers and to fund social and environmental goals (Podhorsky 2015). (d) Community-Supported Agriculture (CSA) and consumer cooperatives: organisational forms that often operate within SFSCs/AFNs by building in risk-sharing, pre-financing and democratic ownership (Egli et al. 2023). (e) "No-middlemen" and solidarity markets: locally organised direct-selling arrangements that typically fall under SFSCs and, when value-driven and collectively governed, under AFNs as well (Papacharalampous 2021).

2.2. Social Innovation: Alternative Initiatives, Degrowth, Buen Vivir, Local Development and the Role of SSE

Social innovation is commonly understood as the development and diffusion of new social practices, including novel forms of cooperation, governance, and resource allocation, that address social needs while reshaping social relations and power configurations (Murray et al. 2010). Unlike technological innovation, its core value lies not merely in "newness" but in social outcomes (e.g., inclusion, empowerment, reciprocity) and in the institutional reconfiguration that enables these outcomes to endure (Cajaiba-Santana 2014). Within the social and solidarity economy, social innovation often materialises through bottom-up, participatory arrangements such as co-production, democratic decision-making, and hybrid forms of exchange that reconnect producers and consumers around shared ethical and ecological commitments. These initiatives carry transformative potential when they do more than deliver niche alternatives; they challenge dominant rules of the agri-food system, generate learning across networks, and create replicable organisational templates that support local and regional development (Haxeltine et al. 2016; Westley et al. 2014; Lyon et al. 2025). From this perspective, SSE initiatives in SFSCs, AFNs, and related arrangements can function as vehicles of transformative social innovation. The distinction between incremental and transformative social innovation is central to the discussion of this paper. Incremental social innovations improve the functioning of existing systems without altering their underlying logic—a more efficient cooperative purchasing scheme, for example, or a food labelling programme that enhances consumer information. Transformative social innovations, by contrast, alter the rules, roles, and relationships that structure the system itself (Haxeltine et al. 2016). They do not merely respond to the failures of industrial agri-food models; they actively contest the normative foundations of those models by establishing alternative principles of value creation, governance, and distribution. The

argument developed here is that SSE agri-food initiatives carry transformative rather than merely corrective potential when three conditions hold: (a) decision-making over production, pricing, and distribution is genuinely collective, shaped by the people involved rather than by market forces alone; (b) value distribution along the agri-food chain shifts so that a greater share accrues to small producers and local communities; and (c) the experience of one initiative travels to others, generating replicable models that different communities and territories can take up and adapt (Westley et al. 2014; Rossi et al. 2021). Community-supported agriculture illustrates this clearly. By pre-financing producers, sharing the harvest risk between farmers and consumers, and grounding food provisioning in relationships of trust and mutual accountability, CSA schemes do more than make food supply marginally fairer; they restructure the relationship between producer and consumer at its root. More recently, the emergence of cooperative digital platforms for CSA has opened new questions about whether solidarity economy principles can be preserved—and potentially extended—through digital infrastructure. Early evidence suggests that when platform governance is structured cooperatively—with farmers holding genuine decision-making power and a collective stake in the platform's economic model, digital CSA can reinforce rather than undermine the relational logic of solidarity food networks (De Cler 2026).

Recent debates on agri-food sustainability increasingly converge on the view that meaningful change requires more than incremental technical fixes; it demands reconfigurations in governance, value creation, and social relations across the food chain. In this context, social innovation (SI) has gained traction as an analytical and practical lens for understanding transformations that are simultaneously social, institutional, and place-based. Scholars working in this tradition treat SI as a process that illuminates food system transformation not as a surface-level adjustment of policy instruments or consumer behaviour, but as a deeper reconfiguration of underlying structures, power relations, values, and governance arrangements. A central claim in the SI literature is that local innovations matter not only because they are smaller in scale or closer to affected communities, but because they can create protected spaces for experimentation with new norms and governance arrangements; when effectively institutionalised, these spaces can support broader policy restructuring and the development of more robust, sustainable governance frameworks (Grimm et al. 2013). The relationship between SSE-driven social innovation and the bioeconomy deserves closer analytical attention than it typically receives in the policy literature. SSE agri-food initiatives do not simply operate within a bioeconomy context; they give concrete institutional form to bioeconomic principles through the way they are organised and governed. Short food supply chains reduce the dependence of food distribution on fossil energy; community-supported agriculture reconnects waste streams, soil fertility, and consumption within a single territorial unit, thereby closing local biological cycles; and agroecologically oriented cooperatives treat biodiversity and traditional biological knowledge as productive resources rather than incidental features of production. From this perspective, SSE initiatives function as local-scale bioeconomy actors, embedding the circular use of biological resources within governance structures that are democratically run (D'Amato et al. 2017).

This characterisation requires a precise qualification, however. SSE-driven bioeconomy is distinguished from industrial bio-based production, which Vivien et al. (2019) have critically described as the "hijacking" of the bioeconomy by large-scale, extractive, fossil-substitution logic, on three grounds: it operates at a local rather than industrial scale; it is governed democratically, meaning that decisions about resource use are made by and accountable to the communities affected; and it is oriented towards sufficiency and regeneration rather than towards volume-driven surplus extraction. It is precisely these features, democratic governance, local scale, and non-extractive resource logic, that give SSE

agri-food initiatives their distinctive claim to be genuine bioeconomy actors. Recognising this distinction strengthens the paper's central analytical argument while protecting it from the critique that SSE is simply being absorbed into a mainstream green-economy narrative (Stone et al. 2025).

The potential of social enterprises and SSE vehicles more broadly, to promote social innovation in the context of sustainable local development through alternative agri-food initiatives, could lead to the re-organisation of food production chains and shift them towards more ecologically sustainable and ethical principles of production (Guarascio 2022). It has also been argued that alternative economic models, such as SSE, can effectively support the shift in food supply systems towards sustainable food chain configurations and promote socially balanced innovations in the whole agricultural sector (Rodrigues Martins et al. 2024).

Alternative initiatives represent and promote collaborative and democratic approaches that enhance processes ensuring respect for the environment, culture, and society while placing social needs at the very centre of economic activity. These initiatives manifest through social economy entities, social enterprises, agri-food networks, agricultural cooperatives, social/local currencies, time banks, community kitchens, and other such structures. These initiatives seek to establish alternative economic practices that depart from the classical market model and challenge the growth-centred logic of mainstream capitalist development (Cattani 2009). Furthermore, emerging alternative approaches seeking radical transformation include Degrowth from Europe and Buen Vivir from Latin America. These alternative lifestyle approaches result from humanity's protracted quest for equality, justice, democracy, reciprocity, and solidarity, in harmony with the environment, emphasising local development as the primary spatial unit for systemic change (Latouche 2009).

Degrowth rejects the primacy of economic growth as the universal solution to social and environmental problems. It prioritises well-being over growth imperatives and envisions a managed reduction in surplus and its utilisation in a prosperous society where people devise sustainable methods of distribution that contribute to community reconstruction and collective benefit (Kallis 2015). Degrowth theory strategically targets the local level, identifying it as the optimal scale for initiating transformative change. In local contexts, alternative bottom-up approaches can be implemented through community-driven activities to promote spatial development via alternative economic models that prioritise social welfare and environmental sustainability. The local scale is conceptualised as the fundamental spatial unit of an ecologically compatible society, wherein small spatial entities (e.g., villages, communities) can initiate the transition towards a degrowth society (Mocca 2020). Guerrero Lara et al. (2023) have positioned the concept of degrowth in close relation to agri-food systems, identifying multiple factors that support research on alternative agri-food practices combined with the implementation of parallel social innovation practices to upscale local initiatives as alternatives to industrial agri-food models. More specifically, degrowth is positioned "in close relation" to agri-food systems in the sense that industrial food production characterises the growth-dependent logic that degrowth critiques. Its reliance on fossil inputs, global supply chains, and market concentration directly conflicts with principles of ecological sufficiency and social equity. The "social innovation practices" referenced include community-based food governance, participatory agroecological transitions, solidarity purchasing groups, and other locally embedded arrangements, through which communities can reorganise food provisioning outside or alongside market norms, all of which resonate closely with the SSE initiatives examined throughout this paper.

Buen Vivir is an open, evolving framework that reframes the good life around harmony with nature, cultural diversity, and the material, spiritual, and social dimensions of human existence—in contrast to the logic of perpetual wealth accumulation (Kothari et al. 2014).

It focuses on and serves local and regional needs in harmonious coexistence with the environment (Gudynas 2011).

Latouche (2009) emphasises that the local does not function as an isolated microcosm, but rather as a nexus within a network of horizontal ethical and solidarity relationships, oriented to democratic practices that operate in defence of the common good. Re-localisation would thus redistribute production, supply, and services locally, while decentralising governance to bring citizens closer to decisions over their economic, social, and cultural lives (Mocca 2020). Close cooperation and information-sharing among economic agents, local initiatives, and industrial actors—centred on sustainable innovation pathways—strengthens social capital, which in turn supports innovation dynamics and self-reinforcing development mechanisms (Thompson 2018).

In parallel, the Social and Solidarity Economy (SSE) works to embed values in local communities grounded in principles of equality, reciprocity, cooperation, trust, and democracy. Its initiatives aim, among others, to address community needs and support inclusive societies, thereby strengthening sustainable local development (Lee 2019). Many SSE ventures, which originate from local societies, possess the capacity to identify social needs, lead to alternative solutions within the socioeconomic framework, enhance intervention from the public sector, and orient themselves towards collective ownership and surplus redistribution to economically vulnerable groups and communities (Reed 2015).

An illustrative example of the synergy between SSE and the agricultural sector at the local dimension is agricultural cooperatives, which generate economies of scale that enhance the income potential of small-scale farmers, rendering agriculture economically viable even in regions with high production costs (e.g., mountainous areas or regions engaged in small-scale cultivation). A principal advantage of this synergy is the achievement of reduced production costs at the local level and the enhanced capacity of small producers to negotiate prices that are fair both for themselves and consumers, who in turn strengthen the local market. Consequently, consumers gain access to local, healthier food products while simultaneously connecting with a more responsible lifestyle in direct interaction with local producers (Reed 2015).

2.3. Innovative Approaches to the Agri-Food Chain and Highlighting the Potential of SSE

The global agri-food system, often driven by vertically integrated large corporations, has contributed significantly to higher levels of food production and productivity throughout the food supply chain. These changes are influenced not only by technological advancements but also by demographic and socioeconomic factors, shaping future labour markets and job creation in sustainable sectors (Staboulis and Kostas 2020). Nevertheless, it frequently fails to address the nutritional needs of a growing global population and can generate conflicts among agriculture, environment, producers, and consumers. In response, new agri-food economies are emerging around novel agricultural practices and food distribution systems. Consequently, new collaborative workspaces are being established, offering an alternative to the insecurity faced by individual farmers, founded on values such as cooperation, sustainability, and collective action—that is, spaces with the potential to foster degrowth-oriented rural reorganisation (Avdikos and Pettas 2021). More generally, bottom-up social innovation synergies are emerging from within territorial communities, with objectives spanning social, economic, and environmental sustainability and oriented towards placing ecological integrity at the centre of economic activity (Calzada 2013). These initiatives focus on redefining agri-food systems through food supply chains grounded in social and ethical values (Murray et al. 2010).

Globalisation and the industrialised agri-food models have fundamentally altered the relationship with environmental resources, adversely affecting soil fertility, climate

stability, water resources, biodiversity, and ecosystem integrity, with direct consequences for human health. Consequently, the prevailing paradigm has demonstrated systematic inefficiency in resource utilisation, generating harmful waste products; meanwhile, agricultural intensification—through industrialisation and specialisation—has steadily eroded knowledge and autonomous decision-making among agricultural producers, deepening their economic vulnerability. The international scientific community, alongside numerous academic and research institutions, has directed considerable attention towards these issues and expressed profound concern, emphasising the imperative for an urgent transition towards environmentally and socially sustainable agri-food systems.

In recent years, the need for innovative agricultural and food policies capable of adopting a systemic perspective, particularly for redesigning food relations at the local scale, has been treated as increasingly critical (Rossi et al. 2021). Traditional agricultural techniques embody a more ecological and place-sensitive methodology, emphasizing locality and seasonality, whereas contemporary approaches tend to prioritise innovation-driven productivity gains (Kamakaula and Uria 2024). Integrating these two approaches through the lens of social innovation and SSE principles (Papaioannou et al. 2024) is argued to offer a pathway towards balanced, sustainable, and efficient agricultural ecosystems, providing an ambitious yet realistic vision for the systemic transformation of agricultural practices (Zhang 2024).

The local scale can be a key domain for developing new agri-food chain configurations that enable communities, local administrations, and economic stakeholders to collaborate in food policy formulation through balanced solidarity relationships. Social capital may also be more visible in smaller-scale settings, where bonding ties can be stronger and where trust and cooperation (often fostered by shared objectives and common challenges) support collective problem-solving in the primary sector (Koutsou et al. 2014). Through the integration of available resources and recalibration of priorities, locally tailored food policies can be designed around sustainability parameters, reconnecting food systems with local societies and enabling new agri-food configurations capable of addressing persistent obstacles and challenges (Rossi et al. 2021).

A prominent example of innovative approaches in the agri-food chain is short food supply chains (e.g., farmer groups, direct farm sales), which support provisioning grounded in social and ethical values. These chains are organised around social and logistical infrastructures and provide locally sourced food characterised by higher perceived quality and stronger environmental and social responsibility, contrasting with foods produced and distributed through conventional globalised food chains. Within short supply chains, the concepts of "locality" and "identity" are paramount for product differentiation. Moreover, short food supply chains are distinguished by transparency, which contributes to the establishment of stronger bonds between producer and consumer, and emphasise values embedded within product production (e.g., product provenance narratives, high-quality agricultural products, ethical and social values, environmental sustainability, equitable price distribution between producer and consumer) (Allen et al. 2003).

Fair Trade is a further innovative arrangement that supports small-scale producers who frequently lack the bargaining capacity to negotiate equitable relationships with buyers and distributors. It represents an alternative trading paradigm built on solidarity, consumer engagement, and other SSE mechanisms. Solidarity between small producers and SSE enterprises/initiatives can be expressed through several mechanisms (Crowell and Reed 2009): (a) collective decision-making regarding trade conditions rather than reliance on market power; (b) transparency and knowledge exchange; (c) more equitable value distribution, ensuring that purchase prices cover full production costs; (d) long-term trading relationships; and (e) support for local development infrastructure. Fair Trade

can thereby contribute to the consolidation of local communities through the engagement of local producers who operate within SSE principles and values. Such inter-stakeholder linkages depend on democratic decision-making, reciprocity, cooperation, and an engaged, well-informed consumer base to create the conditions under which these initiatives can take root and grow (Reed 2015).

Another example of innovative approaches within the agri-food chain is Alternative Food Networks (AFNs), including farmer groups, consumer cooperatives, and solidarity markets. AFNs generate innovative linkages between urban and rural areas (Partalidou and Anthopoulou 2019), incorporate alternatives to the standardised food production and distribution system, and support the ethical dimension of food, the environment, and the transparency of producer–consumer relationships (Sonnino and Marsden 2006). The organizational logic of sharing and collective resource use within AFNs has been studied in specific territorial contexts, with evidence that cooperative governance structures can strengthen producer agency and deepen producer–consumer solidarity within local agri-food systems (Miralles et al. 2017).

Additional innovative approaches to the agri-food chain, based on SSE principles that support local development and strengthen the foundations for a more equitable and ethical approach to the primary sector, include farmer groups (e.g., "markets without intermediaries"), food cooperatives and other forms of "small-scale organised distribution," alongside numerous other innovative initiatives aimed at local development and guided by principles of reciprocity and social and environmental justice (Cacciari 2016).

The internal and grassroots pursuit of novel food production and distribution methodologies, guided by SSE principles, represents an active form of social mobilisation that drives reorganisation towards innovative approaches and practices. These initiatives demonstrate capacity to construct broader systemic transformation (Haxeltine et al. 2013), grounded in their capacity to articulate wider social, economic, cultural, and institutional needs, thereby supporting localised rural development (Rossi et al. 2021). These emerging agri-food chain methodologies rest on (a) recognition of food's multidimensional value (nutritional, ethical, social, ecological, cultural); (b) reconfigured paradigms of production and consumption; (c) community and social relationships that emerge therefrom; (d) revaluation of production systems; (e) place-specificity, cultivation practices, and quality attributes of small-scale local production; (f) agriculture's multifunctional role; and (g) awareness and valorisation of food culture. Together, these orientations support alternative solutions oriented to the re-socialisation and re-localisation of agri-food chain systems and methodologies (Kneafsey et al. 2013). In this sense, SSE-based alternatives can be considered innovative insofar as they respond to needs unaddressed by dominant paradigms, support the inclusion of vulnerable populations, and promote social cohesion and collective benefit through transformative reconfigurations of food systems and practices (Rossi et al. 2021).

3. Methodology

This paper conducts a conceptual synthesis by means of a narrative review of interdisciplinary literature on the Social and Solidarity Economy (SSE), social innovation, and alternative agri-food systems. It integrates key theoretical and policy-informed contributions to clarify how concepts such as SSE, social innovation, short food supply chains, and alternative food networks are employed, while mapping pathways through which these initiatives can support local, regional, and rural development. Literature was sourced from the following academic databases: (a) Scopus, (b) Web of Science, (c) Google Scholar, and (d) EconLit, covering publications from 2001 to 2026. In addition, key reports and policy documents from institutional sources, including the European Commission and the United Nations Research Institute for Social Development (UNRISD), were incorporated where

they provided foundational definitional or governance frameworks. The principal search terms and Boolean combinations used were as follows: ("Social and Solidarity Economy" OR "solidarity economy") AND ("agri-food systems" OR "food supply chains" OR "alternative food networks"); "social innovation" AND "local development" AND ("food" OR "agriculture"); "degrowth" AND "agri-food"; "Buen Vivir" AND "food sovereignty"; and "community-supported agriculture" AND "social innovation." Sources were included if they (a) engaged directly with SSE, social economy, or solidarity economy in relation to food systems or rural development; (b) offered theoretical or conceptual contributions to social innovation in agri-food contexts; or (c) provided empirical illustrations of SSE-oriented agri-food initiatives at local or regional scales. Sources were excluded if they focused exclusively on conventional agri-food economics without reference to social, solidarity, or alternative dimensions, or if they were not available in English, French, or Greek.

A total of 64 sources were assembled and reviewed to construct the interpretive framework, comprising 34 peer-reviewed journal articles, 10 book chapters, 10 monographs, and 10 institutional documents (policy reports, working papers, and conference proceedings), covering the period 2001–2026. While an initial broader search identified a larger pool of candidate sources, the purposive selection retained here reflects the strict application of the inclusion and exclusion criteria described above. Excluded sources were those addressing conventional agri-food economics without reference to solidarity, cooperative, or alternative food system dimensions, or which were superseded by more recent and methodologically superior treatments of the same themes. Two members of the research team independently reviewed titles and abstracts against these criteria during the initial screening phase; discrepancies were resolved through discussion and consensus. The selection prioritised theoretical depth, geographic diversity, and recency, with particular weight given to sources published after 2015, while also including foundational texts essential to the conceptual architecture of the paper.

The review adopts an illustrative rather than exhaustive approach, drawing on selected case examples to demonstrate how SSE-oriented innovations can reconfigure governance arrangements, redistribute value, strengthen producer–consumer relations, and promote inclusive, sustainable development within diverse territorial contexts.

4. Findings from the Conceptual Synthesis: SSE Practices and Agri-Food Chain Transformation

The conceptual synthesis presented in this paper makes it possible to identify several recurring themes that connect SSE practices to the transformation of agri-food chains. These themes emerge from the reviewed literature and together represent the paper's substantive contribution: (a) how SSE reshapes governance and redistributes value; (b) how it responds to specific social and ecological pressures within agri-food systems; (c) how it manages the organisational tensions that arise from collective action; and (d) what the relationship between SSE and broader normative frameworks such as Degrowth and Buen Vivir implies for sustainability transitions. Combined, these themes constitute the proposed framework connecting SSE practices to agri-food chain transformation.

Theme 1: Governance and Value Redistribution. A central finding of this review is that SSE agri-food initiatives generate specific governance architectures that redistribute value more equitably across the food chain. Agricultural cooperatives enable small producers to achieve collective bargaining power and economies of scale, improving their negotiating position vis-à-vis large buyers and distributors. However, the literature also reveals significant organisational challenges. Cooperatives face persistent collective action problems: free-rider dynamics, heterogeneous member interests, and the costs of democratic decision-making can undermine cohesion and reduce operational efficiency (Rodrigues Martins

et al. 2024). AFNs and SFSCs operate under constant pressure from transaction costs and the competitive advantage enjoyed by highly optimised conventional supply chains. The evidence suggests that these initiatives survive and thrive when they build strong relational capital among members, benefit from supportive institutional environments (e.g., public procurement, cooperative finance), and develop hybrid governance arrangements that balance democratic participation with operational flexibility (Rossi et al. 2021; Haxeltine et al. 2016).

Theme 2: Addressing Social and Ecological Challenges. The social challenges that SSE agri-food initiatives are positioned to address include food insecurity and unequal access to quality nutrition among economically vulnerable populations; the progressive erosion of small-scale farming livelihoods under price and market pressures; the weakening of rural social cohesion due to demographic decline and out-migration; and the marginalisation of small producers from value chains dominated by large retail and processing corporations. The ecological challenges include the degradation of soils, water, and biodiversity resulting from intensive agricultural practices; the high carbon footprint of long-distance food supply chains; the loss of local agrobiodiversity and traditional agricultural knowledge; and the disconnect between food consumption and local ecological cycles. SSE initiatives such as SFSCs, CSAs, and agroecologically oriented cooperatives address these challenges by shortening supply chains (reducing food miles and reconnecting production and consumption ecologically), by supporting ecological farming practices (conserving biodiversity and soil health), and by improving local food access and food literacy (improving health outcomes and strengthening local food cultures). Addressing these challenges concurrently improves local well-being by simultaneously strengthening economic livelihoods, environmental quality, and social cohesion in rural communities (Rossi et al. 2021; Sonnino and Marsden 2006). The social challenges and ecological issues connected to agricultural production systems, including food insecurity, rural poverty, soil degradation, biodiversity loss, and greenhouse gas emissions from intensive farming, are highly aligned with the need to shift towards sustainable development through socially balanced innovation (Tarangioli et al. 2024). These approaches are also advanced within agri-food initiatives that restructure their production logic by adopting innovative and sustainable processes (Figurek and Thrassou 2023). These challenges are not purely technical in nature; they are fundamentally relational. They reflect entrenched power asymmetries within value chains, chronic underinvestment in rural economies, and the systematic externalisation of environmental costs by dominant agri-food actors. SSE initiatives are well positioned to address these challenges precisely because they incorporate social and ecological objectives within their organisational logic rather than treating them as externalities.

Theme 3: Economic Implications of Sustainable Methods. The economic implications of sustainable agricultural methods operated through SSE are multidimensional. In the short term, transition costs to agro-ecological methods or shorter supply chains may exceed those of conventional production. Producers face learning curves, infrastructure investments, and the loss of scale economies enjoyed by industrial actors. However, medium- and long-term outcomes are more favourable: reduced input costs through ecological farming, higher farmgate prices through direct selling and fair pricing mechanisms, improved income stability through CSA pre-financing and long-term Fair Trade relationships, and greater resilience to market volatility through diversified production and local market embeddedness collectively make SSE agri-food models economically viable alternatives for small and medium producers (Reed 2015; Egli et al. 2023). Furthermore, SSE agri-food initiatives generate economic externalities that conventional metrics fail to capture: (a) the strengthening of local food economies, (b) the preservation of ecosystem services, and (c) the accumulation of social capital that supports wider community resilience (Koutsou

et al. 2014; Thompson 2018). Interdisciplinary approaches, as employed in this paper, are therefore necessary to capture the full economic significance of SSE-driven agri-food transformation (Negra et al. 2020).

Theme 4: Degrowth, Buen Vivir, and the Values Behind Transformation. The concepts of Degrowth and Buen Vivir, introduced in Section 2.2, connect more concretely to the SSE initiatives discussed in this paper once their evaluative function is made explicit. Degrowth offers a critical perspective for asking whether specific SSE agri-food models genuinely reduce dependence on growth-driven logic. A CSA model that pre-finances producers, shares the harvest risk, and organises provisioning around sufficiency rather than surplus production reflects this logic in practice. Buen Vivir, for its part, offers a relational and place-rooted criterion for asking whether food provisioning arrangements contribute to a more harmonious relationship between communities and their ecological surroundings. A solidarity purchasing group that sources exclusively from local small producers using traditional seeds and seasonal practices, and that gives both consumers and producers a real say in food decisions, reflects Buen Vivir's emphasis on shared well-being, cultural grounding, and ecological responsibility. These frameworks thus serve as reference points for distinguishing SSE agri-food initiatives that bring about genuine change from those that offer only partial or surface-level improvements.

Taken collectively, the four themes developed above converge on a conditional answer to the scalability question raised in the Introduction. SSE agri-food initiatives can expand without losing their transformative character, but only under specific conditions. These conditions are as follows: (a) that governance remains genuinely collective even as organisational complexity increases, which requires investment in democratic participation capacity rather than simply in operational efficiency; (b) that value redistribution along the food chain is protected by institutional arrangements—public procurement rules, fair contracting frameworks, or cooperative finance instruments—rather than left to market dynamics; and (c) that the social and ecological objectives of an initiative travel with it through replication, which requires dedicated knowledge-sharing infrastructure such as inter-cooperative alliances, regional food policy councils, and living lab networks (Haxeltine et al. 2016; Rossi et al. 2021; Stone et al. 2025). Where these conditions are absent, scaling can and often does dilute the solidarity dimension, transforming a genuinely alternative SSE initiative into a more efficient version of the conventional arrangements it was designed to challenge. The policy implications in Section 5 are therefore not generic recommendations but targeted responses to the specific governance, financial, and knowledge conditions that determine whether SSE agri-food transformation is systemic or superficial.

5. Policy Implications: From Conceptual Synthesis to Actionable Governance

The thematic synthesis in Section 4 provides the basis for a set of concrete policy proposals. These are not offered as general prescriptions but are drawn directly from what the reviewed literature shows about governance mechanisms, social and ecological pressures, economic viability, and the conditions under which SSE agri-food initiatives bring about real rather than superficial change. Each proposal is tied to specific findings discussed in this paper.

Implication 1: Cross-Sector Trust and Governance. Building on the finding (Theme 1) that SSE initiatives thrive under supportive institutional environments, we recommend that public authorities at the local and regional levels develop structured frameworks for cross-sector cooperation between SSE initiatives, public bodies, and private stakeholders. Such frameworks should include formal mechanisms for dialogue, shared governance of local food systems, and preferential access to public procurement for SSE-certified producers

and cooperatives. This approach is expected to reduce the institutional isolation of SSE agri-food actors, lower transaction costs, and enable the scaling of governance innovations documented in AFNs and SFSCs. The expected outcomes include the reactivation of small-scale farms and the (re)integration of marginalised smallholders into viable food supply chains.

Implication 2: Sustainable Agricultural Methods and Short Supply Chains. Drawing on the economic analysis in Theme 3, transition to sustainable agricultural methods (including agro-ecological, organic, and low-input farming) involves upfront costs but generates long-term economic and environmental returns. Policy should therefore provide transition support through grants, subsidised training, and risk-sharing instruments during the conversion period. At the same time, the evidence on SFSCs demonstrates that shortening supply chains improves both farmgate prices and consumer trust. Local and regional authorities should therefore actively support short food supply chain infrastructure, including logistics, cold chain facilities, and local market platforms, while establishing incentive schemes for producer participation in Fair Trade and related certification systems that improve market access for small producers.

Implication 3: Consumer Education and Research Collaboration. The evidence reviewed on AFNs and CSAs highlights that these initiatives succeed in part by fostering informed, engaged consumer communities. Policy should therefore invest in food literacy programmes, school-based food education, and consumer awareness campaigns that explain the social, ecological, and health benefits of locally sourced, chemical-free produce. Simultaneously, structured collaborations between SSE agri-food initiatives and academic and research institutions should be facilitated through research partnerships, living labs, and participatory action research. These collaborations serve a dual purpose: they generate the evidence base needed to improve SSE practices and demonstrate their effectiveness, while also validating local food cultures and traditional agronomic knowledge that conventional research tends to overlook.

Implication 4: Networking CSA and AFN Initiatives. Building on the finding that CSA and AFNs generate complementary social-ecological outcomes when they operate in connected networks (Theme 2), policy should facilitate the networking of these initiatives through regional food policy councils, shared digital platforms, and inter-cooperative alliances. Networking enables the sharing of organisational templates, the pooling of financial resources, and the construction of advocacy capacity vis-à-vis regulators. Relevant financial instruments include cooperative investment funds, community bonds, and EU structural funds directed at rural SSE development; policy actors should assess the compatibility of these instruments with SSE organisational forms and adapt them where necessary.

Implication 5: Adopting Innovative Agriculture and Distribution Practices. The reviewed literature demonstrates that the adoption of innovative and sustainable agri-food practices is not spontaneous but requires supportive policy environments. Authorities should therefore develop pilot programmes for the adoption of agro-ecological innovations (including precision low-input farming, composting networks, and participatory plant breeding), integrate these into local rural development strategies, and ensure that innovative SSE food distribution systems (including online direct-selling platforms, solidarity markets, and community delivery schemes) receive favourable regulatory treatment. The cooperative platform model—in which digital infrastructure for direct producer–consumer sales is democratically governed by its agricultural members—represents a particularly promising avenue for scaling solidarity food distribution while preserving the relational and governance principles central to SSE (De Cler 2026; Stone et al. 2025).

Implication 6: Building Local SSE Systems and a New Entrepreneurial Culture. The synthesis demonstrates that SSE agri-food initiatives generate the greatest impact when

they operate as interconnected local ecosystems rather than as isolated projects. Policy should therefore support the development of local SSE systems through multi-stakeholder alliances that connect producers, consumers, civil society organisations, and local civil society organisations, and local governments around shared food governance objectives. This includes fostering a new form of social entrepreneurship—specifically, mission-driven, community-rooted enterprises such as social cooperatives, social and solidarity enterprises, and hybrid non-profit food businesses—that promotes local and traditional foods, develops ethical production methods, and distributes economic returns equitably among members and communities. The expected outcome is the construction of local socio-economic models that are resilient, inclusive, and capable of sustaining SSE-driven agri-food transformation over time.

Implication 7: Institutional Measures to Protect SSE and Small Producers. The economic analysis in Theme 3 confirms that small and vulnerable producers remain exposed to unfair commercial practices, including late payments, asymmetric contracts, and price squeezing by large buyers. Institutional measures to address these include (a) the robust enforcement of EU Directive 2019/633 on unfair trading practices in agricultural and food supply chains, (b) the establishment of national or regional food ombudsman offices, (c) the development of codes of conduct for fair contracting between SSE producers and public or private buyers, and (d) the creation of dispute resolution mechanisms accessible to small cooperative and SSE actors. These measures are particularly important for the viability of the SSE agri-food initiatives documented in this paper, as their social and ecological objectives cannot be sustained under conditions of systematic commercial disadvantage.

Implication 8: Regulatory Mechanisms for Value Distribution. Local and regional policies should formally recognise SSE as a driver of local economic development by integrating SSE agri-food initiatives into territorial development strategies, rural development programmes, and smart specialisation strategies. Regulatory mechanisms to ensure more balanced value distribution along the agri-food chain should include (a) price transparency requirements for processed food products, (b) mandatory supply chain disclosure for large retailers, (c) local content requirements in public food procurement (e.g., for schools, hospitals, and public canteens), and (d) support for cooperative ecosystem infrastructure, including shared processing facilities, distribution hubs, and digital platforms for direct producer–consumer sales.

Implication 9: Cooperative Finance and Financial Inclusion. Building on the evidence that SSE agri-food initiatives face acute financing constraints during start-up and scaling phases, policy should upgrade financial support mechanisms through cooperative banks, credit unions, and social and solidarity finance institutions. Specifically, this includes the development of dedicated SSE loan facilities with favourable interest rates and flexible collateral requirements; the creation of guarantee funds for SSE agri-food enterprises; the integration of SSE criteria into EU EAFRD (European Agricultural Fund for Rural Development) programming; and the promotion of community investment instruments such as community shares, cooperative bonds, and impact investment funds aligned with SSE principles. These financial tools are expected to provide the patient, mission-aligned capital that SSE agri-food models require to grow without sacrificing their social and ecological objectives. Recent estimates place the aggregate cost of transforming agri-food systems towards sustainability at between USD 300 billion and USD 500 billion annually at the global scale, a figure that makes the design of accessible, mission-aligned financing instruments not merely desirable but structurally necessary for any serious scaling strategy (Pimbert 2025).

These findings align with previous studies emphasising the role of SSE in driving sustainable transformation within agri-food systems. Several limitations of the present

study should be acknowledged. As a conceptual synthesis conducted through a narrative review, it does not generate new empirical data, and the policy implications are necessarily contextual, derived from the reviewed literature; they may require adaptation before being applied in institutional settings that differ in their regulatory frameworks, territorial governance structures, or levels of SSE development. The available literature is also geographically uneven, with considerably stronger coverage of European and Latin American contexts than of Africa or South and East Asia. Future research should address these gaps by testing the analytical framework developed here against empirical case studies across diverse territorial settings, examining the long-term impacts of SSE agri-food initiatives on rural development outcomes, and identifying the institutional and financial conditions that most effectively enable SSE-driven models to scale without sacrificing their social and ecological objectives.

6. Conclusions

Taken together, the analytical findings and policy proposals in this paper indicate that SSE-based initiatives may be understood as social innovations within the agri-food chain and the wider bioeconomy: they establish collectively governed practices of production, exchange, and distribution that are more equitable, cooperative, and environmentally responsible at the local scale.

This is particularly significant for local and rural development because (a) these initiatives can improve market access and value distribution for small and vulnerable producers and (b) they strengthen local capacities, trust-based relationships, and networked forms of coordination among producers, consumers, public authorities, and knowledge institutions.

In this context, the relevance of Degrowth and Buen Vivir is primarily normative rather than explanatory. They provide evaluative lenses for assessing whether transformative change prioritises sufficiency, justice, and relational well-being over volume-driven expansion and whether it supports socio-ecological integrity through practices such as short supply chains, agroecological methods, and democratic governance.

Accordingly, policies that protect SSE from unfair commercial practices, expand cooperative finance, invest in consumer education, and enable cross-sectoral collaboration can responsibly scale these innovations while remaining anchored in local commons and broader goals of social and environmental sustainability. The contribution of this paper relative to prior work rests on three connected points. First, it moves beyond descriptive catalogues of SSE agri-food initiatives by developing a structured analytical framework that connects SSE practices to agri-food chain transformation through four thematic lines: (a) governance and value redistribution; (b) social and ecological challenge-response; (c) economic viability and externalities; and (d) normative assessment through Degrowth and Buen Vivir. Second, it draws a careful theoretical line between the broader "social economy" and the more politically specific "social and solidarity economy," demonstrating why the solidarity dimension is the decisive criterion for judging whether particular agri-food initiatives are genuinely transformative or merely more efficient versions of existing arrangements. Third, it treats the bioeconomy not as background context but as a concept with direct analytical bearing, showing how SSE initiatives at the local scale give practical expression to circular biological resource use within democratic governance frameworks that mainstream bioeconomy policy tends to overlook. Taken together, these contributions offer a sharper and more practically useful account of the conditions under which SSE-driven agri-food change becomes systemic rather than marginal.

Author Contributions: Conceptualization, A.K. (Antonios Kostas) and M.F.; methodology, A.K. (Antonios Kostas) and M.F.; validation, A.K. (Antonios Kostas), V.Z. and A.K. (Anastasios Karasavvoglou); formal analysis, A.K. (Antonios Kostas), V.Z. and A.K. (Anastasios Karasavvoglou); investigation, A.K. (Antonios Kostas) and M.F.; resources, A.K. (Antonios Kostas) and M.F.; data curation, A.K. (Antonios Kostas), V.Z. and A.K. (Anastasios Karasavvoglou); writing—original draft preparation, A.K. (Antonios Kostas) and M.F.; writing—review and editing, A.K. (Antonios Kostas), V.Z. and A.K. (Anastasios Karasavvoglou); visualization, A.K. (Antonios Kostas), V.Z. and A.K. (Anastasios Karasavvoglou); supervision, V.Z. and A.K. (Anastasios Karasavvoglou). All authors have read and agreed to the published version of the manuscript.

Funding: This research received no external funding.

Institutional Review Board Statement: Not applicable.

Informed Consent Statement: Not applicable.

Data Availability Statement: No new data were created or analysed in this study. Data sharing is not applicable to this article.

Acknowledgments: The authors acknowledge the use of AI tools (ChatGPT version GPT-4o, Claude version 4.6 Sonnet) exclusively for minor language editing during the final preparation of the manuscript. No generative AI tool was used for analysis or interpretation.

Conflicts of Interest: The authors declare no conflicts of interest.

Abbreviations

The following abbreviations are used in this manuscript:

AFN	Alternative Food Network
CSA	Community-Supported Agriculture
EAFRD	European Agricultural Fund for Rural Development
SFSC	Short Food Supply Chain
SI	Social Innovation
SSE	Social and Solidarity Economy
UNRISD	United Nations Research Institute for Social Development

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