



The collective power of the Lilliputians: Enhancing understanding of how organizational elements of Alternative Food Net-works can support a post-neoliberal transition

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Abstract – In this paper we draw on transition and organizational theory to advance understanding of how alternative food networks (AFNs) contribute to a post-neoliberal transition. We identify and analyse organizational elements that facilitate or support transition by introducing practices of democratic and community-based decision-making, and principles of sharing in transactional relationships. We further reflect on whether AFNs are prompting adaptation at the regime level or whether they are in fact practices that suggest potential pathways to a sustainability transition. We conclude that part of the potential of the “Lilliputians” (networks of networks) comes from the way in which they organize themselves against (perceived) threats.

INTRODUCTION

The mainstream system of food provisioning has failed to secure adequate, accessible, sustainable food for the world's changing population. In response, multiple pathways for transition and transformation towards more environmentally and socially sustainable food systems have been proposed and put into practice (i.e., community-supported agriculture initiatives, solidarity purchasing groups, consumer-farmer cooperatives, bartering, etc.). The motivations, structure, and sustainability of these initiatives are diverse, reflecting the heterogeneity of actors and contexts. In this paper, we are particularly interested in understanding how **Alternative Food Networks** (AFNs) in Europe contribute or hinder socio-ecological and socio-economic transitions that can support a post-neoliberal project. AFNs are diverse and operate at small-scales. However they are often able to create and develop wide networks, and thus diffuse norms, values and practices at a larger scale. The diffusion of these norms, values and practices lead to a “multitudes of practices” creating potential opportunities for socio-ecological change. We argue, invoking the tale of Gulliver's Travels, that the power of the Lilliputians (i.e., the collective of small networks working against various perceived threats) depends very much on how they organise themselves, and that understanding these organizational dynamics is key to supporting transitions towards more inclusive, just and sustainable food systems.

METHODOLOGY

In this paper we draw on transition theory, social practice theory, and organization theory to advance understanding of how AFNs contribute to a post-neoliberal transition. AFNs are understood to be **niches**, made up of **novel practices**. They emerge and are developed in part in response to pressure and/or problems within the **regime** (understood here to be institutions and rules characterised by a neoliberal paradigm, are prompted by the anchoring of novel practices) or the **landscape** (the exogenous environment made up of factors with a broad social relevance). Transitions come from a range of novelties that initially challenge or misfit the dominant regime (Elzen et al. 2012).

Novel practices are widely understood to be new practices, however, in this paper, we are interested in practices undertaken with the intention of promoting change and in opposition to the dominant (food) regime. We recognise that many of the practices employed by AFNs could be characterized as traditional practices and these should not be excluded from analysis. We are particularly interested in practices that relate to organizational elements. These practices challenge mainstream food production and distribution systems, namely practices of democratic decision making about access and use of resources (i.e. land, financial capital, skills), as well as practices of community building, sharing knowledge and information, enforcing trust and relational based relationships and agreements (Brunori et al., 2012). All these practices are central to the organization of AFNs (Cembalo et al., 2015) and shape the way they relate and network with other AFNs. Importantly, novel practices emerge in local practices and become part of a niche through the establishment of networks of actors willing to support these practices.

The construction of networks is thus key to socio-ecological transition, however how the **organizational elements** characterise these networks and the way they scale up or out has not been adequately researched. This paper contributes to transition theory by focussing on the way the **organizational structure** of these AFNs facilitates/hampers the diffusion of novel practices, and more specifically how networks of AFNs can contribute to diffusion of democratic and community-based practices at landscape/regime level.



To strategically address this gap, we implement a “**theory-building from case-studies**” approach (Eisenhardt and Graebner 2007). More specifically, we develop two case studies of established AFNs in Europe and analyse the intersections of social practices and organizational elements that have the potential to facilitate or support transition. We focus particularly on practices of democratic and community-based decision-making, and principles of sharing in transactional relationships.

DESCRIPTION AND ANALYSIS OF THE CASES

In this research we selected and analysed two cases of networks of AFNs which we argue have the potentials to inform researchers about how AFNs can contribute to diffusion of democratic and community-based practices at landscape/regime level. We used as preliminary selection criteria the geographical scope of the networks, predominantly looking at examples of AFNs which are operating at a more international and global level through networking. We also selected networks that have already been established for a longer period of time in order to include some organizational diversity in terms of development and diffusion of practices. **Slow Food International** (SFI) and **Urgenci** are the two selected cases.

We analyse the two cases by comparing and contrasting key practices which are marked by democratic decision making about use and access to resources, as well as community building and sharing values. Based on this preliminary analysis we detected a number of interesting similarities as well as substantial differences. SFI and Urgenci regulate participation via a formal set of rules and a handbook-like approach. Different typologies of memberships are profiled and offered, and they entitle members to gather different types of decision rights and of course different resource access. Both SFI and Urgenci delegate decision making about specific issues to local “chapters” and groups, while keeping centralised more general strategic decisions, for example using an International Council (SFI) or an International Committee (Urgenci). Both networks seem to acknowledge tensions arising when dealing with heterogeneous communities, operating at very different level and different subjects. However the two networks seem to promote slightly different practices in this respect. While SFI is much more concerned about regulating and preserving an appropriate way of using a sort of “collective brand”, Urgenci is more keen on transferring knowledge and practices related to community supported agriculture, to create platforms and to act more at a political level, starting from local and regional realities. SFI seems to implement a more explicit top-down (hierarchical) approach, and access to the network is slightly more regulated than in the case of Urgenci.

While SFI seems to have already achieved and established a strategy for change at the regime level, Urgenci appears to be focused on promoting “coordinated” local impacts. SFI is therefore already an actor embedded in regime mechanisms/dynamics, while Urgenci appears to operate still with “interconnected” niches.

CONCLUSION

We conclude by reflecting on whether networks of AFNs are prompting adaptation at the regime level or whether they are in fact practices that suggest potential pathways to a sustainability transition. Based on our preliminary case study analysis we argue that the organizational elements characterising the different networks of AFNs may have an important effect on the transformational potential of these organizations. More explicitly when a network of AFNs mimics elements and practices of the regime (i.e. hierarchical based practices) and deals with issues of control and regulation of the practices, then it may gain in terms of adaptability and capacity to incrementally change the regime, while losing more transitional and fundamental capacity to transform the regime. Our preliminary results suggest that aggregating niche activities and practices across local networks does not ensure transformational capacity, but the way this aggregation (i.e. via networking) is managed and organised is likely to influence it. In other words the strength of the “Lilliputians” comes from the **way in which they organize themselves against (perceived) threats**.

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