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# Alternative Food Networks<sup>1</sup>: Characteristics and Dynamics that Define Alternativeness in the Academic Production

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## Abstract

This article analyzes the characteristics and dynamics that define alternative food networks (AFNs) as an alternative to the conventional food system. The relevance of the study lies in the growing importance of AFNs as transformative agents that challenge the hegemony of industrial agriculture and point to more equitable, sustainable, and integrated food systems. A systematic review of 106 articles indexed in the Web of Science and Scopus databases was conducted. The methodology involved searching for specific terms, reading the full texts, and creating a database for systematization and qualitative analysis. As a result, 34 characteristics attributed to AFNs were identified, with the ten most cited being: close relationships between actors; economic, social, and environmental concerns; an emphasis on location; differentiated and diverse organizational structures; education, conscious choice, and responsible consumption; shared values; a challenge to the dominant paradigm; activism and political awareness; and challenges to the maintenance and adaptability of AFNs and unconventional agricultural practices. The analysis of the results indicates that alternativeness is not a fixed attribute but rather a concept that is interpreted in various ways, reflecting the coexistence of different values, practices, and organizational structures. In this sense, the study systematically organizes these elements and the findings, offering a comprehensive view of the various ways in which alternativeness is conceived in AFNs. This broadens the theoretical understanding of the phenomenon and provides support for future investigations that wish to

further the debate in different contexts.

**Keywords:** Alternative Food Networks, Alternativeness, Alternative Organizations.

## Introduction

As alternative food networks (AFNs) gain prominence in the contemporary food scene, the contrast between them and the conventional industrial agriculture model becomes more relevant. This contrast promotes a vision that transcends agricultural practices and encompasses social and economic relations linked to food production and consumption (Reynaud, Fulconis, & Paché, 2019).

Due to their increasing significance on the global stage, it is crucial to delve deeper into the concepts that define this field of study beyond an empirical description of AFNs. These networks should not be understood as categories with an intrinsically clear definition because their configuration varies significantly according to socio-territorial contexts, adopted practices, and guiding values. The reviewed literature shows that the alternativeness attributed to AFNs is multifaceted and relational. It results from various interpretations of what it means to "distance oneself from the dominant agri-food model," which prevents the establishment of a universal definition.

In this study, the term "networks" refers to a set of relational arrangements among various actors, including producers, consumers, and intermediary organizations. These arrangements are sustained by bonds of proximity and trust (Seyfang, 2006; Darolt et al., 2016). Similarly, the term "alternative" does not have a single, stable meaning because it depends on multiple factors and the specific context in which it is analyzed. In this article, alternativeness is addressed according to the perspectives of Dufeu et al. (2020) and Rosol (2020). They understand it not only in terms of sustainable practices or short commercialization channels but also as the proposition of alternative social, economic, and political systems that are often in tension with the dominant agri-food system. The latter refers to the prevailing global model of food production, processing, distribution, and consumption. This model is characterized by industrial practices, corporate centralization, and strong integration into the global capitalist regime.

The dominant agri-food system is a global regime in which large transnational corporations organize food production and circulation and are supported by neoliberal policies, multilateral agreements, and investments in industrial technologies. Emerging after World War II, this system has consolidated in recent decades through mechanisms such as agricultural subsidies, extensive monocultures, the intensive use of chemical inputs, biotechnology, and the vertical integration of production chains (Dufeu et al., 2020; Rosol, 2020).

Gaitán-Cremaschi et al. (2019) argue that the dominant food systems combine conventional production practices, such as high productivity, intensive use of chemical inputs, and monocultures, with hierarchical and highly formalized value chains that connect large agribusinesses in global distribution networks. This form contrasts sharply with alternative food systems, which are based on proximity, autonomy, and local governance.

In this sense, AFNs are collective projects that aim to reconfigure the production of food and the values, knowledge, and modes of organization of social life (Levkoe, 2011). To understand their

relevance, it is necessary to critically analyze the principles that guide them, their organizational dynamics, and the internal disputes they face.

As previously mentioned, while conventional agriculture relies on intensive practices that prioritize monoculture, the extensive use of agrochemicals, and centralized production, AFNs propose a more diverse and decentralized approach. These networks challenge the logic of large-scale production and generally opt for agroecological methods that promote environmental sustainability, soil regeneration, and biodiversity preservation (Quiédeville, Bassene, Lançon, Chabrol, & Moustier, 2018).

The agricultural resistance inherent to AFNs challenges not only conventional practices but also seeks to redefine the relationship between producers and consumers. By prioritizing proximity between producers and consumers, these networks establish direct connections and foster relationships of trust and transparency. This highlights not only a change in agricultural methods but also a fundamental reconfiguration of social and economic interactions related to food production. Thus, AFNs offer alternatives to the industrial model and challenge its hegemony, pointing to a horizon of possibilities that envisions more just, sustainable, and integrated food systems (Lundström, 2011).

Studies emphasize the importance of promoting organic agriculture and agroecological practices to achieve sustainable economic development. While there is a consensus on the importance of these practices, the variety of views on how to achieve these goals underscores the complexity and diversity inherent to AFNs. Thus, the debate surrounding AFNs reveals a complex and dynamic scenario where different perspectives coexist as an intricate mosaic of approaches, challenges, and potentialities (Dufeu, Le Velly, Bréchet, & Loconto, 2020).

Based on this scenario, this study explores the complexity of these networks. Through a systematic review of the literature, it offers an analysis of elements permeating academic discussions on alternative food production, distribution, and consumption. The objective of this article is to determine the characteristics and dynamics that constitute the alternativeness of AFNs by analyzing their organizational elements and interrelationships. The aim is to provide a more comprehensive, contextualized understanding of AFNs and contribute to the understanding of their role in transforming the food system and its implications for the global food panorama.

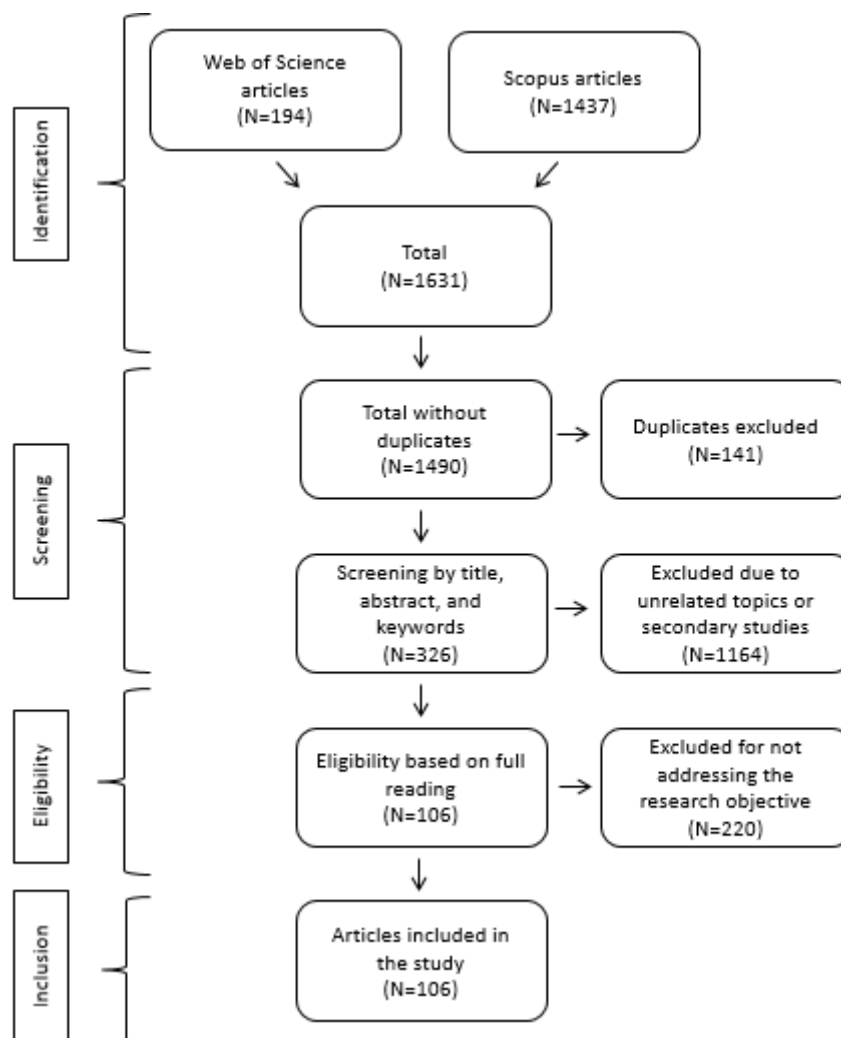
### *Methodology*

This study was conducted through a systematic review of literature from the Web of Science and Scopus electronic databases of indexed journals. No year of publication parameter was used, aiming to reach the largest possible number of articles and cover various views on the subject over time.

The search included articles with the terms "agri-food networks," "food networks," or "food systems"; "organizations," "companies," "enterprises," "associations," "cooperatives," "non-governmental organizations," or "civil society organizations"; and "alternative" or "alternatively" in their title, keywords, or abstract. Various forms of the terms "food networks" and "alternativeness" were used, as well as various types related to the term "organizations," to reach as many studies on the subject as possible. Similarly, English terms were used to provide a wider search range, given

that English is the international standard for publication. The terms "food networks" and "alternativeness" were chosen because they are the main subject of this study. The term "organizations" was added because AFNs are largely made up of organizations, and this study adopts the analytical perspective of management sciences.

A total of 1,631 studies were found in this search: 194 on the Web of Science platform and 1,437 on the Scopus platform. All of the articles were transferred to the Rryan application for screening and evaluation to determine which articles would be included in the study. It was found that 141 articles were duplicates and were removed from the study. Then, all of the abstracts were read to verify that they dealt with AFNs and alternativeness. Articles such as literature reviews and meta-analyses were excluded because they are based on secondary data. Thus, of the 1,631 articles, 326 remained and were read in their entirety. Afterwards, 220 articles that did not meet the research objective were removed, leaving 106 articles for this study. The flowchart showing the steps for collecting and screening the articles can be seen below.



**Figure 1.** Search Process

Source: Prepared by the author.

Of the 106 articles resulting from the selection process, a variety of geographical contexts were observed, with experiences from 37 different countries. It is important to note that a single article may cover more than one country, which explains why the total number of countries is greater than the number of articles. Most of the studies are related to Europe, with fourteen focusing on Italy, eight on France, eight on the United Kingdom, seven on Germany, seven on Spain, four on Poland, four on Austria, two on the Netherlands, and two on Switzerland. Belgium, Bulgaria, Denmark, Slovakia, Finland, Greece, Luxembourg, Norway, the Czech Republic, Romania, Sweden, and Turkey each have one article apiece.

Fourteen studies focus on the United States, eight on Canada, and three on Mexico in North America. Four studies focus on Brazil, two on Colombia, one on Ecuador, and one on Venezuela in South America. Central America as a whole is covered in one study. In Asia, seven articles cover China, and two cover Japan. India, South Korea, and Taiwan are each the subject of one article. One study refers to Australia in Oceania. There are two studies on Africa: one on Kenya and one on Senegal. Additionally, six articles present a theoretical-conceptual approach and do not constitute case studies.

Thus, a clear gap exists in Web of Science and Scopus studies related to AFNs, particularly with regard to countries in Africa, Central America, and Oceania.

## Discussion and Analysis

To analyze and systematize the data, a database was created that included all the characteristics presented in the texts as inherent to AFNs. This database indicated the central idea of each study on a given characteristic, as well as the corresponding authors. This allowed the data to be grouped, revealing consensuses and divergent points among the authors. A total of 34 characteristics were found to be cited by the authors as inherent to AFNs. These characteristics were grouped by similarity, resulting in fifteen comprehensive AFN characteristics. The ten most frequently cited characteristics were chosen as the categories of analysis for this study and constitute the subsections that will be presented and discussed.

### *Close Relationships between Actors*

The most frequently mentioned characteristic in the studies analyzed, highlighted in 34 articles, is the closeness of relationships between the components of AFNs. These networks bring together actors seeking to innovate food production and distribution, promoting more than economic transactions. They give rise to interdependent communities that use food to build ties, promote social cohesion, and express alternative values (Seyfang, 2006). They also create interactive spaces for experimentation and development (Zhong, Hughes, Crang, Zeng, & Hocknell, 2022).

AFNs are notable for fostering high levels of engagement between producers and consumers based on trust and support (Zoll, Specht, & Siebert, 2021). Such bonds are essential to the functioning of these networks, which are largely based on solidarity and companionship (Śpiewak &

Goszczyński, 2023). Beacham (2018) further emphasizes the active participation of actors and their connections with the "more than human," highlighting the importance of engagement with the environment and other forms of life.

Despite the close relationships, gaps and differences may arise due to participants' differing values and priorities (Zhong et al., 2022). However, Liu, Ravenscroft, Ding, and Li (2019) point out that personal relationships and trust play a central role in AFNs and are essential for these networks to transition to more complex structures, even with different perspectives.

Other challenges of AFNs are related to disorganization and disconnection, as González and Lorenzini (2021) point out. This sometimes affects relationships between actors. These authors also argue for the need to build bridges to expand the influence of these networks. Despite these challenges, Guarascio (2022) notes that these networks continue to contribute to development through social innovation, stimulated by direct relationships between actors. Thus, it is clear that AFNs depend on trustworthy, collaborative relationships to overcome the challenges of formation and strengthening.

Reckinger (2018) notes a pertinent aspect of AFNs: the limited expansion of these connections results in networks with a restricted number of participants. This limitation stems from various factors, such as a lack of financial resources and infrastructure, a lack of knowledge about the values and objectives of AFNs, and cultural and social barriers. These challenges highlight the need for public policies that strengthen the alternative food sector by expanding its scope, popularizing these networks, and promoting their dissemination.

Community supported agriculture (CSA) is one of the most relevant elements of AFNs. CSA aims to strengthen the ties between producers and consumers by forming supportive communities and facilitating direct exchanges between them (Zoll et al., 2018). Gugerell, Mühlmann, Schermer, and Wolf (2021) identify trust and collaboration as key CSA characteristics that are also indispensable for attracting new members (Zhang, 2023). Thus, the emphasis on social interactions and community building underscores the importance of collective participation in developing sustainable agri-food systems (Klimek, Pöllinger-Schwinghammer, & Kromp-Kolb, 2021).

The importance of close relationships, trust, and collaboration is often cited as central to AFNs, recognizing their role in building more sustainable and supportive agri-food systems. However, there is disagreement about the limitations of these networks and the difficulty of expanding their scope and influence. Despite these challenges, there is a consensus on the transformative potential of AFNs, particularly through initiatives like CSA, which strengthens community bonds and encourages social innovation in the food sector.

### *Economic, Social, and Environmental Concerns*

A recurring point is the mention of the concern of AFNs for social, environmental, and economic aspects, which appears in 25 of the articles consulted. Touri (2018) notes that AFNs promote benefits beyond market access, contributing to the well-being and self-efficacy of agricultural communities.

Seyfang (2006) states that a key characteristic of AFNs is concern for the environment through the promotion of sustainable agricultural practices. This allows small farmers to increase

the value of their products by producing food using methods that harm the environment and communities less. Belda-Miquel (2022) emphasizes the ability of AFNs to improve well-being by providing benefits that affect various aspects of the human experience. These networks are development strategies and agents of social transformation that impact health, emotions, and the ability to transform the environment.

Connolly, Bogue, and Repar (2022) argue that balancing profitability with triple sustainability (economic, social, and environmental) is essential for AFN development. AFNs are business strategies integrated with broader social goals (Venn et al., 2006). In this sense, Watson (2020) discusses the shift from a "capital-centric" perspective to a focus on producing use value that meets human needs and promotes environmental well-being. Bauermeister (2016) and Manganelli, Van Den Broeck, and Moulaert (2020) also address this topic, emphasizing the need to balance economic, environmental, and social concerns. They highlight the interconnection between social and ecological issues in network governance.

However, Manser (2022) points out that, despite the importance of these issues in network governance, farmers' market governance documents still lack criteria related to equity, the environment, and sustainability. This renders these organizations ineffective at planning and promoting issues such as equality and the social inclusion of individuals.

Regarding the challenges faced by AFNs, Qi (2023) highlights the insufficient attention given to gender inequalities, emphasizing that choices related to agricultural work can exclude women from the benefits of participation. Rignall et al. (2022) acknowledge that well-intentioned organizations, such as AFNs, may unintentionally overlook issues related to different ethnicities. For example, they may fail to explicitly analyze racial dynamics in the food chain.

Although equity is still far off, Si and Scott (2016) point out that, despite the many problems to be solved, AFNs are precursors to a more economically viable, ecologically integrated, and socially just model of development in the long term. Thus, despite the challenges, these networks demonstrate the potential to promote sustainable agriculture and equitable food systems.

The authors therefore agree in recognizing AFNs as transformative initiatives capable of integrating economic, social, and environmental concerns and promoting benefits that extend beyond market access to positively impact the well-being of agricultural communities. However, there are differing opinions on the effectiveness of these networks in addressing issues such as equity, social inclusion, and sustainability. While some authors highlight their potential to build fairer and more sustainable food systems, others point to limitations in governance and failures to address inequalities related to gender, race, and social inclusion, showing that AFNs still face challenges in fully achieving their objectives.

### *Emphasis on Localism*

Twenty of the articles consulted emphasize the importance of localism in AFNs. McInnes, Fraser, Gedalof, and Prata (2017) report that one of the goals of the alternative food movement is to promote food practices closer to and more relevant to local communities.

Another element cited is short supply chains (SSCs), which, according to Lino, Rover, and Pereira (2021), are characterized by the shortest distances and fewest intermediaries between

farmers and consumers. Thus, initiatives that promote SSCs, as discussed by Souza, Rover, and Forno (2023), demonstrate an attempt to establish a sustainable local food system. Additionally, Ramírez and Cadavid-Castro (2022) and Tudisca, Di Trapani, Sgroi, and Testa (2014) argue that SSCs contribute to social development and AFN maintenance.

However, some authors disagree that a local nature is the solution for more efficient food systems. Zhong et al. (2022) are among those who disagree, highlighting the low production efficiency and complexity of AFNs, which can limit the formation of social relations and result in a small circle of social elites who benefit from these networks. Beckie, Kennedy, and Wittman (2012) report common challenges of AFNs, including difficulty with scale, scope, infrastructure, and organizational capacity.

Manganelli and Moulaert (2018) highlight the positive contribution of local actors to food security in AFNs, noting their role in maintaining values of proximity and horizontal, inclusive decision-making. However, challenges and differences arise when considering the complexity and nuances of these practices in the daily lives of organizations.

Liu et al. (2019) recognize the need to adapt to the local context, given that there are no universal rules that guarantee the success of AFNs. It is essential to consider the specificities of each territory. Authors such as Sacchi, Stefani, Romano, and Nocella (2022) question the notion that "local" is inherently desirable. They highlight the complexity of networks of actors and their diverse needs, suggesting that the concept of "local" is not applicable to all AFNs. Leitheiser, Fischer, Hermans, and Delhey (2022) call for a rethinking of traditional methods in favor of more adaptive approaches, emphasizing the need for flexibility to address the specific challenges of each context.

The theme of localism is evident in Gugerell et al.'s (2021) analysis of relationships in CSA. They report that geographical proximity may not be the most crucial variable for the success of these communities and relativize the idea that "local" is an inherent element of AFNs.

Trauger and Passidomo (2012) point out that the separation of production and consumption areas is recognized as a source of instability. Levkoe (2011) and Mount and Andrée (2013) report that transformative food policy advocates localization, post-neoliberal governance, and recognition of locally and regionally evolved forms of development.

Thus, the debate on localism in AFNs reflects diverse perspectives, differing interpretations of the topic, and various views on the optimal implementation of localism and the operational challenges associated with it. This demonstrates the lack of consensus among the authors analyzed and the potential for new studies to address this topic.

### *Differentiated and Diverse Organizational Structures*

Twenty of the articles analyzed cite the variety of organizational structures as an inherent characteristic of AFNs. For example, farmers' markets emerge as decentralized, local-scale entities that sustain economies and reduce environmental externalities (Connolly et al., 2022). Touri (2018) emphasizes the role of small businesses as an integral part of the global food market and a dominant force in establishing AFNs.

This diversity is also reflected in the variety of roles performed by those involved. Escobar-López, Orozco-Rodríguez, and Olvera-Castro (2022) highlight the diversity of roles played by AFN actors, revealing a rich web of sociological perspectives and generations in which various actors perform multiple functions to ensure the smooth operation of networks. According to Śpiewak and Goszczyński (2023), this diversity also occurs in the variation of rules, formalizations, and relationships, which are shaped by the nature of the network and the motivations of its founders.

Kump and Fikar (2021) highlight food cooperatives as organizations that foster the active participation of members by intertwining producers and consumers. Tavella and Papadopoulos (2017) emphasize the importance of participatory and democratic decision-making in these organizations.

Similarly, Dufeu et al. (2020) point to the creation of rules by farmers' cooperatives and associations as a relevant and characteristic aspect of AFNs. Manganelli and Moulaert (2018) share this perspective, emphasizing the reflexivity present in these organizations and its contribution to the bottom-up nature of AFNs.

As previously mentioned, smaller organizations remain a constant in AFNs. However, the structural transformation occurring in these networks is evident in Touri's (2018) narrative, which highlights the constant shift from simpler to more complex organizational structures.

Reflecting on the organization of AFNs emphasizes not only heterogeneity, but also the coexistence and coevolution of agricultural models where traditional practices and structures blend with modern ones. Vercher (2022) highlights the socioeconomic structure and specific conditions of the territory as causes of the diversity and complexity of these organizations, adding layers to our understanding of how these processes emerge and develop. Plumecocq et al. (2018) report that due to the inherent complexity of AFNs, agroecological transitions are often incremental rather than radical. This points to a diversity of possible paths for this transformation.

In this way, AFNs are dynamic and diverse entities that shape themselves in response to a series of tensions and challenges. They adapt to the conditions imposed by the market and their location (Levkoe, 2014). Chiffolleau, Millet-Amrani, Canard, and Garçon (2019) reinforce the idea that there is no single way to organize the new food economy. Rignall et al. (2022) echo this idea, recognizing the complexity of AFNs and highlighting the lack of a single model.

Therefore, despite their remarkable richness and diversity, the structural and organizational plurality of AFNs reveals significant challenges. The absence of a single model raises questions about the capacity of these networks to expand and consolidate alternative practices on a large scale while facing pressure from hegemonic markets. While decentralization and participatory management promote flexibility, they can also generate vulnerabilities, such as disorganization and coordination difficulties between different actors and territories. Thus, balancing the search for greater equity and accessibility with the need for stability and organizational survival becomes a challenge of the complexity of AFNs.

### *Education, Conscious Choice, and Responsible Consumption*

Seventeen of the articles consulted mention the intersection between education, conscious choice, and responsible consumption. According to their authors, this intersection influences

consumers' awareness and understanding of the impacts of their food choices. Darolt, Lamine, Brandenburg, Alencar, and Abreu (2016) argue that consumer participation in AFNs extends beyond the search for food and encompasses social, economic, environmental, and political values, demonstrating conscious consumption. Schumilas and Scott (2016) explain that this awareness and concern among consumers is due to the fact that most of them are middle class with greater access to education and awareness of the importance of AFNs. According to the authors, this opens up a discussion of the extent to which this form of production and consumption is accessible to all.

Consumers who are aware of their consumption are considered "citizen consumers" because they integrate economic and political aspects into their food choices (Dubuisson-Quellier, Lamine, & Le Velly, 2011). Seyfang (2006) also discusses eco-citizenship as a relevant aspect in the context of AFN consumption. Eco-citizenship refers to environmentally responsible citizenship, involving the integration of sustainable practices in food consumption and production. It considers the ecological and social impacts of food choices and is a force capable of motivating sustainable consumption. This goes beyond individual preferences, embracing commitments to ecological values and daily political actions (Seyfang, 2006).

Another phenomenon evident in AFNs, as mentioned by Lee (2022), is the replacement of purchasing channels with those more aligned with the principles of these networks. Farmers' markets are one such channel because they are not only points of sale but also spaces for interaction between producers and consumers. This interaction promotes an "informed community" that educates consumers about the importance of sustainable production and consumption methods (Klimek et al., 2021).

Regarding food itself, Lee (2022) notes that consumers prefer fresh, minimally processed foods. According to Lee, this purchasing pattern reflects concern not only with product quality, but also with promoting healthier food choices and paying attention to how these products are produced.

Regarding the resources shared in AFNs, Miralles, Dentoni, and Pascucci (2017) emphasize that knowledge and experiences are also shared resources. Vercher (2022) also addresses knowledge sharing, highlighting the importance of disseminating innovations to a diverse range of actors and suggesting an inclusive and expansive approach by AFNs.

Thus, the authors emphasize the importance of education in empowering consumers to make choices that align with ethical and environmental values. This raises the question of how this knowledge can be widely disseminated so that it is not restricted to only a small portion of society.

### *Shared Values*

Seventeen of the articles examined mention the values shared by AFN members. These networks are characterized by a set of collective values and practices through which participants share narratives and establish a basis for collective action (Zoll et al., 2021). Darolt et al. (2016) state that incorporating principles such as autonomy, solidarity, food security, social justice, and respect for local culture and traditions into relationships is a distinctive feature of AFNs. These values guide practices and provide an ethical framework that permeates all interactions within the network. A shared understanding of these principles establishes common ground for collective engagement.

Seyfang (2006) highlights eco-citizenship as a tool for analyzing the values and motivations that sustain AFNs. By transcending the distinction between "citizen" and "consumer," Seyfang emphasizes individual dedication to global and environmental justice, underscoring the significance of shared values in fostering communities. Thus, consumers transition from being "mere buyers" to "citizen-consumers," becoming engaged members of their communities. Manganelli and Moulaert (2018) give the example of the Brussels Solidarity Purchasing Network, which is committed to fundamental principles such as defending small-scale farming, promoting transparency, and fostering solidarity between consumers and producers. Motivations such as recreation and health coexist with motivations oriented toward society, where the intersection between the individual and the collective is evident (Zoll et al., 2018).

Socio-cognitive and institutional proximity are also crucial for attractiveness in the context of CSA, highlighting trust, collaboration, and knowledge sharing as key elements of these groups (Gugerell et al., 2021). These aspects align with the importance of forming communities of producers united by social ties and shared values. These communities serve as a moral basis for alternative economic models (Zhang, 2023).

Interaction between members results in the sharing of common values, contributing to a cohesive community (Geissberger & Chapman, 2023). This interaction is also important in the agroecological transition. According to Levkoe (2011), transformative food policy suggests that the necessary agroecological transition implies not only transformations in food practices, but also the construction of a collective awareness about food.

While the shared values among AFN members are important for building and maintaining these networks, the model also faces internal tensions. An AFN is formed by various actors who sometimes have different perceptions of the purpose of the network (Fourat, Aggeri, & Matt, 2020) and different levels of personal commitment to the organization. This is reflected in variations in the culture and institutional context of the movements (Sbicca, 2015).

However, the authors consulted generally highlight that AFNs share fundamental values and exhibit rich diversity in their implementation, adapting to local contexts. The construction of cohesive communities based on trust and shared values emerges as a driving force in the transition to alternative economic models.

### *Challenging the Dominant Paradigm*

Fifteen of the articles analyzed mention the characteristic of challenging the dominant organizational, social, or market model held by AFNs. The contemporary food landscape is characterized by the intricate relationship between major food chains and alternative social movements. According to Schermer (2015), large chains contribute to an image of authenticity by integrating regional and organic products into their portfolios, which attracts the "hybrid consumer," who moves between the conventional and the alternative. This limits the growth of contestatory social movements.

Lundström (2011) highlights the existence of a "deep divide" between agricultural paradigms, signaling the potential conflict between the dominant corporate model and alternative food systems. In response to marginalization and exclusion by the conventional market, family and

small-scale farmers adopt alternative production patterns, indicating an intrinsic resistance to the prevailing model. Michel (2020) discusses this resistance, emphasizing the importance of integrating alternative initiatives into the market to create a collective approach that differs from the current global model.

Rosol (2020) discusses alternative organizations that not only challenge conventional supply chains but also investor-driven capitalism. Allen, FitzSimmons, Goodman, and Warner (2017) report that these initiatives have a global orientation based not only on generating profit and taking a militant stance toward existing structures but also on searching for alternatives that impact not only the internal structures of organizations but also society as a whole.

According to Leitheiser et al. (2022), Beacham (2018), and Watson (2020), alternative initiatives that seek to break with the current industrial paradigm and challenge capitalism as a whole emphasize creating sustainable and socially just food systems. Touri (2018) highlights the desire of AFNs for non-monetary impacts, moving away from conventional conceptions centered on economic growth.

However, completely breaking with the current dominant system is challenging given the structure of the capitalist market, which offers few opportunities for developing alternative organizations. Thus, McInnes et al. (2017) report that, unable to break with the current system, many organizations promote incremental changes within the existing food system and find "loopholes" where they can act according to their principles. Reidsma et al. (2023) portray a preference among stakeholders for adaptations over radical transformations, prioritizing alternative systems that improve the resilience of the current system. In this sense, Kopczyńska (2017) highlights farmers' markets as an example. Although they are an important element of AFNs, they offer limited prospects for radical change.

Thus, the authors report that AFNs oppose the dominant paradigm by incorporating distinct practices and values. Agricultural resistance, the integration of initiatives, and the search for non-monetary impacts converge to challenge conventional food relationships. The emphasis on incremental changes also points to the complexity of the relationship between AFNs and the conventional food system, of which AFNs are often a part and/or dependent in some way.

### *Activism and Political Awareness*

The studies consulted repeatedly present activism and political awareness as characteristics present in many AFNs. These aspects were indicated in fifteen of the studies analyzed.

AFNs play multifaceted roles in activism and vary in their degree of political involvement. Some serve as designated spaces for activism, fostering a dynamic relationship between cooperatives and social movements. These interactions are permeated by tensions between the economic and non-economic aspects of cooperation and encompass various spheres of civil and political action (Fonte & Cucco, 2017; Pasquier, Merino, Salcido, Monachon, & Hernández, 2022). The internet amplifies the reach of activists by providing new possibilities for organization and expression of dissent (Schumilas & Scott, 2016).

The distinction between "activist" and "consumer-oriented" organizations reveals differences in their attitudes toward the space and their understanding of the inherent

responsibilities of AFNs. While activist organizations aim to raise awareness of the negative externalities of large-scale production, consumer-oriented organizations strive to fulfill consumer needs and demands (Bilewicz & Śpiewak, 2019). In the former, AFNs would serve as recruitment sites for political engagement and conscious consumption practices. In the latter, AFNs would supply products outside the current market logic, such as organic, agroecological, and family-farmed goods (Dubuisson-Quellier et al., 2011).

The alternative practices in AFNs are heterogeneous, encompassing participants with diverse motivations. While some actively oppose globalized agri-food systems through political acts, others simply get involved to access specific foods. Political participation is perceived differently among these individuals. Some consider active militancy, such as demonstrations and protests, to be political activities, while others view their choice to buy organic food as equally political (Seyfang, 2006; Zoll et al., 2018; Zwart & Mathijs, 2020).

According to Levkoe (2011), the transformative food politics in AFNs extends beyond the food itself and plays a crucial role in broader social justice and sustainability movements. This influences the construction of narratives and political visions that challenge the status quo, indicating that alternative agri-food initiatives contribute to a new political imagination. Over time, the dialectical relationship between food activism and neoliberalism influences hybridity in AFNs, highlighting the complexity of these networks and their ability to adapt to different political and social influences (Mount & Andrée, 2013).

In summary, AFNs can emerge as dynamic spaces where activism and food practices intersect, contributing to the construction of narratives and new political visions and playing a significant role in broader movements for social justice and sustainability.

### *Challenges to the Maintenance and Adaptability of AFNs*

Fourteen of the articles analyzed mentioned the challenges to the maintenance and adaptability of AFNs. For example, in the face of the COVID-19 health crisis, these networks demonstrated resilience by implementing innovative measures, maintaining economic opportunities for producers, and ensuring a supply of fresh food for urban consumers (Song, Robinson, & Bardsley, 2022). Many AFNs provided closed baskets that consumers had to pay for in advance, ensuring advance financial resources for farmers to produce these foods and a supply of quality food for consumers (Atalan-Helicke & Abiral, 2021). According to Tudisca et al. (2014), AFN entrepreneurs can adapt to consumer demands and become protagonists of territorial development.

Diversity within AFNs is crucial for effectively responding to environmental contingencies, encouraging innovation, and facilitating learning (Quiédeville et al., 2018). However, a lack of structured collective organization and a comprehensive theoretical framework can hinder the formation of a consistent movement (Zoll et al., 2018). Efficient adaptation requires careful consideration of this diversity because it can facilitate or hinder AFN relationships and maintenance.

Maintaining AFNs poses challenges, such as overcoming geographical barriers, mobilizing urban and rural actors, and creating collaborative spaces for initiatives with different objectives

(Souza et al., 2023). Lack of sufficient political support for AFNs, regulatory ambiguity, and lack of recognition by authorities are also significant obstacles (Zhong et al., 2022).

Although AFNs have experienced success, it is important to acknowledge the daily challenges they face, such as the difficulty of making strategic decisions amid uncertainty and risk, as well as a lack of preparation in management (Hoey & Sponseller, 2018). For example, the CSA model faces obstacles due to its niche nature and small number of adherents, who are mostly wealthy individuals (Meyer & Hassler, 2023).

The complexity of AFNs lies in understanding and dealing with contradictions and adapting to specific cultural and political-economic contexts (Levkoe, 2011; Wahn, 2023). Practical challenges, such as a lack of skilled labor, labor issues, and dependence on conventional logistics networks, are also constant (Darolt et al., 2016; Atalan-Helicke & Abiral, 2021).

Thus, AFNs are dynamic and adaptable, but not without trials and tribulations. The ability to adjust to change due to internal network diversity and respond to contingencies are fundamental skills. However, a lack of political support, an absence of common guidelines, and practical barriers can hinder the consolidation and expansion of these networks.

### *Unconventional Agricultural Practices*

Thirteen of the studies analyzed highlight unconventional agricultural practices as an alternative to industrial agriculture and a recurring feature of AFNs. Authors such as Reynaud et al. (2019) and Freidberg and Goldstein (2011) recognize the merits of promoting organic agriculture and agroecological practices to achieve more sustainable economic development. These authors present agroecology as a powerful alternative that can combine development with environmental protection and regeneration.

However, the authors offer different approaches and emphases as ways out of the dominant industrial system. Dufeu et al. (2020) suggest that AFNs could focus on sustainable and organic agricultural practices. Souza et al. (2023), on the other hand, emphasize the importance of SSCs. Ramírez and Cadavid-Castro (2022) highlight attention to sustainability in production, including water conservation and minimizing the use of agrochemicals. Bottazzi and Boillat (2021) highlight the need for a sociopolitical approach to agroecology that goes beyond technical challenges.

Leitheiser et al. (2022) point out the importance of more sustainable agricultural practices that consider the regeneration of systems and introduce the term "proto-regenerative farmers" to describe farmers who explore regeneration strategies in practice. These authors discuss the "decommodification"<sup>2</sup> of land, labor, and food and the development of reciprocal relationships through cooperative pooling of resources and exchange between farmers.

They emphasize integrated environmental protection, highlighting the need for planning tools and adapted regional regulations that consider human factors and promote improved agrobiodiversity (Pinna, 2016). Reidsma et al. (2023), in turn, emphasize that these tools and planning are closely linked to the use and implementation of new, efficient technologies that directly influence the diversification of organic or nature-friendly agricultural practices.

Regardless of the practices used, Michel (2020) emphasizes that AFNs should focus on integrating these alternative initiatives and highlight collaborative efforts to create a collective approach to production systems that differ from the prevailing global model.

In short, the authors' dialogue reveals key convergences regarding agroecology and sustainability in AFNs, while also reflecting divergences in how these objectives should be implemented. This diversity of perspectives ultimately enriches the debate, promoting a holistic approach to addressing global challenges in food production.

## **Conclusions**

AFNs stand out as transformative agents in the food industry, presenting a variety of characteristics and challenges. While it is impossible to compile a definitive list of characteristics that reliably describe AFNs and their alternative aspects, certain aspects frequently mentioned in the literature may be important to this discussion.

The local nature of AFNs is a recurring theme, but analysis reveals diverse perspectives on interpretation, implementation, and related challenges. While many authors agree on the value of the local element and highlight benefits such as proximity and community participation, others point out negative aspects, such as difficulty scaling up, lack of infrastructure, and organizational capacity. Additionally, some question whether localism is a desirable or applicable characteristic of all AFNs.

The intersection of conscious choice and responsible consumption underscores the importance of education in aligning food choices with ethical and environmental values, fostering informed food citizenship. Unconventional agricultural practices, such as agroecology, emerge as alternatives to the industrial agricultural model. However, there is a diversity of perspectives on implementing these practices. Some authors emphasize the importance of sustainability in production, while others highlight the need for a sociopolitical approach. Still others emphasize the regeneration of agricultural systems and the collaborative integration of alternative initiatives.

Concern for economic, social, and environmental issues beyond a simple market focus is one of the most often cited characteristics inherent to AFNs. This portrays AFNs as catalysts for social transformation that promote more sustainable agriculture and equitable food systems. However, AFNs are perceived as having limited potential to drive broader social change due to challenges related to defining an identity clearly and their sometimes reduced scope and breadth.

Despite this "lack of a clear identity," relationships among AFN actors transcend simple economic transactions, fostering interdependent communities and emphasizing the importance of trustworthy relationships in strengthening these networks. Their diversity and shared values, such as autonomy and social justice, highlight their adaptability to specific local contexts.

The specific characteristics of different locations are also reflected in the variety of organizational structures of AFNs. These structures are not only present through fairs and cooperatives, but also in the diversity of roles played by consumers, producers, intermediaries, and organizers. The variety of rules and relationships between these actors is another distinguishing feature of AFNs.

Similarly, activism and political awareness emerge as characteristics of these actors, highlighting the significant role of AFNs in social justice and sustainability movements. These networks play varied roles in activism with different levels of political involvement. Some explicitly function as spaces for activism, establishing dynamic relationships between organizations and social movements. Others shape their political involvement in more subtle ways.

Despite their remarkable adaptability, AFNs face challenges such as a lack of political support and common guidelines, which can hinder their consolidation and expansion. However, AFNs challenge the dominant paradigm by implementing new organizational forms and relationships between actors, integrating initiatives, seeking non-monetary impacts, and pointing to incremental changes in their complex relationship with the dominant global food system.

In summary, this article explored how AFNs constitute themselves as distinct organizations from the conventional food model by examining the characteristics and dynamics that define their alternativeness. A systematic analysis of the literature revealed recurring elements that, despite their heterogeneity, provide significant insights into the various forms of existence and action of AFNs. The main theoretical contribution of this work lies in highlighting that alternativeness is not fixed, but rather a constantly changing field where different values, practices, and organizational structures coexist and exert pressure on the dominant food system.

The findings of this study point to the need for future comparative research analyzing concrete AFN experiences in different contexts. This would allow for a more in-depth exploration of the regulatory mechanisms, modes of governance, and socio-environmental impacts of these networks. It should be noted that the conclusions are limited to the scope of the literature analyzed and cannot be generalized to all AFNs due to the diversity of formats and contexts in this field.

In this sense, analyzing the geographical distribution of the articles covered allowed for local particularities and transnational similarities in the formation of AFNs to be identified. This offered an important perspective on the so-called "contemporary food scene." The presence of theoretical studies also contributed to a broader understanding of the phenomenon.

However, it is worth noting that research on AFNs from some regions of the world is still limited on major academic indexing platforms, especially in the case of Africa, Oceania, and Central America. This indicates that although the overview outlined in this study is relatively comprehensive, it is incomplete. The absence of studies from these regions in these databases prevents access to relevant experiences where food challenges are profound and where AFNs can play a strategic role in building sustainable, locally adapted solutions.

Descriptive analyses predominate over critical approaches that can explore contradictions, ambivalences, and disputes within these networks. Finally, the relationship between AFNs and digital technologies, sales platforms, and social media remains largely unexplored despite being an increasingly relevant aspect.

Future research should include empirical investigations that explore the concrete functioning of AFNs at different territorial scales, analyze their interactions with public policies, expand regional coverage, especially in underrepresented African, Oceanic, and Central American contexts, and critically consider the limits and possibilities of alternativeness. Interdisciplinary and comparative approaches can contribute to a deeper, more situated, and comprehensive understanding of these experiences.

Despite the aforementioned limitations, this study advances our understanding of the primary dynamics that permeate AFNs and the challenges they face in establishing more ethical and sustainable food systems. The authors do not fully agree on the defining elements of AFNs and their alternativeness that differentiate them from conventional food networks. Nevertheless, all the aforementioned aspects were thoroughly discussed by the authors and represent significant elements in the current AFN landscape, highlighting their importance in the global food system.

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## Notes

1. In this study, the term "alternative food networks" (AFNs) was chosen over "alternative agri-

food networks" because the former more broadly expresses the multiple dimensions that comprise the experiences analyzed. The concept of alternative agri-food networks emphasizes the agricultural dimension related to production practices. However, the term "alternative food networks" encompasses both production and the circulation, distribution, and consumption of food. It also includes the social, economic, and symbolic relationships that form around these processes. Thus, the focus is on organizational forms and social practices that differentiate themselves from the conventional food system by promoting short supply chains, solidarity, and sustainability. This choice aligns with recent international literature that has adopted the same term to describe experiences reconfiguring food production, distribution, and consumption.

2. Decommodification is the idea of removing the commodity status of certain elements. In this case, it means changing the idea that land, labor, and food are merely commodities to be traded. The focus is on the relationships these elements are involved in and their impact on society.

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## **Conflict of interest**

The author declares that there is no conflict of interest.

## **Inclusive language**

The author uses inclusive language that acknowledges diversity, conveys respect to all people, is sensitive to differences, and promotes equal opportunities.

## **Authors' contributions**

**First author:** conceptualization, data curation, formal analysis, investigation, methodology, validation, visualization, writing – original draft, writing – review and editing.

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