

Editorial

Sustainable Agri-Food Economies: Re-Territorialising Farming Practices, Markets, Supply Chains, and Policies

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Abstract: Today, technological global agri-food economies dominated by vertically integrated large enterprises are failing in meeting the challenge of feeding a growing global population within the limits of the “Planetary Boundaries”, and are characterised by a “triple fracture” between agri-food economies and their three constitutive elements: nature, consumers, and producers. In parallel to this crisis, new eco-ethical-driven agri-food economies are built around new farming and food distribution practices to face the challenge of food system transition to sustainability. By exploring these new emerging agri-food economies in both developing and developed countries, this Special Issue aims to develop a multidisciplinary discussion on “re-territorialisation” as a strategy to face the existing global agri-food economies crisis. These new agri-food economies are built starting from the farm level, involve the construction of innovative supply chains and markets and are developed through the support of public policies.

Keywords: distributed food agri-food economies; alternative food networks; nested markets; mid-tier supply chains; “values-based food supply chains”; local food policies

1. The Global Agri-Food Economy Crisis

As introduced by van der Ploeg [1] in this Special Issue, “agri-food economies” are socio-technical systems converting natural resources into food and ecosystem services and distributing them to consumers mainly through supply chains and markets. Indeed, agri-food economies are “economies on their own”, distinct to the economies in general because they deliver food, which is indispensable for the continuity and quality of human life, and they locate at the complex interface between nature and society [1].

Today, technological global agri-food economies dominated by vertically integrated large enterprises are failing to meet the challenge of feeding a growing global population within the limits of the “Planetary Boundaries” [2,3] and they are characterised by a “triple fracture” between agri-food economies and their three constitutive elements: nature, consumers, and producers [1].

The first fracture is between the food systems and the environment. The agri-food economies generate loss of agro-biodiversity; loss of forests and ecosystems; release of nitrates in water courses causing soil fertility losses; acidification and acid rain; desertification gas emissions in the form of nitrous oxide (N₂O), methane (CH₄), and dioxide (CO₂); food waste, landscape destruction, and other harmful effects. [3].

The second fracture is with society. A vast literature from different disciplines analyses the negative impact of conventional agri-food economies on society: malnutrition, food poverty and food deserts, obesity, food-related non-communicable diseases, degradation of organoleptic quality and diversity of food products, and food scandals and food scares, among other detrimental factors.

The third disconnection is with farmers and the rural world. Farms' declining share of profit, the cost-price squeeze of commodity production, and the unequal bargaining power in the food chain has increased barriers to market access, especially for small and medium family farms that contribute, together with other structural changes, to the gradual de-agrarisation, land abandonment, and depopulation of rural areas [4].

2. Emerging New Eco-Ethical Driven Agri-Food Economies

In parallel to this crisis, new eco-ethical driven agri-food economies are built around new farming and food distribution practices to face the challenge of food system transition to sustainability. By exploring these new emerging agri-food economies in both developing and developed countries, this Special Issue aims at developing a multidisciplinary discussion—involving sociologists, economists, geographers, and engineers—on “re-territorialisation” as a strategy to face the existing global agri-food economies crisis. The distributed and interconnected organization of these new agri-food economies is built around a re-territorialisation strategy that starts at the farm level, but also involves the construction of innovative supply chains and markets and it is developed through the support of public policies.

2.1. New Agri-Food Economies at Farm Level

At the farm level, in contrast with the specialization, monoculture, productivism (based on economies of scales), and technologism (as a means of nature replacement and standardization) of the industrial farming model, new farming practices grounded on territorial diversity, agro-ecological, and biocultural principles and multifunctional diversification [5,6] have emerged.

The first dimension of a territorialisation strategy based on multifunctional farming model is the “deepening process” [5], which aims to contrast the farm cost-price squeeze by creating more added value for agricultural products (value creation) and increasing the value capture capacity of the farms (value capture). The “value creation” process unfolds through product differentiation, which is realized by moving from the production of agricultural goods with standardized characteristics toward unconventional quality, typical, traditional and also organic products. The deepening strategy aims at and results in the creation of more value added per unit of end product-produced within the farm. On the other side, the “value capture” occurs by moving along the supply chain and re-acquiring functions by (re-)internalizing processing and distribution functions within the farm. This process aims at capturing within the farm the higher added value produced through product differentiation and transformation [5].

Within the framework of rural sustainable development strategies, Maye et al. [7] state that the re-territorialisation strategy is the effort of small and family farmers and processors, especially those located in rural marginal areas, to construct a new niche market by selling high-quality ‘speciality’ products through ‘short’ supply chains and more re-localised and direct relationships with consumers. Through a comparative analysis of cheese products in the United Kingdom and Switzerland, Maye et al.'s paper focus on the value creation process by exploring the PDO schemes as a mechanism to re-territorialise the agri-food regime by “re-valuing a traditional product and its mode of production” [7] (p. 14). In the same vein, but from the perspective of developing countries, Turner et al. [8] explore the experience of the Central Valley of Tarija, Bolivia, in reinterpreting the re-territorialisation strategy by adopting a biocultural perspective. In the Central Valley of Tarija, local biological diversity holds a central position within the production systems and the production and marketing of high value biocultural heritage-based products, including regional specialty foods, are increasingly part of sustainable rural development strategies. During the 2000s and 2010s in the Central Valley of Tarija, the territorialisation process based on regional identity branding was focused on an export-led strategy oriented at the marketing of gourmet products towards upper-middle and upper class consumers. During the recent years, a new complementary strategy emerged, aiming at re-localizing the biocultural food chains for local consumption. As described by Turner et al. [8], during recent years gastronomy and tourism have also been incorporated into the territorialisation

strategy and have led to greater interactions and a creation of what in this Special Issue is called a “nested market”. The linkages between farming and tourism are also analysed by Schneider et al. [9] in this Special Issue by exploring the nested market created around the Caminhos de Pedra, a rural tourism route developed in the district of São Pedro in the city of Bento Gonçalves.

The second dimension of a farming territorialisation strategy is the “broadening process”, which refers to the creation and capture of “non food-related value” through diversification of the farm activities. Farm diversification occurs by exploiting on-farm entrepreneurial activities wider than strictly agricultural ones as rural tourism, land management, therapy farms, food education and other services [9]. Rovai and Andreoli’s paper [6] introduces theoretically and explores empirically the farm multifunctional strategy of diversification (broadening process) through the provision of ecosystem services (ES), more specifically, the land management services. The project “Farmers as Custodians of a Territory” in Lucca (Tuscany) supports the diversification of farm functions by involving local farms in prevention of hydrogeological risk through hydraulic protection. Local public authorities have developed agreement with local farmers for provisioning two specific activities: the monitoring of the territory as regards the state of maintenance of the hydraulic structures and, secondly, the execution of simple maintenance works, i.e., the removal of fallen trees from riverbeds and the management of riparian vegetation in order to ensure a regular flow of water [6] (p. 15).

2.2. *New Agri-Food Economies Based on Alternative Practices of Food Supply and Distribution*

In response to the “triple fracture” of the conventional agri-food economies, in the last three decades we have witnessed the emergence of new organizational forms of food supply and distribution. Alternative food networks (AFNs) are new small-size farms, consumers, retailers, logistics, and other actor networks that embody alternatives to the more standardised industrial mode of food supply and distribution [10,11], relaying on the notions of ‘transparency’, ‘quality’, ‘place’, and ‘nature’ [12,13]. In alterity to the de-territorialisation of the global agro-industrial food chain, the re-territorialisation processes of AFNs [10,11] aims to re-connect producer and consumer, food production and space/environment, rural and urban. As stressed by Jarosz [14] (p. 1): “alternative food networks (AFNs) represent efforts to respatialize and resocialize food production, distribution and consumption in North America, Europe and Australia”. AFNs can be defined as networks where consumers directly purchase produce from producers through different forms of direct exchange, such as short food chains, farmers’ markets, community-supported agriculture, box schemes, solidarity-based purchasing groups, urban agriculture, and community gardens.

In this Special Issue, Rossi [10] describes AFNs as new “ethical foodscapes” emerging from the food movement. AFNs are presented by the author as “community” and “civic” driven alternative food circuits built around a specific type of consumers, what the author refers to “food citizens” or “citizens-consumers”. These alternative trends of food reconnection, inspired by ethical principles and sustainability goals, constitute “forms of resistance” to the prevailing corporate-led agri-food system and its logics. AFNs aim to create alternative community-led food systems through the shift from a utilitarian-private vision to a solidarity-collective logic of production and consumption. According to Rossi, the distinctive features of AFNs are twofold: the first, is the re-appropriation of the collective-social dimension of the production–consumption practices and the development of social capital. The second, is the sharing of a new vision of food “value”—the fair prize to the producer is at the basis of the redefinition and redistribution of economic value. In this sense, the alternative nature of these initiatives is the alterity to the market-led nature of conventional supply chains and their complex infrastructure, where the middleman is a gatekeeper dominating the transactions according to a short-term financial returns.

Relying on the work of Seyfang and Smith [15] on transition theory and strategic niche management theory, Rossi [10] defines AFNs as “grassroots innovations” around food practices. They constitute “innovative niches” challenging the dominant regime. According to the transition theory, once these niches become mature and opportunities arise from the dominant regime, they may also generate

broader change to some extent influencing the dominant system. This integration may take place with a lesser or greater preservation of the innovation potential, from forms of co-optation to forms of radical change, going through more likely forms of incremental (nevertheless reforming) changes [10] (p. 2). By exploring five case studies of AFNs “mature niches” centred on community support agriculture, Rossi [10] argues that, in a context of growing interest both from private and public demand (public food procurement) as well from the production, AFNs are actually in a critical situation where, on the one hand, they are consolidating around their elements of alterity to the conventional food chains and, on the other, they are facing the challenge of growth and the interaction with the mainstream system. From the case studies, the growth of AFNs is seen as an opportunity to expand the accessibility of these practices in the form of product availability and affordability, as well as increasing their impact on society, but at the same time the conventionalisation is stressed, as occurs in the case of organic agriculture.

2.3. *Scaling up AFNs: Innovative Market and Supply Chains*

In recent years there is a growing interest around the challenge of how AFNs “innovation niches” can upscale and eventually become “mainstream” [16–18]. Local food system analysts increasingly assert that the local food movement has to broaden accessibility and local food entities have to scale-up in order to effect broader systemic impacts by engaging either more or larger consumers and producers in commodities and regions [17]. At the same time, there is a growing interest in methods of scaling up alternative food networks that do not erode their authenticity or detract from the overarching objective of contributing to a more sustainable and socially just food system [18].

As stressed by Chiffolleau et al. [11] (p. 1), “more recent field of research has enlarged the scope of ‘alternative’ food chains by going beyond contesting direct-to-consumer channels, and analysing the development of ‘values-based supply chains’ as intermediate chains in which actors share a commitment to social, environmental, and/or economic values”. In this Special Issue, two different approaches are presented in order to interpret innovative modes of food supply and distribution, helping to challenge the perspective of scaling. These two approaches move away from the conventional agri-food system but are also different from AFNs. Differently from AFN theory and movements, the “values-based food supply chains” (VBFSCs) in the USA and “mid-tier supply chains” (MTSCs) in France shift from short food supply chains to more complex food chains, including more intermediaries in between producers and consumers and delivering products to extended distances [19,20], whereas the “nested markets” (NMs) approach focuses on the shift from the community-building perspective to a market-building perspective [9].

2.3.1. *Scaling up AFNs: The “Mid-Tier Supply Chains” and the “Values-Based Food Supply Chains”*

Fleury et al. [19] present “mid-tier supply chains” (MTSCs) in France and “values-based food supply chains” (VBFSCs) in the USA (see also Feenstra and Hardesty [20]) as new concepts to describe new food new supply chain configurations organized around social and logistic infrastructures in the middle between short and long supply chains. On the one hand, they deliver more products to a larger region than short supply chains (e.g., farmers markets or farm direct selling) and, on the other hand, they are distinct from the dominant long or mainstream supply chains because they provide “food from somewhere” with superior quality, environmental stewardship, and social responsibility than ‘food from nowhere’ produced and distributed along the conventional globalised food chains [21]. The papers of Fleury et al. [19] and Feenstra and Hardesty [20] define the main theoretical and empirical characteristics of MTSCs and VBFSCs. The first is their structured form of organization and a more complex logistics compared to short supply chains. These infrastructures are needed to aggregate the produce to face the impressive demand growth of local and regional food, but mostly to cope with the growing demand of local food from big buyers, allowing the scaling-up of AFNs, for example, institutional food service is a growing market channel for local foods [20]. The second characteristic is that MTSCs and VBFSCs should be considered as a hybrid form of supply

chains, maybe including some participants from the dominant agro-industrial economy. However, these supply chains still represent something distinctive because, as stated by Fleury et al. [19], they operate on a smaller scale in terms of volume and number of contributors, the participants share common values, and the products are differentiated from mainstream products. Third, MTSCs and VBFSCs are built around food products, which differs from conventional mass food products because of their quality, sustainability, and locality. This “differentiation” allows for a premium price for the small- and medium-size producers and a more sustainable food chain. At the same time, the aggregational role of VBFSCs in the case of food hubs, the concept of “local” is crucial to determine product differentiation but it focuses on “identity” more than physical proximity. As stressed by Fenstra and Hardesty [20], “telling an authentic story is often more important than “local””. In the AFN literature, three different typologies of AFNs are identified: face-to-face, proximate, and extended AAFNs [13,21,22], but the debate still focuses on “sales in proximity” [23] based on localized short supply, where the geographical extension is local and the chains number of intermediaries is minimised ideally to zero: when the exchange occurs through a direct contact between the producer and the consumer [24]. On the contrary, according to Fleury et al. [19], MTSCs and VBFSCs are not restricted to a geographic location, and the development of MTSCs and VBFSCs can reach the national scale and also create a non-place-based network with the help of the Internet and transportation logistics, characterising them by the logic of identity. Indeed, Allen et al. [25] identified two different, if not contrasting, meanings of ‘local’: on the one hand, ‘local’ refers to regional provisioning that links production and consumption around particular sites; on the other hand, it refers to sites and, through them, to product differentiation—i.e., to the process of attaching particular characteristics of a terrain or territory to a commodity, thereby imbuing it with environmental and social qualities [21]. Fourth, MTSCs and VBFSCs are transparent. As stressed by Feenstra and Hardesty [20], VBSCs rely on shared information among supply chain partners (transparency) in order to improve productivity, enabling rapid response to market changes. Transparency is also between supply chain partners and consumers through product traceability. The fifth characteristics regard value and values. These supply chains accord importance to the values embedded in the production of the food products: authentic farming story behind the product, high-quality food, ethical and social values, ecological sustainability, and also the equal distribution of value and power among partners that achieved, with efficiency, gains resulting from close coordination among supply chain partners. Although the increasing concentration in the processing and retail sectors of the system creates power imbalances in market relationships with regard to the conventional/food supply chain, VBFSCs are long-term networks of partnering business enterprises working together to maximize value for all the partners.

2.3.2. Scaling up AFNs: The Nested Markets

By exploring two case studies in the state of Rio Grande do Sul, Brazil, Schneider et al. [9] introduced the concept of NMs as new forms of market that present specific characteristics that make them different from both AFNs and traditional markets. According to Schneider et al., [9] NMs are not alternative to but a segment of the wider food market. They are specific segment that “typically displays different price levels, distributional patterns of the total Value Added and relations between producers, distributors and consumers than those seen in the wider market” and they are socially built through processes of “agricultural reterritorialization” [9] (p. 4). The first characteristic of NMs is their constructivist nature—in opposition to the idea of the “invisible hand” of the self-regulating nature of a general food market, which occurs through an impersonal price mechanism, these marketplaces are built by the visible hands of the actors involved, which are consciously engaged with their construction. This characteristic is particularly evident in the case study of the open-air market of Grabels (France) by Chiffolleau et al. [11], which has been collectively constructed through the joint action of producers, consumers, public authorities and also researchers. The second characteristic of the NMs is the distinctiveness from the conventional food markets, which is twofold: on the one hand, NMs are associated with “distinctive” products or services in contrast with standard, undifferentiated,

and placeless products available in the conventional agri-food markets, whose “value” drives to a premium price for producers. On the other hand, they are constituted of new specific organizational and economic mechanisms and new bottom-up democratic forms of governance, generating a more distributed power and equal distribution of added value, and they rely on innovative and specific standards and models of trade. A NM creates a collective new socio-material infrastructure that is part of, composes, and works as Common-Pool Resources (CPR) available for all the actors involved. This dimension of NMs is deeply analysed by Wegerif and Hebinck [26] in their paper presenting the Dar es Salaam market in Tanzania, where competitors work together in the utilization of CPRs in their mutual interest. According to the authors, the NMs are governed by specific mechanisms different from both private market mechanisms and command and control public policies. In the Dar es Salaam market, the CPRs management appears to be largely governed by informal and implicit arrangements more rooted in peoples’ cultural repertoires and norms than in formal agreements; what Ostrom calls “internal norms”, which are at the base of a polycentric co-governance mechanism of CPR [27]. According to Wegerif and Hebinck [26], this mode of governance defines the “symbiotic” nature of the Dar es Salaam market, where the prevalence of reciprocity, interdependence and the informality of common internal and social norms explains how the market works. The third characteristic of NMs is the hybridity and coexistence—NMs are investigated far beyond the dichotomy between conventional and alternative market, the concept of “distinctiveness” is different from the concept of “alterity” around which AAFNs are conceptualised and develop. As stated by Schenider et al. [6], NMs are spaces built in relation to broader markets. They are a market segment that is part of a broader market, they are not outside of capitalism or the mainstream mode of production of current society, but they are spaces of interaction that constitute hybrid forms and allow for exchanges of various kinds. Connected to the concept of hybridity is the concept of coexistence. NMs are hybrid spaces whose mechanisms of governance are defined by both conventional standards, norms, and values (competitiveness, efficiency, power) and alternative relationships and conventions (reciprocity, friendship, reputation, interknowledge). As stressed by Schenider et al. [6], the concept of NMs comprises a multitude of markets (and modes of trade and commercial exchange) that coexist—whether they be conventional or alternative—entailing a diversity of practices and social interactions that create specific mechanisms of marketing and distribution. Hybridity is a relevant characteristic of the open-air market of Grabels. As stressed by Chiffolleau et al. [11], the Grabels market is hybrid because it has not been conceived and built as an alternative food chain—even though it is for the most part short—and it involves ‘conventional’, ‘middle-agriculture’ farmers, but thanks to innovative form of governance based on labels and modalities of control, which is participatory, decentralized, and private-public, it may be relevant in supporting the ‘de-conventionalization’ of food systems.

The last characteristic is “reflexive localism”. One of the risks of AAFNs is “the local trap” [28], that is, taking ‘the local’ as a space free from power relations and competitiveness and attributing an exaggerated role to local markets in resolving current problems of food supply, especially in light of the growing process of urbanization. Schenider et al. [6], far from any attempt to delegitimize “localism”, focus on the process of localization as a muddle of overlapping, juxtaposing, or intersecting processes of embedding and dis-embedding of local and extra-local networks operating within the same socioeconomic local space.

3. Movements, Policies, and Programmes Supporting the Development of New Agri-Food Economies

The territorialized agri-food economies are not the outcome of the “invisible hand” of the market nor of top-down planned public policies; on the contrary, they are a social construction of economic, social, and political actors working together. Moreover, we can argue that the territorialised agri-food economies have emerged of a process of re-politization of food, mainly driven by the “food movement”, which is not just about contesting the technological global agri-food economies but about primarily generating social innovations. The food movement is “political”, in the sense that it is aimed and

resulted in having relevant influence in policy making. Sherwood et al. [29], who explored the social dynamics of agro-food movements in Ecuador, stressed that as the contradictions of conventional agri-food economies in Ecuador became manifest, many different self-organized components of the food movement (i.e., farmer, agroecology, and consumer food movements) have risen outside of the formalized spaces of institutions to contest and challenge the existing order. As stated by the authors, over the last decades, these social movements have grown and started to influence the political realm to the point where they have begun to inform and shape public policy.

The re-territorialized agri-food economies explored in this Special Issue are primarily the outcome of innovations from below, but at the same time public policies, projects, or programmes are necessary for their development. The relevance of local public policies in supporting process of re-territorialization appears very clearly from the analysis of the project “Farmers as Custodians of a Territory” described by Rovai and Andreoli [6], where the differentiation of farm activities is the outcome of public intervention. Although some of the diversified activities performed on farms, such as hosting tourists (agritourism) or on-farm education (educational farm), can be remunerated on the market, many other non-agricultural activities have public good characteristics or externalities, which implies market failure to ensure an efficient remuneration or allocation. Indeed, in order to achieve an adequate provision of these multifunctional outputs and/or ‘public goods’, an active involvement of the policymaker is required. Furthermore, the paper highlights that addressing the problem of hydrogeological hazard prevention mainly through top-down and command and control approaches are not the most cost-effective approaches. On the contrary, as in the case of the “Farmers as Custodians of a Territory” project “due to the complexity of the problem and the necessity of a collective responsibility in achieving a more resilient situation, it is important to create better awareness of the importance of territorial management among all the relevant stakeholder groups and to promote collaborative approaches” [6] (p. 25).

From the other part of the planet, Matei et al. [30] analysed public policies at both the federal and state level in Brazil, supporting the reterritorialization of agri-food economies by investing in family farms. The paper analysed the National Program to Strengthen Family Farming (PRONAF), Food Acquisition Program (PAA), National School Nutrition Program (PNAE), and Rio Grande do Sul’s Program for Family-based Agroindustry (PEAF-RS), which are public programmes aiming at “improving farmers’ incomes, providing consumers with fresh and healthy food and promoting new relationships between family farms and markets” [30] (p. 2). These programmes support the family farm in different ways—by expanding and modernizing the agricultural infrastructures but also supporting farm diversification through non-agricultural activities, for instance, by investments in tourism activities. Another way is by promoting the creation of added value to fresh produce through on-farm processing and also developing new markets through public food procurement programmes.

This Special Issue also introduces local food government programmes and policies that address barriers to support local food markets and their growth in the United States. Martinez [31] analysed different public interventions, including examples at the federal level such as the USDA National Farm-to-School Program, created to assist eligible entities in implementation of farm-to-school programmes that improve access to local foods in eligible schools, or the Farmers’ Market and Local Food Promotion Program (FMLFPP), a competitive grant programme for local governments, agricultural cooperatives, farmers, and other eligible groups to improve and expand farmers markets, community support agriculture (CSA) and other direct-to-consumer outlets. As stressed by Martinez [31], state and local governments have also taken on new roles in food system governance by focusing on supporting or enabling local food production and supporting short food supply channels (e.g., farmers market) by procuring local food for institutions (such as farm-to-school) and, finally, by facilitating the development of food system infrastructure (processing and aggregation).

In addition to public policies, non-public programmes such as the Food For Life Program of Soil Association—the United Kingdom’s leading food and farming charity and organic certification body—are also important tools for developing the reterritorialization process in terms of “transforming food culture” to focus on health, sustainability, and enjoyment, as well as supporting the transition of

public food catering to prepare food with more fresh, seasonal, local, and organic ingredients, as well as sustainably-raised meat and fish that meet animal welfare standards. In the paper of Stahlbrand [32], the author analysed the experience of the Food For Life Catering Mark in London and Nottingham. As stressed by Stahlbrand [32], the results were very positive, as in the case of Nottingham Trent University, where the programme supported a redefinition of a different supply chain of the in-house catering service, shifting from a system based on a university bulk-buying consortium to a more local and direct farmer buying system.

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Abbreviations

AFNs	alternative food networks
CPR	common-pool resources
CSA	community support agriculture
NMs	nested markets
VBFSs	values-based food supply chains
MTSCs	mid-tier supply chains

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