



## **Building Food Democracy: Exploring Civic Food Networks and Newly Emerging Forms of Food Citizenship**

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**Abstract.** In recent years new types of consumer–producer cooperation in food networks have emerged in which consumers play an active role in the operation and thereby clearly go beyond food provisioning as such. Examples include consumer co-ops and solidarity buying groups of local and organic food, community-supported agriculture and collective urban gardening initiatives. These initiatives raise important new questions that cannot be adequately resolved within existing theoretical perspectives based on concepts such as ‘alternative food networks’, ‘short food supply chains’ or ‘local food systems’. This article explores possible new analytical frameworks for the study of contemporary dynamics in food networks and develops the concept of ‘civic food networks’ as an overarching concept to explore contemporary dynamics and sources of innovation within agri-food networks. Building on the empirical diversity of initiatives, this introduction to the Special Issue argues that the role of civil society as a governance mechanism for agri-food networks has increased in significance compared to market and state actors. Moreover, expressions of ‘food citizenship’ are reshaping the relation between food practices and the market as well as with public institutions in ways that go beyond material and economic exchange and that contribute to a ‘moralization’ (or even ‘civilization’) of food economies.

### **Introduction to an Emergent Phenomenon**

Within the last decade, a growing body of literature has documented the emergence of new types of producer–consumer cooperation in food networks that run parallel and partly in opposition to dominant globalization and concentration trends in food markets. These new consumer–producer relations have been studied from various theoretical perspectives using different conceptual headings such as alternative food networks (AFNs) (Allen et al., 2003; Renting et al., 2003; Sage, 2003; Whatmore et al., 2003; Goodman, 2004), short food supply chains (SFSCs) (Renting et al., 2003; Ilbery

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and Maye, 2005) and localized agri-food systems (SYAL) (Muchnik, 2010) or local food systems (LFS) (Hinrichs, 2000; Fonte, 2008; Karner, 2010). While studies initially focused primarily on the role of producers and the potential contribution of such networks to sustainable rural development and farm diversification, more recent contributions have analysed AFNs from the perspective of sustainable consumption, as social movements or as attempts to articulate alternative economic spaces and transform profoundly the structures and organization of agri-food systems (Leyshon et al., 2003; Seyfang, 2006; Lamine et al., 2012).

In recent years particular new types of AFNs have emerged and developed strongly, i.e. initiatives in which citizens play an active role in the initiation and operation of new forms of consumer–producer relations. These go clearly beyond direct-selling and marketing activities operated and initiated by producers, since citizen–consumers are the main driving force and initiators, and the emergent networks embody new forms of engagement with food that in many cases go clearly beyond food provisioning itself. Clear examples of such initiatives are consumer co-operatives and buying groups of local and organic food that have spread rapidly in recent years, especially in countries such as France (under the heading *Associations pour le maintien d’une agriculture paysanne*, ‘Associations for the Maintenance of Peasant Agriculture’, AMAP) (Lamine, 2005; Chiffolleau, 2009), Italy (there known as *Gruppi di Acquisto Solidale*, ‘Solidarity Purchasing Groups’, GAS) (Brunori et al., 2011; Lamine et al., 2012) and Spain (referred to as *Grupos Autogestionados de Consumo*, agro-ecological consumption groups, GAKs) (Soler et al., 2010). Similar initiatives are also reported in other countries across Europe (see Little et al., 2010; Balázs, this issue), as well as in other parts of the world (North and South America, Australia, Far Eastern Countries) (Parker, 2005; Jarosz, 2008; Flora and Bregendahl, this issue; Lamine et al., this issue). Other examples of initiatives that suggest new forms of engagement with food are adoption and solidarity schemes of citizens for the mobilization of land, financial capital and other key resources to support the development of local and organic food production in their localities. In some cases, these initiatives see citizen–consumers directly involved in food production activities, such as in community-based urban gardening and ‘grow it yourself’ initiatives, in which groups collectively engage with food production for home consumption in the direct urban environment (Müller, 2007; Jehlicka and Smith, 2011; Veen et al., this issue).

These new types of initiatives are of special analytical interest because they potentially represent a shift in the role of consumers from passive end-users and mere buyers of food products towards more proactive ‘citizen–consumers’ (Soper, 2007; Johnston, 2008) who intend to regain control over the ways in which their food is produced and provided. At the same time, however, initiatives often signify a crucial shift on the producer side – from farming as merely the selling of raw materials to the food industry to an activity that revalues and reincorporates various elements of food provisioning in a wider social and political meaning. As part of these newly emerging networks, citizen–consumers, in collaboration with ‘citizen–producers’, actively reshape their relations with different stages of the food system and start revaluing the (social, cultural, environmental) meanings of food beyond mere commodity and object of economic transaction.

These newly emerging food networks are also of interest because they point at potentially important changes that are occurring in the role and weight of different governance mechanisms in the context of agri-food systems. While agri-food

governance approaches and debates traditionally have focused almost exclusively on the role of market forces and government policies in the structuring of agri-food systems, the emergence of new food networks in which citizens play a key role in the operation and in which voluntary, associational principles and participatory forms of self-management are paramount suggests the need for a reevaluation of the role of civil society-driven governance mechanisms as a source of innovation and transformation of agri-food systems (Renting, 2008; Wiskerke, 2010). As we will indicate in more detail below, both market- and government-based governance are experiencing in the current situation profound, multiple crises, which undermines the capacity of both mechanisms to steer and influence agri-food system dynamics. By contrast, a considerable part of the contemporary dynamics in agri-food systems seems to be rooted in civil society-based initiatives.

It is too early to say to what extent these new types of food networks are signs of a more fundamental and long-lasting transition in the governance and organization of agri-food systems. In any case, they do suggest that existing frameworks and approaches are insufficient to understand the underlying relevant dynamics and potentials for the future development of agri-food systems. One important shortcoming is exactly that existing conventional approaches take into account insufficiently the role of citizens and governance mechanisms rooted in civil society. The unit of analysis of short food supply chains (SFSCs) and local food systems (LFS/SYAL) approaches generally corresponds to the food supply chain (even though sometimes related concepts such as *filière*, commodity system, or system of provisioning are used), which all run from the point of food production to the point of sale only and are thus unable to address relevant influences that originate from changing consumption practices.

Also, the concept of alternative food networks (AFNs) is increasingly unsatisfactory in order to understand the contemporary dynamics of food systems and the emergence of the aforementioned new, civil society-driven food networks. The main shortcoming of the AFN concept is that it has no clear normative content of its own, since it is ultimately defined in terms of its distinction from 'mainstream' food networks. Renting et al. defined AFNs as 'a broad embracing term to cover newly emerging networks of producers, consumers, and other actors that embody alternatives to the more standardised industrial mode of food supply' (2003, p. 394), while Tregear speaks of 'forms of food provisioning with characteristics deemed to be different from, perhaps counteractive to, mainstream modes which dominate in developed countries' (2011, p. 419). Whatmore et al. furthermore indicate that the social reality to which the AFN-debate referred is constructed through,

'non identical collective nouns [which] consolidate a multiplicity of food networks from organics and fair trade to regional and artisanal products... What they share in common is their constitution as/of food markets that redistribute value through the network against the logic of bulk commodity production; that reconvene "trust" between food producers and consumers; and that articulate new forms of political association and market governance' (2003, p. 389).

It therefore should not be a surprise that while the term AFN was useful initially as a delimitation for an explorative analysis of the newly emerging phenomenon of counter-hegemonic food networks since the 1990s, it has proven less adequate for

more detailed analyses and in addressing recent tendencies (see also Holloway et al., 2007; Tregear, 2011).

Moreover, as various authors have correctly pointed out, the distinction between alternative and conventional is problematic since it is not static and often delimitations between alternative and mainstream are dynamic over time (as indicated, for example, in debates on 'conventionalization' of organics and fair-trade products, see Jaffee and Howard, 2010). Therefore food network dynamics can be better studied sometimes in terms of 'hybrid' networks that combine elements of alternative and mainstream food networks as part of ongoing, incomplete transition processes (Sonrino and Marsden, 2006; Lamine et al., 2012). Finally, AFN approaches have been criticized for a lack of attention to questions of social inclusion and justice, both with respect to the type of farmers involved and to concerns that produce mainly reaches middle-class consumers (Goodman, 2004; Johnston, 2008).

These shortcomings of commonly applied concepts suggest that there is a need to explore alternative theoretical perspectives for the study of contemporary food system dynamics. What is needed especially are conceptual approaches that address more clearly the renewed role in such dynamics of citizens, consumers, producers and civil society, the distinctive nature and characteristics of social and economic relations embodied in newly emerging food networks, and their potential to generate genuine food system transformations. In this article, we propose the concept of 'civic food networks' (CFNs) as a possible alternative and complementary analytical concept. The ideas presented here, and in the collection of articles in this Special Issue more generally, are a reflection of debates and presentations that were held during a series of thematic Working Group sessions organized at relevant international conferences in 2011 and 2012<sup>1</sup> around the topic of new forms of citizen engagement in food networks.

While the concept of 'civic food networks' (CFNs) is intended not necessarily to fully substitute for existing analytical terms, but rather to act as a complementary category to concepts such as 'short food supply chains' and 'local(ized) food systems', there are several relevant considerations in proposing this new analytical approach:

- CFNs refer to new relationships that are developing between consumers and producers, who engaged together in new forms of food citizenship;
- CFNs refer to wider networks than those narrowly engaged in food production–distribution–consumption practices, and may also include new forms of cooperation between different local actors, who (for different reasons) are interested and engaged in new approaches to food matters.
- CFNs are an expression of processes of change in the agri-food governance mechanisms, showing the increasing importance of the role of civil society (and to some extent local and regional administrations) compared to market forces and the (national) state.
- CFNs correspond to a considerable degree to and coincide with changing relations between agri-food networks and urban–rural relations. Often cities are the starting point for food-system innovations associated with CFNs, including (peri-)urban forms of agriculture and gardening, thereby somehow 'inverting' traditional rural–urban relations and shifting the starting point and locus of innovation of food networks from production/countryside to consumption/city.
- CFNs often embody different discourses, new knowledge and new symbolic frameworks, which are developed and shared through interaction amongst in-

volved actors and which underpin new preferences and practices. Such discourses and frameworks emanating from CFNs have introduced important new 'traditions' and references in agri-food system dynamics (again often urban based), such as permaculture, 'grow it yourself', etc.

- CFNs in many cases develop and build upon linkages with other new social movements and conceptual innovations related to different societal and economic spheres, such as de-growth, transition town movements, solidarity economy districts, place-based development, ecofeminism, etc. In this regard, the development of new thinking and alternative practices around food often seems to represent an accessible area of experimentation, with the capacity to foster the further development of new discourses and forms of citizenship.

### **'Civic Food Networks' and 'Food Citizenship' as Explorative Concepts to Study Contemporary Food Network Innovations**

In this section, we elaborate further the concept of 'civic food networks' and discuss a number of theoretical approaches in the literature that may contribute to its operationalization. Especially relevant in this respect are the concepts of 'food democracy', 'food sovereignty' and 'food citizenship'.

The concept of 'food democracy' was introduced by Tim Lang in the 1990s in response to the increasing corporate control of and lack of consumer participation in the food system (see also Lang and Heasman, 2004). Lang advocated the need to democratize the food system and to look at 'food as a locus of the democratic process', which is essentially a call to enhance the role of citizens in the management and control of the food system. In this sense, the rise of CFNs corresponds to citizen's attempts for 'building food democracy'. The food democracy concept has been further elaborated by Hassanein, who indicates that 'food democracy ideally means that all members of an agro-food system have equal and effective opportunities for participation in shaping that system, as well as knowledge about the relevant alternative ways of designing and operating the system' (2003, p. 83). Hassanein's conception thereby goes clearly beyond food democracy as only a rights-based concept and stresses active citizenship. Suggesting that 'people can and should be actively participating in shaping the food system, rather than remaining passive spectators on the sidelines' (2003, p. 79), Hassanein is very much in line with the approach proposed in this article. The call for a pragmatic focus in the elaboration of food democracy, i.e. 'the achievement of what is presently possible coupled with ongoing inquiry by an active and informed citizenry' (Hassanein, 2003, p. 85), is also at the heart of what we consider as CFNs.

The concept of 'food sovereignty', which was developed in a bottom-up manner by the international farmers' movement Via Campesina from 1996 onwards (Wittmann et al., 2010), in our opinion goes largely in the same direction as the food democracy concept, even though it has perhaps a stronger rights-based focus and is also more clearly defined from a producer perspective. It should also be recognized that since its broad, initial definition as 'the right of people to determine their own food and agricultural policies' (Patel, 2009, p. 682) the food sovereignty concept has evolved strongly. For example, Pimbert suggests that it 'is perhaps best understood as a process that seeks to expand the realm of democracy and regenerate a diversity of locally autonomous food systems' and that this transformative learning process 'implies a fundamentally new conception of citizenship: economic, political, social

and cultural' (2009, p. 2). Also, Wittmann indicates that food sovereignty implies new forms of 'agrarian citizenship' as 'a model of rural action that 'protects against both state abuses and the greed of the market' by encompassing the role of civil society and of democratic communication' (2009, p. 808).

While the use of the 'citizenship' concept in relation to food and agriculture in Europe has been relatively uncommon, in the United States and Canada there is a considerable literature referring to 'food citizenship'. Much of this appears to go back to the work of the sociologist Lyson, who in the late 1990s under the heading 'civic agriculture' introduced a strongly community-based conception of a localized and multifunctional agriculture defined as 'a locally organized system of agriculture and food production characterized by networks of producers who are bound together by place' (2005, p. 92). In addition, Lyson made explicit reference to citizenship by indicating that civic agriculture 'has the potential to transform individuals from passive consumers into active food citizens' (2005, p. 97). 'Food citizenship' was subsequently also described by Wilkins as 'the practice of engaging in food-related behaviours that support, rather than threaten, the development of a democratic, socially and economically just, and environmentally sustainable food system' (2005, p. 271).

Independently from this, the concept of 'food citizenship' was also introduced in Canada as early as 1998 as part of the initial development of the Toronto Food Policy Council and inspired by the early ideas of Tim Lang on food democracy. Welsh and MacRae indicate that the concept of 'food citizenship' was used to emphasize 'the need to move beyond food as a commodity and people as consumers' (1998, p. 237) as a critique of corporate control and the loss of food skills ('deskilling') within the public. In their analysis, four dimensions to this process of diminishing food citizenship are mentioned: 1. corporate control over the food chain; 2. providing consumers with limited product information; 3. manipulation of the supermarket environment; and 4. emphasizing processed and convenience foods – which demand less skill of shoppers and eaters – over less-processed ones.

These concepts, and especially the concept of 'food citizenship', are considered helpful in understanding the emergence of CFNs and provide an interesting normative model of potential dynamics and social innovations they might embody. Moreover, it seems to be appropriate to map, explore and better understand the actual contemporary dynamics and innovations in agri-food networks. Hence, our approach is based principally upon and delimited by an empirical definition. On the basis of a historical analysis of recent trends in the development of governance mechanisms of agri-food systems, we argue that civil society-based forms of governance are of growing importance in understanding the dynamics and innovations within contemporary food systems. This is in line with observations of Lang and Heasman who observed that 'the challenge for governance is how the state and institutions can engage with the people – hence the emergence of "stakeholders" or civil society' (2004, p. 262), even though they also remark that civil society engagement has 'yet to convert... into a firm position in terms of delivery and actively shaping overall policy integration' (ibid.). We contend that this tendency towards the growing importance of civil society-based governance has been consolidated, and in recent years has been reinforced and accelerated by the multiple political and economic crisis that is also affecting agri-food system development.

These changes can be understood and visualized by applying the 'governance triangle' (see Figures 1 and 2), which distinguishes the state, market and civil society as basic institutional mechanisms that may give 'structure' to collective human

behaviour within society (Rhodes, 1997; Renting, 2008; Wiskerke, 2010). While the *state* corresponds mainly to public regulation to structure collective action, the *market* makes use mainly of market-regulation mechanisms, such as prices and rules for market liberalization or privatization, as a means to govern market partners' actions. With respect to *civil society*, governance mechanisms refer mainly to active citizen's participation, self-organization and democratic control.

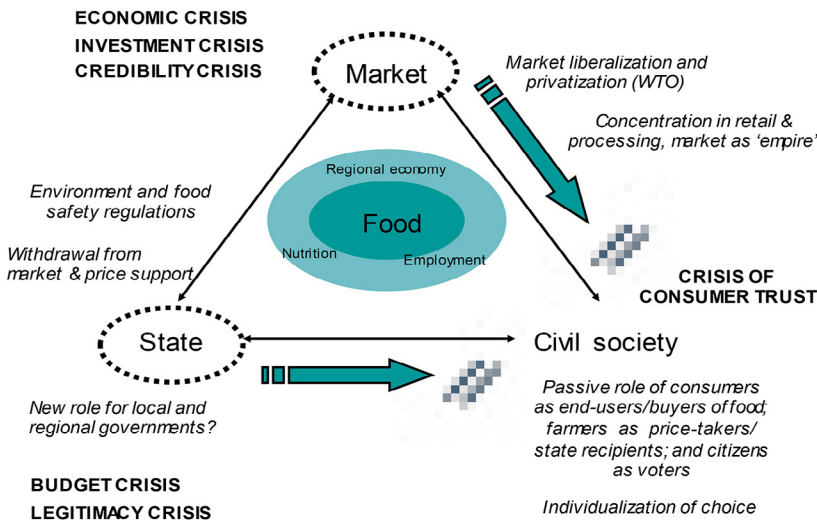
When applying the governance triangle to agri-food systems,<sup>2</sup> it becomes clear that debates about agri-food governance have focused principally on market regulation and state intervention as the main governance mechanisms in the last decades, while much less attention was given to the role of civil society in structuring agri-food systems. This bias reflects, on the one hand, that as a result of neo-liberal policy especially in recent decades food production was considered merely an economic activity and food a tradable commodity, not that much different from other products and economic sectors, for which (perhaps with the exception of acute shortages and emergencies) price mechanisms should play a central role in the organization of markets. On the other hand, agriculture, food and rural development are policy fields for which state intervention was considered an accepted phenomenon early on, if not with respect to markets than certainly for improving farm structures, technical efficiency, food safety control or guaranteeing food security and, especially in Europe, also social and environmental concerns. The centrality of market and state regulation in debates on agri-food governance is well illustrated by discussions within the framework of the World Trade Organization (WTO) on trade liberalization and the legitimacy of government support to agriculture and related debates on the reform of the Common Agricultural Policy (CAP) of the European Union.

In the heyday of the agricultural modernization project (ca. 1960–1985) the governance of agri-food systems was to a considerable extent state driven. In order to augment production levels and – certainly in the European context – guarantee basic food self-sufficiency, the state was accorded a key role by means of policy incentives and public extension and advisory services. The state not only attempted to shape infrastructural conditions and improve farm structures or management practices, but also intervened in commodity markets through subsidies and price setting. Indirectly, agri-food policies aimed to enable a diversification of the economy by providing cheap food for growing urban populations. Beyond securing minimum safety standards, however, the state hardly intervened in food-quality issues.

From the 1990s onwards, a gradual rebalancing occurred of the weight and particular role of public and market regulation within agri-food governance. On the one hand, in this period we see the rise of neo-liberal economic approaches that, in the context of the WTO (and previously the GATT), increasingly put pressure on governments to gradually abolish market intervention and state support of agricultural prices. The successive CAP reforms from the 1980s onwards were an expression of this. On the other hand, the reforms implied a redefinition of the role of public policy in agri-food governance. In a context of growing societal discontent and public concern over the negative environmental and social side effects of mainstream agriculture, various policy measures and regulations (e.g. agri-environment measures, food-quality schemes) were introduced to improve the public image of agriculture and reinstall the confidence in the quality and safety of their food. This tendency was reinforced by food-related health scares and animal disease outbreaks in the 1990s, resulting in additional food-safety measures and health and consumer protection policies.

While market and public regulation were thus considered to be key governance mechanisms, this has not been the case for civil society. Indirect control by representative democratic institutions was generally considered a sufficient level of citizen involvement and only for professional organizations and interest groups (farmers' unions, industry lobby groups, and consumer groups) was a stronger involvement in policymaking considered necessary and appropriate. With regard to markets and consumption, hand in hand with overall trends in the agri-food system, the involvement and role of civil society was reduced to that of (individualized) passive buyers and end users of food products and recipients of promotional marketing messages. In many respects the same goes for farmers who were largely considered (individualized) recipients of state regulations and price-takers in the market (see Figure 1).

For a long time, this combination of governance mechanisms was successful in meeting its goals (raising productivity, providing cheap food, generating regional economic development) and, thus, in stabilizing the productivist food regime (Friedmann and McMichael, 1989). However, this model is now confronted increasingly with multiple crises, which in turn are resulting in growing social and economic tensions (see Figure 1). On the one hand, markets are dominated increasingly by a small number of concentrated market parties in retail and processing, thus undermining the bargaining power and influence of producers and consumers; at the same time, market liberalization and privatization have facilitated the emergence of a global 'market empire' (Hardt and Negri, 2000; Ploeg, 2008) beyond the control of national sovereign states and dominated by private corporate interests. On the other hand, public regulation is undergoing continuous policy reforms and a shift in levels of policy intervention, which debilitates its effectiveness. While the national state has increasingly withdrawn from traditional agricultural and rural policies, new potential roles and responsibilities for governments are emerging at local and regional levels (e.g. support of localized food systems and multifunctional forms of agriculture in the framework of rural development measures). However, this policy shift



**Figure 1.** Dominant agri-food governance mechanisms and the current, multiple crises.

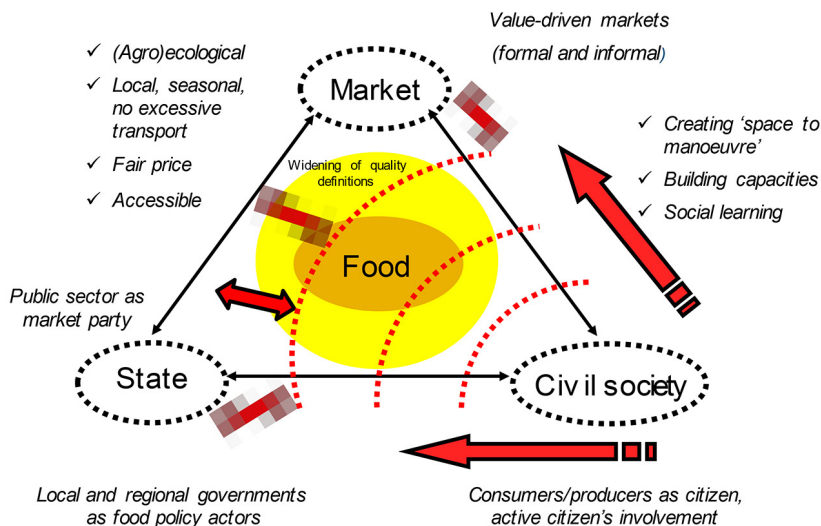


is implemented in highly incomplete and contradictory ways, amongst others as a consequence of opposition from vested interests groups in conventional agriculture (Marsden and Sonnino, 2008).

This results in a rupture of relations between civil society and market and state governance, exemplified in a lack of consumer trust in the quality and safety of food products and a breakdown in citizen’s support (consumer and producers alike) for agri-food policy measures. Moreover, this breakdown in relevant linkages appears to be further aggravated and accelerated by the current financial, economic and political crises that wider society is undergoing and that is also affecting agri-food systems. For example, innovations in state governance are severely conditioned by the budget crisis that undermines the possibilities for funding of policy innovations (or that cuts down on existing funds). Moreover, the legitimacy crisis of the representative democratic system (as expressed e.g. by the ‘Occupy’ protest movements in various countries, see Pabst, 2011) undermines its credibility to come up with real answers to the crisis of the agri-food system.

Similarly, market governance mechanisms and their potential to create dynamism and transitions in the agri-food system are undermined increasingly by the financial and economic crises. The investment crisis makes it more and more difficult for socially committed entrepreneurs (either in production or processing and retailing) to obtain credit and access markets, while the economic crisis puts further pressure on prices and makes it more difficult to compete in markets with differentiated quality products with higher prices. Also, tendencies towards the watering down and conventionalization of quality standards in the face of market pressure may undermine the credibility of market-based innovations of the food system.

As Figure 2 shows, CFNs can be understood against this background as an expression of the revitalized role of civil society-based governance mechanisms and, more generally, of a rebalancing of the role and relative weight of different types of governance mechanisms. While civil society was accorded initially a minor and



**Figure 2.** Civil society-based governance mechanisms as source of dynamism and innovation.

secondary role within agri-food governance, by means of CFNs citizens are increasingly reclaiming influence on the organization and operation of food production, distribution and consumption systems, and by doing so generating new forms of citizen engagement with food. In a context of profound crises of market and state governance, civil society-based initiatives become an important source of innovation through social learning, the building of new capacities and by creating 'space to manoeuvre' for organizing food production, distribution and consumption differently.

The regeneration of civic governance mechanisms not only results in changes towards more active roles for consumers as citizens, it also redefines the roles of 'citizen-producers' within food systems, and it also redirects the nature of agri-food networks as a whole. As such, not only does growing citizen engagement lead to different social and economic relations between producers and consumers, but CFNs also appear to embody specific production and distribution models that in sustainability performance and food-quality definitions are clearly distinct from conventional food systems. While CFNs present a considerable diversity, shared characteristics include: promoting (agro-)ecological production methods (though not necessarily with formal organic certification); favouring local and seasonal foods, thereby avoiding unnecessary 'food miles' and excessive energy consumption; offering fair remuneration to producers and other persons involved in different stages of the food system; and providing access to quality food for all income levels and not only for wealthy citizens. What is striking is the integrated nature of criteria applied, often combining ecological, social and other ethical concerns with food quality, as well as the fact that informal, flexible forms of coordination and control systems based on direct relations and mutual trust are preferred to formal arrangements.

Innovations emerging from social-learning processes and new forms of organization within CFNs may in turn form the basis for (re-)creating linkages with state and market parties, and thus lay the basis for new configurations of agri-food governance mechanisms. When the growth of CFNs results in the availability of new, alternative forms of organization of food provisioning, this opens up new interfaces and space of negotiation with market parties and public administrations (indicated by the row of double-sided arrows in Figure 2). These interfaces and negotiations may (and in initial phases often will) be full of tensions and contradictions, but in the medium and long run may also lead to new alliances, rules, institutional arrangements and organizational models for sustainable agri-food systems. Examples of such possible organizational innovations for which CFNs often play a key role as source of dynamism are urban and territorial food strategies (Renting, 2008; Lamine et al., 2012; Derkzen and Morgan, 2012), in which local and regional governments together with civil society groups define concrete plans of action for improving agri-food systems at the local level and governments take up a role as market party by creating demand for local, sustainable food through public food-procurement schemes (Morgan and Sonnino, 2008). For the civil society-market axis, CFNs provide examples of innovations by alternative systems of food provisioning, especially short food supply chains or forms of social or solidarity economy (Leyshon et al., 2003; Gibson-Graham, 2006), in which material and financial exchanges in markets are increasingly subject to value-based, ethical considerations.

### **Towards a Mapping of Different Forms and Mechanisms of Food Citizenship**

The study of the newly emerging reality of CFNs is confronted with a considerable number of methodological and conceptual complications. Generally speaking only fragmented information is available, especially on the basis of Internet sources and (field) expert knowledge, and only in exceptional cases (semi-)official data are published. For example, Flora and Bregendahl (this issue) refer to the national database of the Robyn Van En Center for CSA resources in the USA, which presently includes more than 1,650 CSAs all over the United States. In Italy, the only 'official' data about solidarity buying groups at national level is provided by the national network, which lists currently somewhat more than 900 groups (RETEGAS, 2012), while experts estimate a total of about 2,000 when including non-registered groups (Lamine et al., 2012). For France the interregional platform MIRAMAP in its most recent survey of November 2011 counted 1,600 AMAP groups delivering regularly 66,000 product boxes to 270 000 consumers (MIRAMAP, 2011). For many other countries even such 'informed guesses' are not available. Moreover, in many cases the study of CFNs involves the uncovering of 'hidden realities' outside the formalized agri-food system, and sometimes even people who do not want to be registered for ideological considerations. Hence, to a considerable extent 'blind spots' remain and available figures are often underestimated.

In many respects, the described situation calls for what the Portuguese sociologist Boaventura de Sousa Santos has called a 'sociology of absences and emergences' (Santos, 2003). As he indicates, dominant conceptions of social and economic organizational forms often implicitly ignore possible alternative organizational models and to a certain extent it is in the interest of hegemonic groups to disqualify these as 'non-existent' or 'non-viable'. He proposes therefore a new epistemological approach to address the presence and development of alternative experiences.

'Whereas the goal of the sociology of absences is to identify and valorize social experiences available in the world – although declared non-existent by hegemonic rationality – the sociology of emergences aims to identify and enlarge the signs of possible future experiences, under the guise of tendencies and latencies, that are actively ignored by hegemonic rationality and knowledge' (Santos, 2003, p. 241).

The sociology of emergences 'consists in undertaking a symbolic enlargement of knowledge, practices and agents in order to identify therein the tendencies of the future (the not yet) upon which it is possible to intervene so as to maximise the probability of hope vis-à-vis the probability of frustration' (ibid.).

Following this perspective, CFNs present highly diverse forms of civic engagement in food networks and in their transformative potential within agri-food systems and, more generally, food practices and culture. In fact, CFNs take various avenues through which food is co-generated (in its material and immaterial 'quality') and transacted between producers and consumers; different types of arrangements are used to share production risks and to finance investments; the connection between producers and consumers can have a variety of contractual or informal constructions. Moreover, CFNs show different capacities to act as agents of change, at a local level (e.g. relations with public institutions and local communities) and, more generally, at the level of public opinion, culture, discourses, marketing strategies, political agendas, etc.

Without any intention of classifying CFNs, we could organize this variety of expressions of food citizenship with reference to two areas of action. The first is characterized by active involvement into *(re-)constructing alternative systems of food provisioning*, which may result from a very close interaction and mutual influence between producers and consumers or even a physical identity of both roles. The second is civic engagement into *shaping public opinion, culture, institutions and policies by communication, lobbying and political activism*. In terms of different governance mechanisms visualized in the previous section, the first area corresponds to the (re-)building of linkages between civil society and markets, while the second includes the creation of new connections between civil society and (local) public institutions.

Both of these areas of action entail processes of social learning, primarily interesting consumers and producers but increasingly also other actors and public institutions. Through these processes skills are regained and a new awareness and different attitudes towards food develop. Another important process is that of the re-appropriation of the social and recreational function of food. Overcoming the individualized dimension shaped by the modernization of the agri-food system, civic food practices appear increasingly to be able to produce relational goods, by allowing the exchange of meanings and values and sharing the enjoyment of food production and consumption as social and identity-reinforcing activities.

In the following sections we explore some of the manifestations of these new expressions of food citizenship, and draw upon examples from articles included in this Special Issue.

#### *Engagement in Reconstructing Food Practices: From Closer Consumer–Producer Relations...*

A common feature of the close, more or less formalized relationships established between consumers and producers is the capacity to extend beyond economic exchange and to include social and political motivations and benefits for both sides. An outstanding example of this is ‘community-supported agriculture’ (CSA) (Parker, 2005; Flora and Bregendahl, this issue). Within this relationship, consumers are committed to sustaining farm activities, both financially and otherwise, e.g. by paying in advance, sharing production risks, and in some cases contributing to tasks on the farm or even becoming co-owner of the farm land and resources. Similar experiences are currently spreading rapidly in southern Europe, including the already mentioned Solidarity Purchasing Groups (GAS) in Italy and Associations for the Maintenance of Peasant Agriculture, AMAP) in France (Lamine et al., this issue). Examples in other countries which work in a similar way are food co-ops in Germany and the UK (Little et al., 2010), Groupes d’Achat Solidaires de l’Agriculture Paysanne (solidarity purchasing groups for peasant agriculture, GASAP) and food teams in Belgium, Agriculture Contractuelle de Proximité (proximity contract agriculture, ACP) in Switzerland, and agro-ecological consumption groups or cooperatives in Spain (Soler et al., 2010).

The close negotiations between producers and consumers on production and product standards in these CFNs imply a co-evolution of practices that, depending on the degree of consumer involvement in production activities and of producer involvement in distribution and marketing, can be termed ‘co-production’ or ‘consumption’. *Co-production* within agri-food networks can be defined as the influence of consumers on production activities in more or less formalized arrangements. In

many cases, this interrelation takes the form of a real negotiation and agreement on the production patterns and on their ethical standards (Brunori et al., 2011). While co-producers involve themselves in production activities, *co-sumption* refers to civic engagement through the conscious choice of products only. Co-consumers thus remain in the role of consumers who impact through purchasing decisions without closer relationships, even though their decisions are informed by increased knowledge of food production processes and a reskilling of consumers. Some examples of CFNs appear at first sight to be farmer-driven forms of direct marketing, but a closer look reveals a key role for consumers. Examples are box schemes that are initiated by consumers together with farmers and even farmers' markets (often perceived as clear example of producer-led direct marketing) which in the case of Prague in the Czech Republic were only organized after demands and campaigns from civil society (Zagata, this issue).

*... to the Identity of Producer and Consumer*

The rich variety of forms of citizens engagement in food provisioning within CFNs make clear that the traditional distinction between 'producers' and 'consumers' is becoming increasingly obsolete, and following Veen et al. (this issue) we may rather speak of a sliding scale of 'producerhood'. In some cases citizen engagement in food production takes the form of a real re-appropriation, as is the case with 'grow it yourself' initiatives that received attention in the context of 'urban agriculture'. Two articles in this collection (Psarikidou and Szeszynski, this issue; Veen et al., this issue), but also a growing body of literature on urban gardening, testify that the forms and motivations of those who grow their own food vary greatly. As a study in the city of Munich shows, forms may range from individual allotments to collective fields as well as pedagogic and therapeutic gardens or intercultural and neighbourhood gardens (Haide, 2009). Some growers mainly appear to be interested in self-fulfilment, reconnecting with nature and meeting other like-minded people (Veen et al., this issue; also Vogl et al., 2003). More than a conscious action aimed at changing the overall food system, many individual and collective experiences appear to be opportunities for deskilled citizens to regain knowledge about food growing. From a perspective of societal change, however, they represent a meaningful reconstruction of capacities.

In other experiences, especially in Germany and Austria, community gardens have become popular sites for social integration of different groups, e.g. in the context of neighbourhood gardens, intergenerational gardens or intercultural gardens. Social integration is the main driver, but some authors also attribute a political role to community gardens in reclaiming public space and providing subsistence production and autonomy (Müller, 2007). Along similar lines several initiatives aim to provide access to land to those who want to grow food and do not have land, especially young and unemployed people from an urban background. Examples include *Selbsternte* ('self harvest'), Vogl et al., 2003) in Austria, *Landshare* in the UK, *Terre de liens* ('land of connections') in France or *Toma la Tierra* ('take the land') in Spain. Some offer their services freely or as community service (like *Landshare*), while others are more business oriented and closer to direct-marketing schemes (like *Selbsternte*). Others again consider themselves more clearly as political movements (like *Terre de liens* and *Toma la Tierra*) and have a clear agenda linked to current debates on de-growth and reclaiming the commons.

These CFNs in which consumers increasingly assume a production role, and identity differences between consumers and producers diminish, call for a theoretical reflection. Some insights are offered by the concept of *pro-sumption*, a term originally coined by Toffler (1980) to indicate that in a post-industrial society the distinction between production and consumption becomes increasingly blurred. Since then the concept has been used to describe, on the one hand, the increasing agency of consumers, for example by Zwick et al. who argue that 'the recruitment of consumers into productive co-creation relationships hinges on accommodating consumers' needs for recognition, freedom, and agency' (2008, p. 185). Ritzer and Jurgenson (2010), on the other hand, use the concept to denounce the progressive, forced integration of consumers into production processes, e.g. mandatory self-service in the fast-food industry and the increasing outsourcing of tasks to end consumers. We use the term here to refer to the active involvement of consumers in food production, as a deliberate choice to increase their agency and engagement in the agri-food system.

Empowerment by citizen's engagement in food growing is not necessarily related to self-sufficiency in food production. Although always present, food production is reported to be a secondary motivation to most European cases of urban gardening (Jehlicka and Smith, 2011; Veen et al., this issue). Similarly, in Japan the Tanada system of collective rice terrace cultivation appears more of a sociocultural activity than a source of staple food (Kieninger et al., 2011). In the United States, on the other hand, urban gardens are especially mushrooming in the 'food deserts' of inner cities (Blanchard and Matthews, 2007; Corrigan, 2011). Here community gardens do have an importance for guaranteeing access to healthy food for socially disadvantaged parts of the population, a role which also applies for many urban-agriculture initiatives in the countries of the Global South (Dubbeling et al., 2010).

### *Political Engagement in the Food System*

The concept of CFNs is not limited to relations of market exchange and to the provision of food per se. In line with the governance triangle in Figure 2, new configurations of food citizenship can be observed along the axis between civil society and the state, corresponding to governments at various levels. Through the sharing of societal goals beyond just economic exchange, CFNs are able increasingly to act as agents of change, exerting pressure on the food system in several ways. They may do so by pointing out contradictions and limitations of the mainstream food system and thus fostering new public awareness around food issues and the introduction of new questions on political agendas. Others put pressure on the regulatory system by engaging in the redefinition of rules or by undertaking demonstrative protest actions. CFNs may exert power by active participation in community organizations, local food movements, or local institutions. Examples in this issue are the local food policy councils in Hungary (Balázs, this issue) and Manchester in the UK (Psarikidou and Szerszynski, this issue) and organic food procurement to public schools in France and Brazil (Lamine et al., this issue).

The growing public concern over food and the increased awareness that food models and practices need to change profoundly result at least partly from pressure by civil society groups. They have successfully created a new discourse on food and food practices by forging linkages with other social movements. This creates pressure for suitable food policies and changes in regulatory frameworks aimed at creating more favourable conditions for small-scale farming systems, organic farming

and innovative food-provisioning initiatives. Proposals often demand deregulation and adjustment of existing rules, e.g. in the case of food-hygiene rules, regulations for public procurement tenders or organic certification, topics on which pressure from grass-roots organizations have stimulated a debate and the search for alternatives.

The proactive role of civil society towards public and institutional spaces has fostered new forms of interaction and encouraged new types of policy initiatives. As Psarikidou and Szerszynski (this issue) indicate, the boundaries between citizen-led and institutional initiatives are often not clear cut. Institutional frameworks are needed often to nourish community activities and provide a milieu in which food citizenship can thrive. Sometimes motivations behind institutional support appear to be ambiguous, as is increasingly the case with urban-gardening food-provisioning initiatives that attract attention from public administrations and offers for public support. Some authors consider the growing interest and support from local institutions critically as a potential expression of a neo-liberal model of urban development, in which private, voluntary gardeners take over services formerly provided by public management (Rosol, 2012).

The mobilization of civil society also assumes forms of opposition and protest. This is the case when growing dissatisfaction with legal institutions provokes demonstrative protests or acts of resistance, such as land occupations ('reclaiming the fields') or support for political protest campaigns. Some groups aim to raise awareness about consumerism and its consequences, focusing on the large amounts of food waste inherent in modern food-retail and consumption patterns. Radical critics of this 'throw-away society' have started to live deliberately on the 'waste' of supermarkets, and movements like 'freeganism' and activities like 'dumpster diving' are expressions of this position, which might be called 'no-sumption'. Freeganism combines concepts of free and shared resources (food, clothing, housing, etc.) with veganism (abstaining from the use of animal products) and certain forms use it as a public political statement to denounce the unequal access to food (Petina and Amos, 2011). A similar approach is followed by Food Not Bombs, an international movement sharing free vegan or vegetarian food in over 1,000 cities over the world to protest against war, poverty and environmental destruction 'expressing a commitment to the fact that food is a right and not a privilege' (Heynen, 2010). Other groups, like the German movement *Tafel* (i.e. 'table'), donate products removed from supermarket shelves prior to their expiry date as charity to marginalized people – a more conventional practice often considered ambivalent as it might foster social exclusion instead of battling it (Lorenz, 2012).

### **Future Conceptual Challenges and Opportunities**

Civic food networks as an emergent phenomenon is rapidly gaining momentum and relevance, both as a space for experimentation and as a breeding ground for alternative ways to organize food provisioning and potentially as a countervailing power to the dominant agro-industrial food system. Being a movement rooted in communities and principally defining local answers to global problems, its expressions show a great variation. Heterogeneity and embeddedness are strong points and essential characteristics, but also pose conceptual and methodological challenges for research.

A conceptual framework taking the civic nature of new agri-food networks as a starting point needs to go beyond the terminology of 'consumer' and 'producer', which intrinsically defines and limits citizen's agency with respect to food by assuming that it forms part of a material and economic transaction. While 'economy' will continue to be an important dimension of agri-food systems, it is increasingly problematic and falls short in explaining the motivations and driving forces of social actors. New civic food experiences suggest that several basic assumptions, which were taken for granted for long, need to be reconsidered. For example, economic actors were seen as opposing parties, while within CFNs new forms of collaboration and sharing emerge as key features.

Citizen's actions related to food, from this perspective, should be defined as expressions of a common area of agency (shaped by consumers and producers) representing shared goals at community level and embodying a gradual shift from utilitarian-private visions to economic models based on solidarity and the defence of common goods. These lessons embodied in CFNs coincide with a wider tendency that aims to bring ethical considerations back into the economy and 'put economy in its place' again, both in theory and practice. To some extent we are seeing a 'moralization' (or even 'civilization') of economies, resulting in an 'ethical foodscape' (Goodman et al., 2010) of which emerging civic food initiatives form part. Against the background of this new common area of agency, concepts of food citizenship, food democracy and food sovereignty find new evidence and force in an alliance around new food discourses and practices.

The study of CFNs is also challenged to adequately address the reshaping of relations between market forces, public policies and the role of civil society within the governance of agri-food systems. Within a context of market and state governance in profound crisis, civil society-based governance mechanisms emerge as important sources of dynamism and innovation. These dynamics of change have a common denominator in the mobilization of processes of social learning, needed to develop new attitudes and capacities for tackling food matters, at both a practical and cultural-political level. While the renewed role of civil society thus opens opportunities for system transformation, there is also reason for caution. The dangers of instrumentalization by the dominant regime should be seriously addressed (Rosol, 2012) and require a better understanding of the contradictions between opposition and cooperation with public institutions from the perspective of CFNs.

In line with these considerations, the articles brought together in this Special Issue are a first attempt to better document and understand the emergent phenomenon of CFNs. They cover highly different geographical and sociocultural settings in Europe and the Americas and show that in all these contexts civil society is (re-)emerging as an important driver of food system change. Taken together, the various examples, without being exhaustive, also represent a large variety of expressions of food citizenship. While the contributions build on different conceptual approaches, and thus valorize the important previous work done under headings such as 'short food supply chains', 'alternative food networks' or 'local food systems', they all take on board the key focus upon civil society and citizen's agency for understanding contemporary food-system dynamics. Building on this first attempt of stocktaking, a next step should be to develop further conceptual and methodological avenues to fully grasp the innovative potentials embodied in CFNs.



## Notes

1. These included the XXIV European Society for Rural Sociology Congress (22–25 August 2011, Chania, Greece); the International Conference on Multifunctional Agriculture and Urban-Rural Relations: Agriculture in an Urbanizing Society (1–4 April 2012, Wageningen, Netherlands); the 9th European IFSA Symposium (1–4 July 2012, Aarhus, Denmark); and the XIII World Congress of Rural Sociology (29 July–4 August 2012, Lisbon, Portugal).
2. This analysis is based mainly on the European situation, but is likely to apply to agri-food systems in the developed world. Its applicability to countries in the South is still to be further assessed, but also there civil society appears increasingly to be a key driving force of food system dynamics (e.g. see Lamine et al., this issue).

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