

Article

# Beyond Food Provisioning: The Transformative Potential of Grassroots Innovation around Food

Adanella Rossi

Department of Agriculture, Food and Environment, University of Pisa, Pisa 57124, Italy; adanella.rossi@unipi.it; Tel.: +39-050-221-8985

Academic Editors: Giaime Berti, Moya Kneafsey, Larry Lev, Irene Monasterolo and Sergio Schneider  
Received: 14 July 2016; Accepted: 11 January 2017; Published: 19 January 2017

**Abstract:** The newly-emerged ethical foodscape includes multiple expressions of innovation around food. With reference to the Italian context, this paper focuses on the transformative potential of the experiences of social innovation, innovative grassroots initiatives, which have been significantly contributed to shaping the food culture and production-consumption practices during the last two decades. While still consolidating their fundamentals and facing the challenge of growth, the networks behind them continue to be engaged in an effort of innovation, inside and outside their niche. The paper explores these dynamics. Understanding how these networks are managing their transformative capacity and what are the opportunities and challenges arising in the relation with the mainstream system may help to better capture and value the potential of this innovation niche, drawing useful lessons for fostering its expression and for a broader transition to more equitable and sustainable food systems.

**Keywords:** grassroots innovation; alternative food networks; food value; boundary-crossing; food as a commons; food democracy; reflexive governance

---

## 1. The Bottom-Up Innovation around Food Practices

Trends of food reconnection, inspired by ethical principles and sustainability goals, are deemed a significant evolutionary trajectory in the development of agri-food systems. As widely acknowledged, grassroots innovations [1] around food practices, promoted collectively by actors inhabiting the fringes of the conventional agri-food system, hand in hand with the action of movements fighting for specific food issues, have been important drivers of these processes. They arose worldwide as forms of resistance to the prevailing corporate-led agri-food system and its logics, seeking for a space of survival and autonomy where to build alternatives [2–6].

Notwithstanding their relatively small economic impact, these innovative initiatives around food have been significant for the consensus they received and their rapid diffusion in all of the geographical and social contexts, as well as for their capability to trigger change. They have initiated processes of diversification in cultural patterns and food practices, introducing greater food democracy [7,8]. In this way, they have strengthened the efforts of food movements in drawing attention to the ills and shortcomings of the mainstream food production/consumption patterns and the need for alternatives.

Within this social innovation trajectory, the growing interest in more sustainable food practices has led to the development of an array of new local food initiatives, strategies, forms of entanglement and cooperation. The result has been the multiplicity of “alternative food networks”, “short food supply chains”, “nested markets” and “values-based supply chains”, which currently constitute the new ethical foodscape. In the voluminous literature produced, these variegated forms of production-consumption reconnection have been analyzed in relation to the nature of their alterity (or alternativeness), their relation with the mainstream model and their widely beneficial, effective and durable transformative capacity [3,6,9–14]. This last dimension has been explored also

within the context of the changes and adaptations these innovative models have experienced over their development, because of the reactions they have determined in the mainstream agri-food system [14–19]. Furthermore, these initiatives have been studied for their potential capacity to promote societal change that goes beyond the production-consumption dimension itself [7,13,18,20,21]. In a context of growing social, economic and environmental uncertainty, the experimentation of new sustainable, place-based food systems has been also assuming increasing significance for a transition to more resilient and socially-cohesive territories [2,14,22–24].

From the perspective of transition theories and, within them, strategic niche management theories [25–28], the development of these innovative approaches around food and the relationship between these and the mainstream agri-food system have been interpreted as processes of niche formation and interaction dynamics between niches and regimes [1,29]. The early expressions of these pathways of social innovation, looking for alternatives to the incumbent models, have been in fact considered as spaces of the experimentation and development of new approaches and practices [1,29–31]. The core of this innovation is the reconstruction of the social, technological and institutional infrastructures underlying production, distribution and consumption practices. Once consolidated as well-defined and stable niches, besides experimenting with alternative systems, these initiatives may also generate broader change if opportunities arise [28], to some extent influencing the dominant system. This process is as crucial as critical, as it depends on the level of development of the niche, as well as on the capacity and mode of the system to integrate innovation. 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 (anyway reforming) changes.

The progressive, growing interest and involvement by public opinion, businesses, institution, politics and culture in these alternative pathways testifies to the processes of change they have triggered. Within the extensive literature on this ethically-driven evolution of the foodscape [32,33], considerable attention, as mentioned above, is devoted to the complex dynamics that have been developing around this innovation in food meanings and practices over time. Ethical issues have been subjected to institutionalization, have entered logics of power and competition and, finally, demanding new efforts by food movements for their redefinition and control (known examples are the organic and fair trade sectors) [14,17–19].

Despite the numerous analyses, there is no univocal reading of this scenario. In line with the many scholars who argue the importance of overcoming dualistic views of the agri-food system development, some underline that all of the above-mentioned dynamics are making the boundary between conventional and alternative forms increasingly difficult to identify, with knowledge, practices and politics around food being affected by a multiplicity of boundary-crossings, or “transgressions” [34]. In another perspective, some point out the diffusion of accommodative market-based alternatives rather than radical ones, as the effects of the mainstreaming, stressing the meaningful difference between the two proposals [14,18,35]. Furthermore, the processes of divergence from a central ethos of alterity, which have occurred during the “conventionalization”, are believed to result in new alternative trajectories. Within these, as said above, many organizations and movements aspire to return to their founding principles and are seeking new means for their socially-shared enactment in the market arena.

Goodman and Sage themselves acknowledge that “in order to be transgressed, boundaries, borders and norms—whether behavioural, spatial, discursive, material or ethical—must be created, become established, and be maintained” ([34], p. 2). In other terms, after many years of debate, “alterity” in managing food-related issues continues to seem the key to innovation, the starting and reference point for any (further) evolution. This alterity is created, recognized and claimed within new definite and organized social spaces, which allow the co-creation of new knowledge, meanings and other common repertoires. Once defined, these “boundaries”—the new identity and distinctive material and immaterial organization—represent the ground of confrontation with the mainstream, to propose radical alternatives or negotiate other forms of shared innovation.

In the context of increasing the spread and diversification of these alternatives, these processes now seem neglected, as well as not considered for their potential and the specificities they assume. Instead, as some scholars assert, understanding the contribution of these innovative initiatives to the evolution of the agri-food system, notably in the perspective of a transition to more sustainable and resilient systems [22], cannot disregard their peculiar features, their evolution over time and the specific dynamics they are able to develop in the local social, economic and institutional contexts [36].

#### *The Alterity of Grassroots Innovation around Food*

As known, the development around a common core of ethical principles of environmental sustainability and social justice has been central for grassroots innovations around food. These shared principles have informed the approach to resource management, have redefined actors' roles and responsibilities and have reshaped power and economic relations. Hence, they have guided production systems into new technical choices, labor organization, forms of coordination within the supply chain, relationships with the other firms and the social environment. Similarly, they have remodeled the culture of food and driven the reorganization of the consumption practices. In such processes, the relationship between producers and consumers has strengthened around "new" norms, such as mutual respect, transparency, solidarity, equality and fairness. This alignment has promoted innovative forms of interaction up to forms of co-participation in material and immaterial processes [20,37,38]. The sharing of a new vision of food "value", in all of its multiple components, has been the main achievement of these processes [33]. This new vision has been the basis of the redefinition and management of economic value, as well, leading to the reshaping of the approaches and rules in tackling economic and financial matters.

This normative embeddedness has also triggered a redefinition of the identity elements, overcoming, in the cases of greater awareness, the clear division of roles between producers and consumers and the role as economic actors themselves, towards a shared sense of responsibility and a common idea of "food citizenship" [7,13]. Similarly, it has underpinned the transition from a utilitarian-private vision to a solidarity-collective logic of production and consumption practices [39,40]. On this basis, the common ethics has resulted in being able to favor the development of more significant collective agency, civic engagement and political activism [13,41]. Food and its meanings have become important mediators of social change processes [21].

All of these processes take place within the social structures that these networks reconstruct around food, through the reframing processes that collective learning permit in these relational spaces [30,42]. The re-appropriation of the collective-social dimension of the production-consumption practices and the development of social capital around them is indeed the first fundamental distinctive feature of these experiences of innovation around food [40].

As for other grassroots innovations, this collective dimension is variously structured, these experiences being place/community based, but also integrated into wider "communities of interest" [1] (which may assume the form of local/regional/national networks up to broader organizations). This articulation has been effectively captured through the concepts of Community of Practice (CoP) [43] and of Network of Practice (NoP) [44], respectively referring to spatialized direct interactions and broader scale/virtual interactions. These concepts are used by these movements themselves. The growing interest in food relocalization processes in the perspective of a transition to more resilient, sustainable communities is further refining this relational dimension through the idea of networks of regional "communities of food" practice [45]. The mutually-reinforcing action of these interaction levels is important to create new elements of collective identity and drive coherent and more robust development processes.

## 2. Focusing on the Innovation Potential and Its Management

The evolutionary dynamics that characterize these more innovative food networks, committed to building alternative, community-based food systems aligned with a comprehensive set of ethical principles and goals, constitute the focus of this paper.

It looks in particular at the Italian situation. Despite their modest economic weight, in this context, these initiatives have had a significant impact at the cultural and operational level [35]. This is particularly meaningful considering Italy's still alive history of territorially- and culturally-based quality produce, its widespread culture of food and the role food plays as a factor of sociality. This impact is evidenced by the debate on environmental and social externalities of the mainstream agri-food system they contributed to promoting, the rapid and easy acceptance of their models in the purchase-consumption practices and their influence on corporate marketing strategies, as well as on small to medium-scale businesses. Civil society and economic actors at the margins of the system have triggered the development of a new discourse on the ethics of food, which has increasingly involved opinion leaders, public institutions, farmers' unions and other organizations, academics, as well as the big players of the agro-food system.

In a context of growing interest both from private and public demand and from the production world, the opportunities for these initiatives to grow in size and complexity and to take part in new development pathways at the local level have been multiplying. These alternative systems appear engaged, on the one hand, in consolidating their fundamentals; on the other, in facing the challenge of growth, coherently with their principles and goals of change. Growth is seen as an opportunity to enhance the ability of this niche to offer alternatives and generate change; at the same time, the maintenance of a transformative potential demands addressing some significant questions. Other challenges concern how to maintain the innovation effort, through the continuous improvement of the alternative models, and how to bring innovation out of the niche.

Although these initiatives started to spread and develop in the country more than twenty years ago, most academic researchers have started studying them only over the past few years. Exploring the ways these networks are facing the need to grow and to continue innovating, as well as their interaction with the mainstream system, the paper aims at bringing out the contribution to innovation that these mature experiences are still making. Understanding how they are trying to manage their transformative role and what are the opportunities and challenges arising in the relation with the system may help to better capture and value the potential of this innovation niche, drawing useful lessons for fostering its expression and for a broader transition to more equitable and sustainable food systems.

The paper is structured as follows: after the methodological section, including also the illustration of the empirical material used, the analysis is conducted in three sections. These consider, respectively: the consolidation of the niche, through reproduction of the elements of distinctiveness of these experiences (the maintenance of boundaries); the management of the process of growth, analyzed in its main components; the further more recent efforts of innovation in which this niche is engaged, both internally and in the interaction with the dominant system. Finally, some overall reflections close the paper.

### *Methodological Approach and Empirical Material*

The knowledge of the dynamics of the development of these initiatives in Italy stems from specific research activities that I have carried out during the last fifteen years. I have studied these initiatives within several EU-funded projects of the 6th and 7th Framework Programmes and of Horizon 2020 Programme, as well as in national and regional projects. In all of them, these initiatives are considered as examples of social innovation, significant for a transition to more sustainable food systems. These research activities have been supported also by my personal engagement in organizations connected to these initiatives at the regional and national level. The latter experience has been an

invaluable opportunity to observe and follow the development of the initiatives and the debate internal to the movement in a continuative way and from a broader perspective.

The paper also draws on the analysis of five well-established initiatives, whose meaning in terms of innovation and social and economic relevance are widely acknowledged in the Italian context. The reference to these initiatives allows capturing and exemplifying significant issues emerging from the most general analysis. Using a constructivist, descriptivist and subjectivist approach, the initiatives were considered as results of the interactions among the involved actors and were investigated using the actors' points of view, as well as examining the contexts in which they developed. For this reason, the study essentially relied on qualitative data and participatory methods to collect and analyze data and/or to validate the results.

The collection and analysis of primary data (through direct interviews and group discussions, as well as participant observation in multiple internal meetings and public events) and secondary data (from grey and published literature, illustrative material, Internet sources) supported the research activity, as well as the comprehension of the processes "from within".

The studied initiatives are briefly introduced below (Table 1). Other details are reported in the analysis.

**Table 1.** The studied initiatives.

Floriddia organic farm and its network (Tuscany, Central Italy)	<p>Floriddia is an organic multifunctional farm, strongly embedded in the territory. It mainly cultivates cereals, legumes and fodder (on 300 ha). It turned to organic in 1987, gradually reinforcing an alternative approach to farming, management and market relations. During the 2000s, it initiated in-house processing and direct marketing and diversified through opening an agro-tourist activity. In 2010, it expanded the processing on farm by means of a new technologically-advanced plant for bread and other oven products, as well as pasta, which also allows the firm to process other local organic farmers' harvests (for a total of about 400 tons of cereals per year).</p> <p>Between 2006 and 2009, the farm turned to the cultivation of old wheat varieties, more suitable for organic farming and healthier final products. It has soon become a key actor of this activity in the territory, kick-starting similar processes among other local small farms. With some of them, an innovative commercial agreement has recently been established, which formalizes horizontal cooperation among farms. Pricing is inspired by principles of fairness, outside of the conventional market. At the end of 2015, the farm sold its produce (about 26 tons per year of bread and 70 tons of pasta) almost entirely locally, directly or through small retailers. The choice of marketing through local short chains has been important to this business, as in the case of the relationship with Solidarity Purchase Groups (from now on GAS, from the Italian name "Gruppi di Acquisto Solidale"; they are groups of consumers self-organized to purchase goods directly from producers, according to the principles of sustainability and solidarity [30,35]).</p> <p>The farm plans for the future do not include further up-scaling, but rather improving the internal organization and strengthening and extending the network of relationships.</p>
IRIS cooperative (Lombardia, Northern Italy)	<p>IRIS is a cooperative founded in 1978 by a group of young people eager to engage in sustainable farming, guided by principles, such as mutual aid, collective property, circulation of financial capital and care of the common good. It runs a surface of 38 ha, bought in 1990 through the financial support of consumers, who became members of the cooperative ("co-supporter, financially and morally, of the project"). The farm mainly grows cereals that are processed into pasta.</p> <p>Over the years, many organic farms joined the cooperative, as members or suppliers (about 300 in 2016). All of them benefit from free technical advice and a stable buying contract, at a "fair price" agreed outside of the conventional market. Through this network of farmers, IRIS operates in 12 Italian regions, from north to south, covering approximately 2000 ha with a production of about 5000 tons of cereals.</p> <p>The sale is mainly through short circuits: directly to GAS (35%) and through the shops of fair trade cooperatives in Italy; through selected importers abroad.</p> <p>In early 2005, it bought the pasta factory that processed its wheat. More recently, the cooperative decided to build a larger factory, inspired by its main value: protection and promotion of common goods. The structure will include services for the local community, as well. For this project, in addition to shareholders and suppliers, a new figure was created, that of the "financial member" who can buy "mutualistic shares". This has enabled a crowdfunding campaign throughout the country, warmly welcomed by the public (5 million € were collected). With the new factory, pasta production will increase from the current 7000 tons per year to about 21,000 tons. This will imply increasing the production base and strengthening the network of collaborations.</p> <p>Despite its growth, the cooperative has never neglected its original values. It continues to reinvest the profits in the activity, and salaries are established in a participatory way, according to fairness criteria. The management ensures the involvement of all of the supporters, consumers and small financial members included.</p> <p>IRIS is very committed to its social mission. Through a foundation established in 2010, it provides education, training, research and social assistance on many topics.</p>

Table 1. Cont.

Aequos cooperative (Lombardia, Northern Italy)	<p>Aequos is a cooperative formed in 2010 by a group of GAS from an area with low availability of organic fresh produce. In addition to filling this gap, the aim was contributing, through purchasing, to the building of a “healthier, equitable and sustainable economy” (it is also a member of the District of Solidarity Economy).</p> <p>Aequos is a logistics operator and includes only organizations or businesses. It is by now well established and supplies 40 GAS and social cooperatives, in 25 municipalities of 4 provinces (about 2000 families involved). It has relationships with about 40 producers.</p> <p>In 2016, it bought more than 500 tons of food.</p> <p>The success of Aequos is definitely mostly due to their great attention to efficiency and a strong value base. There is a great effort to contain costs (for structures, equipment, organization and logistics), also through the direct involvement of GAS members. This last condition is clearly essential and is considered as an integral part of the special joint venture.</p> <p>“Adhering to a broader project and its values, pooling time, commitment and energies, mutual solidarity, staying together for reasons that go beyond self-interest ensure that Aequos continues to grow and operates successfully compared to conventional businesses.”</p>
Arvaia CSA (Emilia-Romagna, North Italy)	<p>Arvaia, in the Bologna area, is currently the most important experience of Community-Supported Agriculture (CSA) in Italy. It is a cooperative of farmers and consumers, cultivating organically a public piece of land rented from the municipality. It involves more than 100 members, mainly from the local GAS. At the beginning, in 2013, it employed 3 persons; the number has then increased, and the goal is to reach 10 employees by 2018. The production activities now include vegetables and fruit production, but there is a plan to include breeding and processing, as well. Starting with 3 hectares, recently, the cooperative expanded the area rented from the municipality (47 ha).</p> <p>Its main purpose is cultivating the land through collective management, mainly for the members’ consumption, and to support the cooperative activities (three markets and a small shop). The members plan together the annual production activities and, based on the budget, finance them in advance. They can visit the fields and are asked to contribute a few half-days of work per year. This is seen as an opportunity to strengthen the relation with the land and farming.</p>
La Terra e il Cielo cooperative (Marche, Central Italy) and Adesso Pasta! project	<p>Adesso Pasta! (AP!) is an agreement for the supply of high quality organic pasta, based on the mutual commitment between producers and consumers, including the sharing of costs and risks. It involves the cooperative La Terra e il Cielo (T &amp; C), a pioneer of organic farming in Italy, located in the Marche region (Central Italy), including about 100 farms, and GAS throughout the country. The project was designed and carried out through a long participatory process, started in 2009. It aimed at defining all of the operational and financial aspects related to cultivation, processing and distribution and, afterwards, at formalizing them in a formal agreement, a “pact”, between the parties involved. At the end of 2015, 60 GAS (distributed in 7 regions of Northern and Central Italy) had adhered to the pact, contributing for 8 percent to the total business of T &amp; C.</p> <p>The project is explicitly founded on the principles of solidarity, sustainability, transparency, equality and fairness. The model of reference is that of a “solidarity economy”, conceived of as based on relations embedded in a community. At the same time, it applies this model at a supra-local scale, thus facing the challenge to manage the trust relationship at a distance. The mutual commitment formalized in the pact strengthens the adherence to the project, to its values and goals.</p>

### 3. Managing the Transformative Role

How do these mature niches of innovation configure and present themselves? How do they position themselves in the ongoing change process? How are they managing their transformative role? What are the challenges to be faced in this regard?

#### 3.1. The Consolidation of the Niche (Reproducing and Maintaining Boundaries)

These initiatives appear engaged in a process of consolidation around their elements of distinctiveness, their fundamentals; in other terms, they are taking care of their “boundaries”. On these basic elements, they continue to build their collective identity. As evidence shows, the significance of this process is clear if you look at these experiences as social spaces of iterative collective learning, where the social dimension relates to the role of the interactions for the process of ‘self-identification’, and the iterative nature relates to the need for multiple learning processes due to the continuous entry of new actors. This process is important to both producers and consumers.

As we will say later when dealing with growth, in the case of producers, this process is what underlies the different business model and allows facing the difficulties related to the changes required in the technical and organizational management, as well as in the relational sphere because of the greater interaction with the outside [38].

*The intense exchange of information and experience that in the recent years Floriddia has established with the other local farmers, has been crucial to the diffusion of alternative approaches in a very “mainstreamed” sector such as the cereal one. Shared learning processes have helped cereal farmers to change attitude towards their work, the value of their resources and the way of managing them through production processes, the quality of their products and the related economic value, marketing and relation with consumers and other actors.*

The reference to a different set of principles and values is also what supports the further strengthening of a different farmer identity [46]. During recent years, this process has been seeing the role performed by not-mainstream farmers’ organizations, strongly oriented towards the defense of the alternative status of “peasant”, as well as, increasingly, the engagement of other movements from civil society. It is significant in this regard the recent mobilization in Italy around the promulgation of a law for peasant farming. This initiative has actively involved expressions of the agriculture sector, as well as NGOs, civil society organizations and politicians.

These processes, as known, are no less significant for citizens-consumers. The iterative, collective learning taking place within these experiences proves to be crucial to align attitudes and behavior between new and old network members. This clearly emerges in the case of GAS or Community Supported Agriculture (CSA) [30,35], as well as in the further initiatives these groups join.

*Arvaia organisation devotes great attention to ensuring its large membership has a solid understanding of the cooperative’s goals and of its challenging operational choices. Specific cultural and animation activities are aimed at this.*

However, the care of these processes frequently weakens in the routine practices, even within these alternative initiatives. Together with weaker motivations, partly due to the widening of demand, this sometimes compromises the active participation of citizens-consumers. The risk is seen that this may favor forms of passive and more superficial adherence to ethical consumption, which may be easily satisfied by the corporate marketing strategies. Within the local networks and the wider (regional, national) networks to which these initiatives are connected, this is an important topic of debate. The stable change of attitude towards food practices and the empowerment of consumer-citizens through a more active role are in fact considered crucial to the creation of an alternative model of production-consumption.

More in general, the defense of the full significance of values and principles at the basis of these experiences is considered important in the context of growing openness to sustainable consumption and lifestyles, according to a new discourse inspired by ethics, social justice and sobriety. Added to this is the desire to control cooptation of both operational and value-discursive elements carried out by the mainstream system [35]. Significant in this regard is the emphasis laid on a holistic view of the multiple features of environmental sustainability and food healthiness (represented by the early organic and integrated by the more recent agro-ecological models). As meaningful is, on the other hand, the criticism towards the frequent ethos on single, more accessible ethical issues, such as proximity (food miles), or territorial embeddedness (localness or typicalness), or on generic fairness in economic transactions. This approach has indeed been characterizing the strategies to promote small farming and short chains by important actors, such as Farmers’ Unions, Slow Food and big retailers. This is seen to result in giving up an important part of sustainability goals and in spreading an ambiguous view of equity, besides a reductive vision of the mutual social purpose.

In a time of multiple “food transgressions” [34], the care of the specific “boundaries” in the processes of innovation of food production-consumption practices so seems to be still important to the movement. This ethos characterizes the general, internal debate, as well as the local “communities”, up to the individual strategies.

*When telling the story of the farm, the Floriddia family emphasizes the sharp difference between recent changes and the previous management model, referring to issues of identity, mission, product quality, market relations, quality of life. The same strong sense of alterity underpins the commitment in creating and promoting new knowledge and practices about farming and food, shared within the wider network which the farm belongs to.*

*IRIS is strongly engaged in promoting alternative approaches to farming, food practices and lifestyles. It provides education, training, research and social assistance services in the areas of organic-biodynamic farming, environmental protection, rural culture, collective ownership, social inclusion, mutuality and cooperation.*

*The T & C cooperative attaches great importance to the definition and spreading of its production-marketing mode. It is engaged in intense interactions with its members. This commonality of principles and goals is considered an element of strength in the mainstreaming of the organic sector. Equally intense is its external communication and cultural animation at local and national levels.*

### 3.2. Facing Niche Development

An active management of development is considered necessary among these initiatives to increase their impact, at the operational and cultural levels. The continuous rise in interest in ethical food and in a closer relationship with production is considered as a great opportunity to that end. There is thus a willingness to expand the accessibility of these practices, in the form of product availability and affordability, in order to represent a real alternative for a growing number of people (in general terms, but also looking at the spatial concentration of consumption, as in cities). The pathways undertaken to that end are various. At the same time, there is also the consciousness of the importance of properly managing this growth, in order to maintain the innovative potential of these practices. The issues that follow have proven to be particularly significant in this regard.

#### 3.2.1. The Forms of Growth

For a long time, the preferred mode to meet a greater demand was the replication of the various initiatives activated. Increasingly, however, growth in terms of production and/or organizational capacity has emerged as clearly needed, to be achieved individually through scaling-up processes, or collectively, through forms of coordination at the local level (scaling out), handling greater volumes and numbers of exchanges.

As it emerges from empirical evidence, these realities are engaged in experimenting different solutions to manage growth, from more traditional to more innovative ones. They cover a range of pathways: a moderate growth in size of individual enterprises, consistent with the principles of reference and socially legitimated (e.g., Floriddia, IRIS, T & C); renewed forms of cooperation between producers, between consumers or both, as in the case of innovative network agreements among farmers, lighter than the cooperative form (e.g., Floriddia), or in the case of new distribution models, aimed at meeting growing demand and/or managing provision from not local farming (e.g., Aequos); services of commercial intermediation, suitable to the particular model of the relationship between production and consumption and related principles (the values-based supply chain model); more advanced forms of cooperation between producers and consumers, following the CSA model (e.g., Arvaia; AP!). The organizational structures created often include more than one of these solutions. Organizational flexibility and creativity, often supported by appropriate management models/tools (based on digital technology), underlie this great variety of solutions.

#### 3.2.2. The Issues of Growth

The development of broader and more complex production-distribution systems has significant implications for these realities. It is believed it may challenge their ideal and operational patterns,

particularly in the following areas: the production model to pursue (because of the problems connected to the transition between different models); the management of the economic issues (including the various components involved in the creation and distribution of value); the modes of interaction between the parties involved (communication practices, power relations and consequent level of democracy in decision-making mechanisms, forms of coordination between producers and consumers).

### The Expansion of the Production Base

A growth of the short chain first entails an expansion of the production base, primarily at a local scale and, when necessary, on larger areas. Although this reorganization may represent an opportunity for many Italian farms, structurally more adequate to the short chain, a full “conversion” to this model cannot be considered obvious and linear [35,38]. As the empirical evidence shows, looking at the market in a different way, considering its social nature, a space of expression/satisfaction of multiple needs and of sharing of other values and objectives than just the economic ones, in fact demands a significant change of mind-set. The consequent reorganization of practices, in terms of the adaptation of production processes (what and how to produce, considering diversification and/or different methods) and of internal management (different organization of work, multiple activities), as well as the change in how to relate to the outside (conceiving of the farm boundaries differently) are equally challenging. These processes require determination and adequate external support, not only from the economic point of view. Not taking these difficulties into account can make the new pathways fragile, or create not fully innovative pathways. For several of these aspects, the care of all of the cultural, technical and organizational components still seems to represent a key factor. This issue has already emerged when dealing with the engagement in maintaining the specific features of these experiences.

*For its organisation, extended on a large territorial scale, IRIS needs to establish and maintain close and continuative relationships with its providers of raw materials. Technical advisory services and, even more important, support in developing motivation and commitment in adhering to the production model represent crucial factors.*

*The Floriddia family recognises the difficulties of their conversion to organic farming and, afterwards, of the farm reorganisation, introducing processing and direct selling, and the importance to that end of the support received by the organic farmers' organisations and other practitioners. Now that the farm is consolidated in its identity and business they devote many energies to help other farmers change attitude and reorganize their work.*

Besides this inherent complexity, the expansion of the production base poses the most innovative experiences in front of the question of the degree of openness to adopt (what agriculture, production methods, organizational forms, scale), thus solving the dilemma between the choice of inclusion and the desire to remain faithful to the principles. This choice is often facilitated by the current back-to-the-land trend and the connected interest in alternative farming models [46]. There are however cases in which it has still to face a poor sensitivity to the need to move towards more sustainable patterns.

### The Management of Value

The issue of economic equity, the equitable distribution of value along the chain (with particular attention to producers' profitability) and affordability for consumers, is clearly of prime importance within an approach that aspires to managing market relations under different logics than those of the capitalist market. This aspect becomes an expression of the new relationship established between parties, foregrounding the difference with the unbalanced power relations and consequent inequities in benefit sharing that often characterize conventional market relationships. The growth of these initiatives in organizational complexity, due to scaling-up, various forms of scaling-out and/or the presence of forms of intermediation, may be further challenging in this regard. What are the aspects to take into account? What are the mechanisms to be put in place in order not to return to old models?

The actualization of an equitable management of value within a reshaped market space sees the role of well-known factors, each of which however needs to be re-considered with reference to the ideals and goals underpinning these initiatives.

This actualization firstly depends on the level of democracy in the supply chain organization, in particular considering the role of the two less powerful actors, namely producers and consumers. The empirical evidence shows that this specific exercise of democracy is mostly an integral part of the relation of sharing and trust that develops among the parties, in many cases mediated by the social control that the local dimension of transactions allows. In some cases, however, it takes the shape of a real cooperation in the design and management of the economic (and other) aspects of the relationship. Enacting an alternative approach to these issues is here instrumental to redefining the whole model. When this process is particularly important, it may be facilitated through the intervention of a third party, which acts as an intermediary, making interactions easier.

*Within the AP! project, the T & C cooperative and Biorekk GAS association closely cooperated in designing the agreement between the parties. This process was supported by two outside organisations—GAES and Co-Energia, which facilitated the encounter and the reciprocal comprehension between the parties, as well as all the analyses and negotiations needed. In a phase aimed at consolidating and enlarging the adhesion, Co-Energia still plays a key role in managing and guaranteeing the “pact”.*

As evidence shows, another significant factor in the management of value is represented by the criteria for its distribution and related implications. In these initiatives, cost estimates/calculation represent the preferred way to determine the margins for the various chain agents, in the attempt to take into account the specificities of the production/distribution processes (not always are these easily translatable in economic terms). This approach differs from the one adopted in other short chains, where the prices paid to producers are fixed only with reference to the conventional market rules [39] or to not well-defined attributes based on the local origin of produce.

*In the case of AP! the definition of the agreement has demanded analysing, in a transparent way, all the costs related to the production-distribution stages, to define the degree of sharing of economic risk, to choose the marketing solutions more suitable to the GAS organisation and the degree of GAS involvement in managing the activities (or, alternatively, their economic value, to be recognised to T & C). This has in turn demanded an understanding of the respective exigencies, such as, for example, the cooperative’s need to invest internally or the consumers’ need to comprehend the uncertainty of farming.*

Taking into account costs inevitably entails facing the issue of the efficiency of the diverse activities/stages. In these kinds of short supply chains, this in turn leads to trade-offs between efficiency improvement, to ensure affordability, and the maintenance of the social and environmental sustainability features (that is, other ethical goals). Most of the initiatives analyzed show high levels of awareness about the issue of cost containment and ways to handle it, including intense use of ICT, working on scale and/or technology (as in the cases of Floriddia, IRIS, T & C) and organizational innovation. This last includes innovative solutions, such as the use of structures/equipment in common with other initiatives (e.g., Aequos), or the direct involvement of consumers in managing some supply chain functions. The latter is particularly significant, for the theoretical and practical implications that it has. Furthermore, here, the approaches differ, ranging from: (a) high (Aequos) or moderate voluntary engagement (AP! and Floriddia), which allows one to translate part of the costs (and benefits) out of the market; to (b) a more business-oriented model, referring to a different interpretation of the ideals (Arvaia).

*Aequos devotes great attention to the containment of costs: the structure is light, logistics costs are kept low and there is a good use of digital technology. Overall, the costs are 9 times lower than those of conventional chains. The cooperative is based on self-organization: GAS manage all activities, supported by paid staff for logistic work. About 600 people are involved. Through this management the cooperative achieves its goals of giving wide access to high-quality organic products (prices are about half those of big retailers) and paying producers equitably (they get more than 82% of the final price, with immediate payments).*

*The complex organisational structure of Arvaia and some choices made in that regard (such as rewarding all the services provided by members) have conditioned other important issues in the economic management of the project, such as the level of farmers' engagement (part-time employed) and the cost for the consumers (the annual share has been considerably increasing). This last aspect is deemed acceptable in the wealthy societal context in which the project takes place.*

The voluntary involvement of consumers appears closely related to the innovation in the approach to value creation-management. Within many of the most innovative short supply chains, it is seen as part of the participatory approach in the management of production process and looks to be a contribution to value co-creation. While this is a distinctive feature of these organizational models, in a perspective of growth, it poses new challenges, such as the dilemma with respect to the need for greater professionalism and efficiency and the willingness to explore new conceptions of enterprise, which may include also the societal actors (we will return to this issue later).

The other crucial factor related to the equity in economic value management is the way the issue of the final price is addressed. This redefines the efficiency dilemma. A criticism frequently moved to these alternative food networks is that of "exclusivity" or "elitism" [47] and, so, of incoherence with respect to social justice purposes. For its part, these networks and in general the movement denounce this emerging rhetoric of "food at low price for low income people" as aimed at aprioristically reducing food value to a low economic value. They counter that it expresses a rather reductive view of social justice (as well as consumer-centered) and confuses the terms of the question (Why should food cost less? Why do people prefer spend money for other goods? Who should solve the crucial issue of fulfilling this basic need/right?). Nevertheless, this point has become particularly significant in the context of growing interest in this type of provisioning, even more so in times of economic crisis. The diffusion of these initiatives is so faced with an additional trade-off: on the one hand, there is the moral commitment to ensure the affordability of ethical food; on the other hand, there is the willingness to foster the cultural and economic acknowledgment of the multiple social values of this food. Given the work done on cost containment and efficiency (within the limits permitted by the particular features of small-scale, organic and often territorially disadvantaged farming and processing), the initiatives analyzed show the enterprises mainly engaged in facing the challenge to redefine the value of food within their "communities" of reference.

*In its communication activities, Floriddia lays great emphasis on the "values" of its produce, stressing the environmental, health and cultural benefits stemming from his approach to farming and processing. They always underscore the need to change criteria of evaluation of the prices, re-positioning the value of good food with respect to other consumption choices.*

*IRIS aims at offering a high-quality organic product that may be affordable for everyone. This goal drove and is driving its growth strategy. At the same time, it is strongly engaged in fostering a different knowledge towards farming and food and in promoting not so much the product, as "the whole co-production system" and the related values.*

This approach seems to meet consumers' attitude. Similarly to what emerges in other studies [48], the analyses conducted confirm that the choices of consumers involved in these initiatives result not in being primarily conditioned by prices, or, better, evaluating these last consistently with the preference accorded to the special "quality" of food and, thus, the meanings attached to its purchase-consumption.

The different approach to the creation and management of the value of food and food systems, in which, as said, consumers are engaged actively, finds expression also in the ways these initiatives address other aspects of the economic management. As known, consumers may participate in the financial burden. This contribution may assume diverse forms: mere forms of pre-payment, more advanced forms of pre-financing, up to the full sharing of the business risk, such as in the community-based models, which clearly questions the foundations of the conventional models. In addition to solving difficult situations (there are several cases in which GAS intervened to sustain producers), the financial help can be aimed at supporting producers in their growth (e.g., the crowd-funding promoted by IRIS and planned by T & C).

#### The Modes of Interaction

The recognition, creation and management of value, as all of the aspects involved in the model of “co-management”/“co-production”, are closely related to the different “framework of sense” that the various actors involved develop and share through interaction and learning [35]. This collective reframing underpins any process of evaluation and mobilization, of production and reproduction of symbolic and material elements. In the development phase, maintaining and adapting the relational dimension that supports this process are so considered crucial in order to preserve the conditions for “co-producing”.

There is in this regard a belief that the growth of these initiatives in size and complexity may be accompanied by an impoverishment of the social dimension and, in practical terms, by a decrease in the level of interaction and co-participation. This would inevitably result in a weakening of a central component of their force of innovation, as well as of their democratic character. What forms of communication can ensure learning that takes place through direct interaction among different actors? What can continue to support the trust relationship even without direct interaction? Additionally, what interaction mechanisms may allow you to maintain a high level of sharing and avoid, on the one hand, processes of power concentration or exclusion and, on the other, processes of delegation? These questions are debated within the movement, and solutions are experimented on within the single initiatives facing development.

*Interaction and sharing have been and are key factors of the success of the Floriddia farm as well as of the broader projects it co-manages within the network of other farmers, processors, retailers, practitioners, scientists, organisations, groups of consumers of which it is part. The work on the genetic resources and farming techniques, the research around quality of bread and pasta, the spreading of the new knowledge and taste, the promotion of new initiatives with others take place through the close, smooth and continuative interactions among all the actors involved.*

The development of appropriate and consistent forms of interaction among parties is so deemed crucial to support the necessary process of growth. They include exchanges of information, maintenance of transparency on management, as well as mechanisms of democratic participation.

*IRIS remains faithful to its principles while managing its growth. The internal organisation is shaped on its vision of enterprise. The decision-making mechanisms, the management of the economic aspects, the conception of property are in the name of sharing and partnership.*

Managing the growth is however even more challenging, demanding other ways of coordination. A first example is given by the contracts that link a certain number of firms horizontally, as the “network agreement” established by the Italian law (National Law 33/2009) (Floriddia applied it to reinforce the relationships already existing with the other local farmers). Among these innovative initiatives, however, the definition of proper tools appears oriented towards other models suited to the particular nature of the relationship, based on mutual commitments, negotiation of win-win solutions and the key role of the trust component. Indeed, more than through formal contractual tools, these demands are better met through comprehensive trust-based agreements, which do not fit into

the legal-institutional framework available, but are rather fruit of the normative embeddedness in which these experiences have developed. It is the case of the experimentation of “pacts” between producers and consumers, agreements that provide for partnership and shared responsibility in the management of production-distribution processes and that are inspired by principles of solidarity [49]. This experimentation has long been undertaken by the most innovative AFN, in Italy as in other countries. The best-known example is that of Community-Supported Agriculture (CSA). In Italy, besides some recent initiatives of CSA (e.g., Arvaia), the development of this type of coordination began within the twenty-year experience of GAS, where some more advanced initiatives set the bases of the relationships between consumers and producers in this way [35,38,50]. The experimentations on participatory guarantee systems [51] represent another interesting innovation pathway. These are systems of guarantee/certification of quality functioning at the local level through involvement of the interested parties, close relationships of trust and knowledge co-creation. Besides the Arvaia case, the implementation of the pact model is well represented in the experience of IRIS and AP!-T & C.

### 3.3. *Still Looking for Innovation*

The challenge in addressing the above-mentioned critical issues so sees these initiatives engaged in developing innovative approaches compared to the mainstream models.

As significant is the further innovative potential that these initiatives express while continuing to experiment with the novel, but also finding ways to come out of the niche by trying to interact with parts of the system where favorable spaces and conditions arise. The first of these intertwined pathways includes the internal debate and experimentation around business models, while the second covers the efforts of innovation in the interaction with other private and public actors, in the new geography of food governance. They are illustrated below.

#### 3.3.1. Towards a New Social Pact

The definition of organizational models consistent with their value systems is a central issue of these innovative initiatives. The adoption of forms of coordination embodying a new social pact between production and consumption is integrated with the search for a full implementation of the social enterprise model, aimed at operating out of the capitalist market logics. In line with the community approach pursued by grassroots innovations [1], this model is based on a radical change of vision, aimed at re-embedding economics within superordinate social purposes. In this perspective, the enterprise is seen in its ability to manage the production and reproduction of common goods and to create social value for and together with the community of reference, being this spatially-based or a broader community. This pursuit of social purposes goes well beyond the model of corporate social responsibility, as well as beyond the enterprise commitments themselves, to involve the whole community. According to the narrative created by these networks, the production activity itself becomes a common good, integrated into the community. In this mutual commitment, the coordination function played by the “pact” becomes even more meaningful, as it formalizes the trust-based relationship between the enterprise, recognized in its social role, and the other social actors (e.g., AP!; IRIS) [49].

The implementation of this form of relationship and related business model is a challenging process, which is nourishing a theoretical debate among movements and organizations (among them: the Italian Network of Solidarity Economy, the Degrowth Association, the Federation of the Economy of Common Good) [52]. Different theoretical models are considered in that regard, such as: the early cooperative movement, aimed at building a non-profit food business model around social values; the community-based economy (inspired by Olivetti’s vision of enterprise), in which the enterprise becomes an agent of social change and the firm a collective good [53]; the common good economy [54], in which the enterprise operates as an ethical business although in the capitalist market; the solidarity economy, aimed at the common good, by pursuing social and environmental justice [55].

Hand in hand with this endeavor of theoretical redefinition, the experiences in the territories promote or are involved in experimentations. The experience of IRIS is significant in this respect.

*To strengthen the value base underlying its activity and its social role, IRIS is committed to testing the implementation of the 'common good economy' model, collaborating in the definition and validation of the necessary indicators. This experimentation is followed with interest by other enterprises, including T & C.*

Not less meaningful is the pathway undertaken by T & C through the Adesso Pasta! Project, aimed at grounding the pact in commitment to transparency.

*In order to put in practice the idea of a pact with its community of reference T & C has "opened the firm" making available all the information needed to define a transparent final price, on which to agree with potential consumers. This transparency is considered the first, needed step towards a really new relationship, based on co-responsibility in the enactment of an alternative production-consumption system.*

The link between socially-oriented food business and (spatially-based or broader) community is deemed crucial in those evolutionary trajectories that see enterprises significantly up-scale. Its maintenance contributes to preserving the right relation between economic and social goals.

*The criticism newly addressed to IRIS is the risk, over the pursued process of growth, of losing a real contact with its social environment and its production base, so moving towards a conventional approach to the business and market.*

*The growth of scale has been posing new challenges in financial and organisational terms to Arvaia, leading towards a more complex structure. This is stimulating an internal debate, with members who prefer to put a limit to the expansion of business and membership, and others who see the growth as instrumental to building an alternative market.*

The re-socialized and re-spatialized vision of economic activities is stimulating a reflection also on the role that the community may in its turn play in the implementation of an alternative model and, therefore, on the importance of the existence/development of social and communitarian capitals. To this end, (re)building community relationships based on new shared visions and practices is considered as crucial to overcome the social deficiencies that have been characterizing many territories. Strengthening local communities—at the same time factor and goal of the process of transformation of economy—is indeed a central issue of the theoretical reflection carried out by movements and organizations [52]. At the operational level, in many cases, these processes develop through intense relational exchanges, often on specific issues or projects, that the firms are able to promote and maintain within and around the supply chain, with citizens-consumers and other local actors. The adhesion to new sustainable production/consumption models and life styles and, with it, the enhancement of human capital, social relations and culture of common good are in this sense deemed significant areas of collective growth.

*The interactions between Floriddia and local organisations, firms and concerned consumers have a positive impact on the local community. The sharing of new knowledge and beliefs and the sense of participating in a common project—consolidating a local production-distribution-consumption system based on agro-ecological practices, ethical management and culture of healthy and nutritional food—have become significant, promising components of this new "environment".*

*Arvaia considers and presents itself as a collective management of a common good—land—for subsistence and other social purposes. Through intense relational activities it has attracted many organisations and institutions interested in understanding this new economic-social model better, as well as other networks with which the cooperative has initiated new projects.*

In this perspective, as we will see later, communities are also loaded with a responsibility in contributing to create broader enabling environments, supporting the expression of the potential of alternative business. The arena of local governance is the spaces where civil society may play this proactive role.

### 3.3.2. Looking for Further Spaces of Innovation

The desire to represent food practices within a wider vision of management of the territorial resources and community-based mobilization is leading these alternative networks to open to interaction with other pathways of rethinking/reorganizing production-consumption patterns. Equally important is the connection with other extra-local networks sharing the same commitment.

At the local scale, numerous chances of dialogue and collaboration with other actors/networks, such as public administrations, research institutes and organizations, have been developing in several areas. They concern issues such as sustainability, rural-urban development, social inclusion, urban food strategies, public procurement, education, health, food culture, food sovereignty, etc. In most cases, grassroots initiatives around food are deemed forms of active citizenship, able to promote and support the creation and spreading of new culture and practices and thus regarded with interest and sought as partners (the cases of Floriddia, IRIS and Arvaia exemplify this interest).

These opportunities of interaction have been representing significant potential spaces of innovation. Their results have been however different, in relation to the project, the actors engaged, the innovation initiatives involved and the context characteristics. It emerges, in particular, the role played by the quality of the connections established between these innovation networks and mainstream actors/networks. Good exemplifications in this regard are given by the involvement of grassroots initiatives in local processes for the definition/implementation of urban food strategies (these pathways have been characterizing, for instance, the processes promoted in Pisa, Milan, Turin and Bergamo), or in specific research activities, such as those focusing on sustainability issues. In both of the cases, the modes of communication and cooperation seem to be a key factor. To that end, the presence of actors able to “cross the boundaries” and facilitate the establishment of an effective interaction between the parties proves to be crucial.

*The work of genetic improvement carried out by Floriddia and the other actors involved (other farmers, millers, bakers) has seen the key role played by the close relationship established with some researchers. In its turn, this relationship has benefited from the researchers' experience in participatory methods and integration of different sources of knowledge, and from the intermediary role played by the network of activists and practitioners which the farm belong to. The encounter between these different worlds has been so successful in building a common pool of knowledge and expertise, and in defining shared goals.*

Besides the existence of proper conditions for interaction, the evidence confirms how the presence of a favorable institutional and political environment is important for the expression of the transformative potential of these networks. The recent experience of Arvaia is meaningful in this regard:

*The decision of the Municipality of Bologna, in 2015, to lease a large area adjacent to the land cultivated by Arvaia represented a great opportunity for the cooperative, however, it was not fully conducive to it. The procedure followed by the Administration in fact did not take into account the widely acknowledged social value of Arvaia project, forcing the cooperative to compete for the land on the free market. The high investment needed changed its financial situation heavily.*

Public policies of territorial planning, differently interpreting “social needs” in land use, have indeed become an emblematic area of clash between different visions/logics. Needs and instances coming from active segments of the civil society still hardly find room in public decision-making. Even the recent pathways aimed at building integrated food strategies, although representing

innovative institutional contexts, prove to be not free from the risk of a merely formal involvement of these social actors. In other cases, because of the lack of dialogue, the only form of expression seems to be opposition. In the last few years, there were, as in other countries, many community-led initiatives of “resistance to the system” in the name of principles of food sovereignty and food democracy. In addition to the inconsistency of public policies, these difficulties highlight the weaknesses, in terms of institutional spaces and operational conditions that still characterize this potential space of interaction between grassroots movements and mainstream articulations. In other terms, the still existing difficulty of implementing effective forms of local governance emerges, in which also non-institutional actors, the expression of segments of society and business and related innovations can contribute to decision-making.

The significance of these deficiencies is even clearer considering the potential of these initiatives in a broader perspective. The success of specific, localized experiences of interaction, strengthened by sharing the experience horizontally with other networks, may in fact trigger wider processes of change by promoting innovation at higher levels. The above-mentioned example of the integration of grassroots initiatives into local food strategies is meaningful in this regard. The experimentation of this inclusive innovation at the local scale may be the basis for the definition of new food policy frameworks and more general food governance patterns [56]. As significant is the case of the participatory research-experimentation activities. The achievements obtained at both the technological-organizational level and the institutional level have initiated new pathways that potentially lead to even more significant changes in the field of research (objectives; methods for designing and conducting research) and in the specific legal-institutional framework (e.g., definition of specific labels, forms of coordination, regulations). As regards the first area of change, the increasing interest in these issues and innovative approaches by mainstream research institutes and research/development policies (at regional and higher levels) well testifies to the “new course” that these grassroots innovations have contributed to promoting (the hybrid network of which Floriddia is part has brought its fields of interest and its approaches within several EU-funded research projects). At the institutional level, the advocacy action for renewing the seed regulatory system, collectively carried out, is supporting a challenging political action at the international scale [57]; on the other side, it is already yielding its fruits in the revitalized debate on biodiversity and intellectual property right laws at a national level. These changes, in their turn, are integrated with the growing societal consensus towards new food production-consumption models that these types of initiatives have contributed to developing.

#### **4. Final Remarks: Capturing the Value of Alterity**

In the context of growing societal interest and mobilization around more sustainable food practices, the paper has focused on grassroots, radical innovations, exploring their internal dynamics, related to the processes of growth and the further effort of innovation, and the challenges emerging in the diffusion of their innovation out of the niche. This in the belief that understanding the potential of innovation of these initiatives, looking at what they have enacted, but also at what they are pursuing, and the factors affecting the full expression of this potential may be helpful for the broader process of transition to more equitable and sustainable food systems. I highlight here some main points in this regard.

A deep normative commitment characterizes the trajectory of innovation of these initiatives; similarly, it informs their interaction with and impact on the mainstream system. Having increased the visibility and the consciousness of the hidden meanings of food and having raised the question about the need to modify attitudes and practices around it, looking at a new value of food, represent the first, major contributions to change by these initiatives. The development of a new food culture and, even more, of a new ethics of food is so the first challenge to the system.

These initiatives also show that the translation of these new culture and ethics into alternative practices is a complex process, which requires proper changes in multiple domains, and the active

engagement of all stakeholders. As the issues discussed in the paper have shown, it is about changing models and practices of firm management, consumers' approach to food, organizational models and power relations, modes of management of economic value, roles and identities of the actors involved, forms of interaction and related institutions. A re-orientation of these aspects according to the new principles and goals implies significant reframing processes, supported by collective learning.

These processes have characterized the early development of these initiatives as a radical innovation niche. They are still important to reproduce their specificity, preserving their transformative potential, as well as to manage the needed growth and to continue to innovate in the context of increasing interest and engagement in these alternative models. In a perspective of growth, the distinctive characteristics of these initiatives have to face organizational efficiency requirements and greater complexity in supply chain relationships, challenges that value co-creating and co-managing put at cultural levels. These initiatives are engaged in facing these challenges through innovative technical, organizational, cultural and institutional solutions compared to the mainstream models, in line with their objectives of change. These innovation pathways look of great interest in a broader context that, while being increasingly aware of the necessity of transition, seems largely oriented towards accommodative, compromise solutions [14,18].

The case of the conception of the value of food and its relation with economic value is emblematic in this regard. Despite the debate promoted around the theme by exponents of culture, organizations and scholars, in general, consumers' choices seem still affected by the dilemma between greater "quality" of food (consistently with principles) and cheapness. The shift from the logic of "value-for-money" to that of "values-for-money" [33] is indeed not at all easy. These initiatives show how different the approach to this issue may be and how challenging it is to enact it. A wide change in the way of valuing food implies questioning the priorities in food choices and, even more significantly, between these and other needs. It is not just a matter of economic affordability, but also and even more a question of cultural accessibility and normative frames, that is of knowledge and the system of values. In this regard, these experiences show how important collective learning and action are in supporting individual behavior [30]. The relevance of the social dimension of change is confirmed to be an important achievement in the understanding of transition mechanisms/processes [40]. Equally important, it is the issue of the possibility to put the preference for a certain food value into practice, which leads to the realm of food democracy and, thus, of power relations dominating food practices.

Other areas of change provide further, not negligible challenges. The latest innovation effort of these initiatives aims at designing and testing even more advanced models of the relation between food practices and society. Within these, a shared vision of food value incorporates food practices into a broader vision of the management of territorial resources and into a community dimension. This appears to be a significant process of innovation, in line with the perspective that looks at the close link between the development of sustainable regional food systems and community resilience [22]. Some scholars consider this process even more meaningful, as it entails a radical change in the positioning of food in social life, according to a process of "re-commonification" capable of uniting all players around the vision of "food as a commons" [58]. The concepts of re-spatialization and re-socialization of food systems and of re-embedding the economic into the social assume their fullest sense: the relationship among food, actors engaged around it, places and ways of production and consumption is entirely redefined. The territorial and social embeddedness refers here to a powerful conception of community built and engaged around ethical food values and related operational implications. Going even beyond the approach of food sovereignty, it refers to a form of food citizenship built and shared collectively, to a new social pact encompassing rights and responsibilities. This vision is much more challenging than the mainstream representations of re-localization, and intentionally normative when looking at issues of transition. Fortunately, narratives and experimentations in this sense are already spreading among social networks, as well as these issues are already engaging scholars.

This broader vision, shared within wider networks of practice, has opened these initiatives to new interactions, with other social and institutional components of the territories. Moreover, it has led to efforts to spread their innovation at higher levels, in order to create favorable institutional, political, legal and cultural conditions to trigger more significant change.

Capturing and amplifying this variegated innovation potential represents an important opportunity for transition, providing insights into both directions and ways of change. To this end, the existence of favorable conditions for interaction, in particular enabling boundary-crossing [59], as well as of democratic institutional frameworks for the expression of these niches of innovation [33,36,60] prove to be important. The former factor is crucial to catch their potential of change. As evidence shows, it requires overcoming communication barriers among different actors with different value bases, different visions and goals, often different languages and operational approaches, sometimes mutual prejudice. The latter factor requires creating adequate spaces and tools to overcome exclusion, power imbalances and lock-in mechanisms, in order to actually open to wider interests and enact negotiation and co-decision. In a perspective of multi-level governance, different forms of intervention are possible and needed. While acknowledging the importance of undertaking change at a higher levels, priority goes to the local scale where to devise and experiment with innovative social and political spaces, in which to significantly reframe discourses and practices around food. Proper social learning processes may allow here including multiple perspectives and integrating cognitive and normative beliefs in handling sustainability issues. Such a framework of reflexive governance can more effectively catch the challenges that local systems face and valorize the plurality of resources available and efforts put into practice for transition [36,60].

**Acknowledgments:** I wish to thank the many people I met during my research activities on these initiatives and the organisations which I am engaged in for the opportunity to understand the observed processes from a broader perspective.

**Conflicts of Interest:** The author declares no conflict of interest.

## References

1. Seyfang, G.; Smith, A. Grassroots innovations for sustainable development: Towards a new research and policy agenda. *Environ. Politics* **2007**, *16*, 584–603. [[CrossRef](#)]
2. Hendrickson, M.; Heffernan, W. Opening spaces through relocation: Locating potential resistance in the weaknesses of the global food system. *Sociol. Rural.* **2002**, *42*, 347–369. [[CrossRef](#)]
3. Morgan, K.; Marsden, T.; Murdoch, J. *Worlds of Food: Place, Power, and Provenance in the Food Chain*; Oxford University Press: Oxford, UK, 2006.
4. Kneafsey, M.; Cox, R.; Holloway, L.; Dowler, E.; Venn, L.; Tuomainen, H. *Reconnecting Consumers, Producers, and Food. Exploring Alternatives*; Berg: New York, NY, USA, 2008.
5. Wright, W.; Middendorf, G. *The Fight over Food: Producers, Consumers, and Activists Challenge the Global Food System*; The Pennsylvania State University: University Park, PA, USA, 2008.
6. Goodman, D.; DuPuis, E.M.; Goodman, M. *Alternative Food Networks: Knowledge, Practice, and Politics*; Routledge: London, UK, 2012.
7. Hassanein, N. Practicing food democracy: A pragmatic politics of transformation. *J. Rural Stud.* **2003**, *19*, 77–86. [[CrossRef](#)]
8. Hassanein, N. Locating food democracy: Theoretical and practical ingredients. *J. Hunger Environ. Nutr.* **2008**, *3*, 286–308. [[CrossRef](#)]
9. Holloway, L.; Kneafsey, M.; Venn, L.; Cox, R.; Dowler, E.; Tuomainen, H. Possible Food Economies: A Methodological Framework for Exploring Food Production–Consumption Relationships. *Sociol. Rural.* **2007**, *47*, 1–19. [[CrossRef](#)]
10. Maye, D. Moving alternative food networks beyond the niche. *Int. J. Soc. Agric. Food* **2013**, *20*, 383–389.
11. Jones, O.; Kirwan, J.; Morris, C.; Buller, H.; Dunn, R.; Hopkins, A.; Whittington, F.; Wood, J. On the Alternativeness of Alternative Food Networks: Sustainability and the Co-production of Social and Ecological Wealth. In *Interrogating Alterity: Alternative Economic and Political Spaces*; Ashgate: Oxford, UK, 2010; pp. 95–109.

12. Holt Giménez, E.; Shattuck, A. Food crises, food regimes and food movements: Rumbblings of reform or tides of transformation? *J. Peasant Stud.* **2011**, *38*, 109–144. [[CrossRef](#)] [[PubMed](#)]
13. Renting, H.; Schermer, M.; Rossi, A. Building Food Democracy: Exploring Civic Food Networks and Newly Emerging Forms of Food Citizenship. *Int. J. Soc. Agric. Food* **2012**, *19*, 289–307.
14. Constance, D.H.; Friedland, W.H.; Renard, M.-C.; Rivera-Ferre, M.G. The Discourse on Alternative Agrifood Movements. In *Alternative Agrifood Movements: Patterns of Convergence and Divergence*; Constance, D.H., Renard, M.-C., Rivera-Ferre, M.G., Eds.; Emerald: Binkley, UK, 2014; pp. 3–46.
15. DeLind, L.B. Transforming organic agriculture into industrial organic products: Reconsidering national organic standards. *Hum. Organ.* **2000**, *59*, 198–202. [[CrossRef](#)]
16. Guthman, J. The Trouble with ‘Organic Lite’ in California: A Rejoinder to the ‘Conventionalisation’ Debate. *Sociol. Rural.* **2004**, *44*, 301–316. [[CrossRef](#)]
17. Jaffee, D.; Howard, P.H. Corporate co-optation of organic and fair trade standards. *Agric. Hum. Values* **2010**, *27*, 387–399. [[CrossRef](#)]
18. Renard, M.-C. Alternative agrifood movements and social change. In *Alternative Agrifood Movements: Patterns of Convergence and Divergence*; Constance, D.H., Renard, M.-C., Rivera-Ferre, M.G., Eds.; Emerald: Binkley, UK, 2014; pp. 69–85.
19. Hinrichs, C.C.; Eshleman, J. Agrifood movements: Diversity, aims, and limits. In *Rural America in a Globalizing World: Problems and Prospects for the 2010s*; Bailey, C., Jensen, L., Ransom, E., Eds.; West Virginia University Press: Morgantown, WV, USA, 2014; pp. 138–155.
20. Lockie, S. Responsibility and agency within alternative food networks: Assembling the “citizen consumer”. *Agric. Hum. Values* **2009**, *26*, 193–201. [[CrossRef](#)]
21. Sassatelli, R. The political morality of food: Discourses, contestation and alternative consumption. In *Qualities of Food*; Harvey, M., McMeekin, A., Warde, A., Eds.; Manchester University Press: Manchester, UK, 2004; pp. 176–191.
22. Marsden, T.; Sonnino, R. Human health and wellbeing and the sustainability of urban-regional food systems. *Curr. Opin. Environ. Sustain.* **2012**, *4*, 427–430. [[CrossRef](#)]
23. Blay-Palmer, A.; Landman, K.; Knezevic, I.; Hayhurst, R. Constructing resilient, transformative communities through sustainable “food hubs”. *Local Environ.* **2013**, *18*, 521–527. [[CrossRef](#)]
24. Berti, G.; Mulligan, C. Competitiveness of Small Farms and Innovative Food Supply Chains: The Role of Food Hubs in Creating Sustainable Regional and Local Food Systems. *Sustainability* **2016**, *8*, 616. [[CrossRef](#)]
25. Rip, A.; Kemp, R. Technological change. In *Human Choices and Climate Change*; Rayner, S., Malone, E., Eds.; Batelle: Columbus, OH, USA, 1998; Volume 2, pp. 327–399.
26. Geels, F.W. From sectoral system of innovation to socio-technical systems. Insights about dynamics and change from sociology and institutional theory. *Res. Policy* **2004**, *33*, 897–920. [[CrossRef](#)]
27. Kemp, R.; Schot, J.; Hoogma, R. Regime shifts to sustainability through processes of niche formation: The approach of Strategic Niche Management. *Technol. Anal. Strateg. Manag.* **1998**, *10*, 175–195. [[CrossRef](#)]
28. Geels, F.; Schot, J. Typology of socio-technical transition pathways. *Res. Policy* **2007**, *36*, 399–417. [[CrossRef](#)]
29. Van der Ploeg, J.D.; Bouma, J.; Rip, A.; Rijkenberg, F.H.J.; Ventura, F.; Wiskerke, J.S.C. On Regimes, Novelty and Co-Production. In *Seeds of Transition: Essays on Novelty Production, Niches and Regimes in Agriculture*; Wiskerke, J.S.C., Van der Ploeg, J.D., Eds.; Royal Van Gorcum: Assen, The Netherlands, 2004; pp. 1–30.
30. Brunori, G.; Rossi, A.; Guidi, F. On the new social relations around and beyond food. Analysing consumers’ role and action in Gruppi di Acquisto Solidale (Solidarity Purchasing Groups). *Sociol. Rural.* **2012**, *52*, 1–30. [[CrossRef](#)]
31. Darnhofer, I. Socio-technical transitions in farming: Key concepts. In *Transition Pathways towards Sustainability in Agriculture. Case Studies from Europe*; Sutherland, L.-A., Darnhofer, I., Wilson, G., Zagata, L., Eds.; CABI: Wallingford, UK, 2015; pp. 17–31.
32. Goodman, M.K.; Maye, D.; Holloway, L. Ethical foodscapes? Premises, promises, and possibilities. *Environ. Plan. A* **2010**, *42*, 1782–1796. [[CrossRef](#)]
33. Lang, T. From ‘value-for-money’ to ‘values-for-money’? Ethical food and policy in Europe. *Environ. Plan. A* **2010**, *42*, 1814–1832. [[CrossRef](#)]
34. Goodman, M.K.; Sage, C. Food Transgressions: Ethics, Governance and Geographies. In *Food Transgressions. Making Sense of Contemporary Food Politics*; Goodman, M.K., Sage, C., Eds.; Ashgate: Farnham, UK, 2014.

35. Rossi, A.; Brunori, G. Drivers of transformation in the agro-food system. GAS as co-production of Alternative Food Networks. In *Building Sustainable Rural Futures. The Added Value of Systems Approaches in Times of Change and Uncertainty, 9th European IFSA Symposium, Vienna, Austria, 4–7 July 2010*; Darnhofer, I., Grötzer, M., Eds.; Universität für Bodenkultur: Vienna, Austria, 2010; pp. 1913–1931.
36. Marsden, T. From post-productionism to reflexive governance: Contested transitions in securing more sustainable food futures. *J. Rural Stud.* **2013**, *29*, 123–134. [[CrossRef](#)]
37. Holloway, L.; Kneafsey, M. Producing-consuming food: Closeness, connectedness and rurality in four alternative food networks. In *Geographies of Rural Cultures and Societies*; Holloway, L., Kneafsey, M., Eds.; Ashgate: Farnham, UK, 2004; pp. 262–282.
38. Brunori, G.; Rossi, A.; Malandrini, V. Co-producing transition: Innovation processes in farms adhering to solidarity-based purchase groups (Gas) in Tuscany, Italy. *Int. J. Sociol. Agric. Food* **2011**, *18*, 28–53.
39. Belletti, G.; Marescotti, A.; Innocenti, S.; Rossi, A. Prezzo giusto e filiera corta: Una lettura dell'esperienza dei mercati dei produttori agricoli in Toscana. *Agriregionieuropa* **2010**, *6*, 23.
40. Little, R.; Maye, D.; Ilbery, B. Collective purchase: Moving local and organic foods beyond the niche market. *Environ. Plan. A* **2010**, *42*, 1797–1813. [[CrossRef](#)]
41. Sage, C. The transition movement and food sovereignty: From local resilience to global engagement in food system transformation. *J. Consum. Cult.* **2014**, *14*, 254–275. [[CrossRef](#)]
42. Tisenkopfs, T.; Kunda, I.; Šūmane, S. Learning as Issue Framing in Agricultural Innovation Networks. *J. Agric. Educ. Ext.* **2014**, *20*, 309–326. [[CrossRef](#)]
43. Wenger, E. *Communities of Practice. Learning, Meaning and Identity*; Cambridge University Press: Cambridge, UK, 1998.
44. Brown, J.S.; Duguid, P. Knowledge and organization: A social-practice perspective. *Organ. Sci.* **2001**, *12*, 198–213. [[CrossRef](#)]
45. Blay-Palmer, A.; Sonnino, R.; Custot, J. A food politics of the possible? Growing sustainable food systems through networks of knowledge. *Agric. Hum. Values* **2016**, *33*, 27–43. [[CrossRef](#)]
46. Canale, G.; Ceriani, M. *Contadini per Scelta. Esperienze e Racconti di Nuova Agricoltura*; Jaka Book: Milano, Italy, 2013.
47. Guthman, J. From the ground up: California organics and the making of 'yuppie chow'. In *Alternative Food Geographies: Representation and Practice*; Maye, D., Holloway, L., Kneafsey, M., Eds.; Elsevier: Oxford, UK, 2007; pp. 241–254.
48. Guidi, R.; Andretta, M. Between Resistance and Resilience. How do Italian Solidarity Purchase Groups Change in Times of Crisis and Austerity? *Partecip. Conflitto* **2015**, *8*, 443–477.
49. Tavolo per la Rete italiana di Economia Solidale (Ed.) *Un'economia nuova, dai Gas alla zeta*; Altreconomia: Milano, Italy, 2013.
50. European CSA Research Group. Overview on Supported Community Agriculture in Europe CSA. 2016. Available online: <http://urgenci.net/wp-content/uploads/2016/05/Overview-of-Community-Supported-Agriculture-in-Europe.pdf> (accessed on 12 May 2016).
51. Coscarello, M.; Rodriguez, L.B. Certificación 'de papel' o de relaciones humanas? Los sistemas de garantía participativa como iniciativas de soberanía alimentaria local. In *Ecología Política. Cuaderno de Debate Internacional*; Icaria Editorial: Barcelona, Spain, 2015; pp. 35–41.
52. Biolghini, D.; Bonaiuti, M.; Burlando, R.; Cacciari, P.; Castagnola, A.; Deriu, M.; Di Paolo, P.; Di Vece, L.; Domeneghini, D.; Mance, E.A.; et al. *I Dialoghi dell'economia solidale. Scenari e concetti per una transizione possibile*, 1st ed.; Asterios: Trieste, Italy, 2016.
53. Magnaghi, A.; Bonomi, A.; Revelli, M. *Il vento di Adriano. La comunità concreta di Olivetti tra non più e non ancora*; DeriveApprodi: Roma, Italy, 2015.
54. Felber, C. Die Gemeinwohl-Ökonomie: Das Wirtschaftsmodell der Zukunft. Available online: <http://www.christian-felber.at/buecher/gemeinwohl.php> (accessed on 15 June 2016).
55. Rete Italiana di Economia Solidale. Carta per la Rete Italiana di Economia Solidale. 2007. Available online: <http://www.economiasolidale.net/content/carta-res> (accessed on 10 May 2016).
56. Di Iacovo, F.; Brunori, G.; Innocenti, S. Le strategie urbane: Il piano del cibo. *Agriregionieuropa* **2013**, *32*, 9–16.
57. Bocci, R. Seeds between freedom and rights. *Scienze Territorio* **2014**, *2*, 115–121.

58. Vivero, J.L. Food as a Commons: Reframing the Narrative of the Food System. SSRN Working Paper Series. 2013. Available online: [http://papers.ssrn.com/sol3/papers.cfm?abstract\\_id=2255447](http://papers.ssrn.com/sol3/papers.cfm?abstract_id=2255447) (accessed on 10 May 2016).
59. Howells, J. Intermediation and the role of intermediaries in innovation. *Res. Policy* **2006**, *35*, 715–728. [[CrossRef](#)]
60. Hinrichs, C.C. Transitions to sustainability: A change in thinking about food systems change? *Agric. Hum. Values* **2014**, *31*, 143–155. [[CrossRef](#)]



© 2017 by the author; licensee MDPI, Basel, Switzerland. This article is an open access article distributed under the terms and conditions of the Creative Commons Attribution (CC BY) license (<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>).