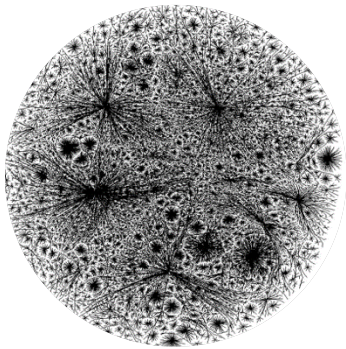


Assembling AFNs' activities in Sheffield, UK

Alberto Serra

MSc Thesis report



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Author: Alberto Serra

Study programme: MSc Organic Agriculture, Sustainable Food Systems

Registration number: 861112 758 090

Supervisor: Jessica Duncan

Chair group: Rural sociology group

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Abstract

In the last decades, an increasing number of food initiatives provide food to communities across the world adopting holistic farming methods, direct distributions strategies and social inclusive approaches. Such initiatives are often recognised as Alternative Food Networks (AFNs). Major discourses around AFNs focus on how such initiatives are linked to the turn to quality, embeddedness, localism and alternativeness. Although the academic literature extensively portray what AFNs represent, it indicates little about what actually occurs in the reproduction of these initiatives. AFNs tend to group together distinct initiatives that although might adopt similar strategies they have different configurations. Such configurations, intended as assemblages, can reveal the functioning of AFNs by understanding what interactions shape the reproduction of such initiatives. To this extent this research studied what activities characterize the material and expressive aspects of AFNs assemblages. This has been done by studying food initiatives in Sheffield, UK, mainly a community shop and a veg box scheme through participant observations and interviews. The results describe the interactions between growers, producers, workers, volunteers and customers through activities such as promotion, acquisition, distribution, administration and celebration. The report further presents how these activities contribute to the territorialisation and coding of AFNs assemblages. This allowed to capture how food is the mean for most interactions and how conversations and attitudes mark the uniqueness of each initiative. Overall, the research showed how the initiatives studied entail similar activities but they are differently developed, confirming the necessity to use more contextual narratives around such food initiatives.

Keywords: Alternative Food Networks, assemblages, activities, territorialisation, coding

1. Introduction

In the last decades, a wide array of food initiatives provide local, ecological and healthy food to communities around the world by adopting holistic farming practices, direct distribution strategies and social inclusive approaches that move away from conventional food systems (Eriksen, 2013; Hinrichs, 2000; Morris & Kirwan, 2011; O’Kane, 2016; Sage, 2003; Sonnino & Griggs-Trevarthen, 2013). Because of their characteristics, such initiatives are often recognised as Alternative Food Networks (AFNs) (Dansero & Puttilli, 2014; Goodman & Goodman, 2009; Kirwan, 2004; Maye & Kirwan, 2010; Renting, Marsden, & Banks, 2003; Venn et al., 2006; Wiskerke, 2009).

AFNs as such are retained as counterparts of conventional supply chains within the food panorama rather than co-existing initiatives that adopts diverse strategies. The academic literature extensively portrays what these initiatives represent in term of quality (Ilbery & Kneafsey, 2000; Murdoch, Marsden, & Banks, 2000; Winter, 2003), localism (Dansero & Puttilli, 2014; Goodman & Goodman, 2009; Tregear, 2011) embeddedness (Hinrichs, 2000; Morris & Kirwan, 2011; Sage, 2003) and alternativeness (Watts, Ilbery, & Maye, 2005) while it indicates little about what it actually happens in the reproduction of AFNs.

The term AFNs tends to group indistinctively heterogeneous initiatives such as farmers’ markets, veg box schemes and community supported agriculture schemes (CSAs) amongst others. Although these initiatives might have similar strategies, they have very different configurations and grouping them under the term AFNs might results in flattening their diversity and relevance. Such initiatives are in fact differentiated by the adoption of varied activities as well as contexts where they are embedded (Jarosz, 2008).

Food initiatives within AFNs are therefore to be understood by the activities that they entail which characterizes them and distinguish from other initiatives. To this extent, AFNs can be seen as assemblages, intended as multiplicities that entail contingent interaction between heterogeneous components. The activities within food initiatives can in fact represent the interactions that enable the reproduction of a phenomenon such as AFNs can be. An assemblage of the activities performed in a food initiative would therefore allow to understand what actually happens within AFNs by elaborating how the assemblage is spatially distributed and characterized. This ultimately helps to distinguish AFNs while also shed a light on how such initiatives are reproduced.

In an effort to further understand AFNs, this research aims to explore what activities characterize the reproduction of food initiatives within AFNs. Given the heterogeneity of AFNs, I argue that assemblage thinking is an appropriate lens to discern their different compositions.

In order to pursue the aim of this research, I studied food initiatives based in Sheffield, UK, a community shop and a veg box scheme, both distributing mainly plant based food. This has been done by employing participant observations, semi structured interviews and documents' review (Hammersley & Atkinson, 2007; Kumar, 2011).

This thesis presents a literature review on AFNs and the relevance of this research, followed by a brief description of assemblage thinking and the related methods that will be used. It then describes the assemblages that emerged based on the initiatives and ends with a discussion of the findings and answer to the research questions in the conclusions.

2. Literature review

AFNs have been increasingly addressed in the academic literature (Web of science, 2019), see Figure 1. Over the last two decades multiple authors addressed AFNs from different point of views. For this reason, I will indicate below some of the major discourses around AFNs.

AFNs are generally considered networks of producers, eaters, and other actors that embody alternatives to the more standardised industrial modes of food supply (Goodman & Goodman, 2009; Maye & Kirwan, 2010; Murdoch et al., 2000; Renting et al., 2003; Sonnino & Griggs-Trevarthen, 2013; Tregear, 2011).

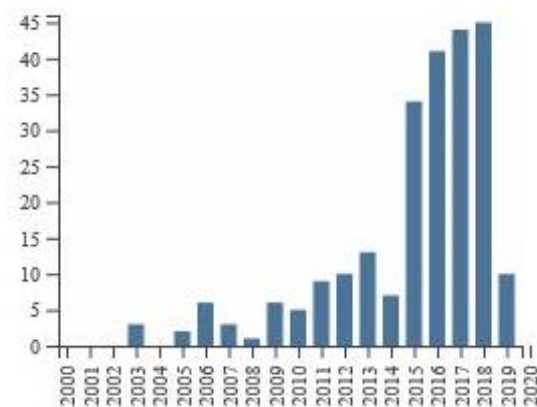


Figure 1 Total publications by year about AFNs (Web of science, 2019)

AFNs are often linked to multiple concerns of locality (Dansero & Puttilli, 2014; Goodman & Goodman, 2009; Tregear, 2011) which can refer to different types of proximity, namely geographical, relational and value, as described by Eriksen (2013). Nevertheless, localism has been in some cases considered not inherently good (Born & Purcell, 2006) but open for interpretation (Blake, Mellor, & Crane, 2010) that need to be understood in broader contexts where it unfolds.

AFNs have also been linked with 'the turn to quality' (Ilbery & Kneafsey, 2000; Murdoch et al., 2000; Winter, 2003). This often relates to the increasing interest in food quality derived from development of global food systems that opened up for a series of events marking such concern from consumers. In relation to AFNs, the quality turn is often used to refer to the food properties searched by consumers. However, as a social construction, quality can take up different meanings depending on the contexts used (Ilbery & Kneafsey, 2000).

Other authors focused on the embeddedness of AFNs, most notably Hinrichs (2000) and Sage (2003) elaborated on the market and social embeddedness of farmers' markets and CSAs

(Hinrichs, 2000; Sage, 2003) while Morris and Kirwan operationalised the concept of ecological embeddedness in relation to the potential benefits of AFNs for rural environment and landscape (Morris & Kirwan, 2011). By adopting specific practices within food production and distribution, AFNs can in fact retain the capacity to be ecologically, socially and economically embedded.

Furthermore, AFNs are conceived as 'alternative' to 'conventional' supply chains in various instances. The literature review of Watts, Ilbery & Maye (2005) on the alternativeness of AFNs clearly shows that different sets of AFNs differently position themselves in contrast to conventional food supply chains. To this extent they identify different dimensions of alternativeness that characterize AFNs which stand in opposition to different aspects of conventional food supply chains (Watts et al., 2005).

AFNs have been also conceived as initiatives that have emerged from the development of parallel processes. In analysing AFNs in Washington state, Jarosz shows how such initiatives are also driven from political, cultural and historical processes (Jarosz, 2008). The development of food systems in fact lies in the contexts where they are embedded (Carolan, 2011). Specifically, AFNs emerge from the initiative of people that want to address specific aspects of the current food systems such as the absence of fresh food in a determinate space, or the need for social care amongst many other purposes, which are not given but emerged from specific contexts.

From the insights above mentioned, it is possible to ascertain how a wide amount of literature portrays AFNs in relation to other social constructions such as localism, turn to quality, embeddedness and alternativeness. It is implicit that all these concerns are related to the activities adopted within the initiatives studied. Each of these concepts is crucial in analysing specific aspects of AFNs but do not give an overall idea of the phenomenon. Without doubting about the relevance of such concepts, it is inevitable to notice how such references remain actually intangible if not considered within the confined academic discourses.

Also, the concept of AFNs as such has been used to refer indistinctively to a wide array of heterogeneous food initiatives such as farmers' markets, CSAs and veg box schemes indistinctively. These initiatives have often some sort of common features such as the adoption of organic agriculture, direct distribution strategies and horizontal structures which are intended as opposed to extensive production and mass distribution strategies that characterize conventional supply chains. Although they tend to adopt similar strategies, they have different configurations. Also, given the absence of clear guidelines, it's actually very hard to categorize what an AFNs really is and what is not.

At the same time, the use of the word alternative implies an opposition to a dominant or conventional paradigm. While these terms are used to orientate food initiatives in the food panorama, it's important to do not reinforce imaginary dichotomies of alternative versus

conventional but rather understand the nuances that characterize food initiatives sustaining our food systems.

Hence, AFNs as term is arguably too broad to enclose distinct initiatives but suitable to categorise initiatives as subject in academic debate. Food initiatives within AFNs are in fact shaped by the adoption of different activities that mark their uniqueness. However, grouping distinct initiatives might weaken AFNs as subject and underestimate the potential of each category/initiatives that it includes. On an academic level, AFNs are mostly compared to social attributions, whereas outside the academic realm, AFNs are networks of people organised to produce and/or distribute food following specific activities according to specific values and motivations. However, there is much more than that, and it's difficult to grab from current literature.

To this extent, assemblage thinking provides a way to intersect the interactions composing phenomena, unfolding their complexity. Assemblages, understood as multiplicities that entail contingent interactions of its parts, rejecting essentialities, permit to capture the interactions taking place within a specific phenomenon, developing new ontologies. Retaining activities has the fulcrum of the uniqueness of food initiatives, this research will make assemblages of food initiatives' activities. In this way assemblage thinking can be used to detect the activities occurring within food initiatives hereby considered AFNs. An assemblage of AFNs activities would allow to understand food initiatives as continuous interactions between components involved that contribute to a material and expressive distribution of the phenomenon. The information gathered about food initiatives assemblages in terms of activities will be useful to complement current academic discourses around AFNs.

2.1 Research objectives

Summing up, in the academic literature AFNs are often addressed in relation to other social constructions such as turn to quality, embeddedness and alternativeness. Besides, AFNs, as a term, tends to be used to group heterogeneous initiatives indistinctively while there is not an extensive knowledge on how such initiatives are carried on. Hence, it is necessary to study the configuration of food initiatives labelled as AFNs. This can be done by adopting an assemblage lens that helps us to understand the interactions occurring. For these reasons, **the objective of this research is to explore the activities that constitute the assemblages of food initiatives (considered AFNs) in Sheffield by studying specific initiatives that produce and or distribute fresh organic fruit and vegetables.**

Despite the importance of practices, activities are understood to be particularly relevant as they are the material actions necessarily needed for the reproduction of food initiatives.

Nevertheless, this research is not representative for all AFNs as they all have different activities and take place in different contexts but will contribute to understand some of the dynamics taking place in similar initiatives.

2.2 Research questions

In order to pursue the objectives of this research, I will attempt to answer to the following question:

- What activities constitute the assemblage of food initiatives, considered AFNs, in Sheffield?

To answer this question, I employed assemblage thinking and used participants observations, semi structured interviews and documents' review as explained below.

3. Theoretical framework

In order to explore the reproduction of AFNs, I used assemblage thinking which enables to understand phenomena such AFNs as multiplicities that entail contingent interaction of its components. By rejecting essentialities and totalities, assemblages allow to go beyond fictitious representations invoking a new ontology of the social about imminences in a given time (Clough, Han, & Schiff, 2007). This is done by capturing the configuration of interactions among the actors and objects involved in an initiative.

This theoretical framework is based on assemblages, intended as an approach, as a way of thinking rather than a theory. This due to the fact that there is not a widely agreed assemblage theory, but rather works claiming to establish a theory derived from the writings of Deleuze & Guattari (DeLanda, 2006; Nail, 2017). Also, in its very understandings, assemblages are about connecting, rejecting what it could be an essentialist theory as such. This framework is therefore constructed drawing from the work of its founding authors and the interpretations derived by other authors.

Firstly introduced by Deleuze & Guattari (1987), assemblage thinking has been further elaborated by other authors (DeLanda, 2006; Nail, 2017; Woods, Anderson, Guilbert, & Watkin, 2013). Deleuze & Guattari (1987) presented assemblage mainly in their book *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia* where they elaborate on assemblages often compared to plant rhizomes as shown in figure 2, mostly used in botany, the term refers to stems that emit roots and shoots from the nodes. In this book, Deleuze & Guattari embark on a philosophical journey to explain, in a real assemblage fashion, how assemblages are based on range of principles and processes such as territorialisation and coding. However, their work, remaining on a philosophical level, appear fuzzy and difficult to operationalize. To this regard, the work of



Figure 2 Plant rhizome

DeLanda (2006) is particularly useful as it simplifies the use of some of the concepts firstly used by Deleuze & Guattari (1987). However, his works can also be challenging to interpret and apply, hence the work of Bueger (2013) contributes to make concepts more tangible to understand and to operationalise the use of assemblage thinking in this research (Bueger, 2013).

Following Deleuze & Guattari, assemblages respect a range of six principles (Deleuze & Guattari, 1987, pp. 1-25). Principle one and two, connection and heterogeneity, suggests that any point of a rhizome can be connected to anything other and must be. Principle three, multiplicity, is that an assemblage is the increase in the dimension of a multiplicity that change in nature as it expands its connections. Principle four, asignifying rupture, means that a rhizome might be broken but it will start again on old or new lines. Principle five and six, cartography and decalcomania, suggests that assemblages are maps not tracings. Assemblages therefore can be understood as not interactive maps with no points but lines. Following these principles, it is possible to assert that assemblages can map out events, initiatives, not as merely descriptively but disentangling the features and processes that compose them.

DeLanda (2006) further describes assemblages as the result of logical and contingent interaction of its components which have properties and capacities. Following DeLanda, such components can be detached and plugged in other assemblages with different interactions. Such assemblages are considered to have a material and an expressive dimension shaped by two main processes (de/re) territorialisation and (de/re) coding (DeLanda, 2006). Territorialisation refers to the mechanisms that define the spatial boundaries of the assemblage whereas coding refers to mechanisms that shape the identity of the assemblage hinting to language, behaviours and power relations.

Moreover, to be retained as such, assemblages need to have a relation of interiority that links its components to one another. Such relation constitutes the terms of the relationship between the parts defining their identity. At the same time, the components of an assemblage retaining their own identity which can be plugged in other assemblages, which is referred as relation of exteriority.

As Deleuze & Guattari suggest, anything we can think of can be seen as an assemblage and depending at how we look at it, an assemblage can take different meaning (Deleuze & Guattari, 1987).

“A book has neither object nor subject; it is made of variously for matters, and very different dates and speeds. To attribute the book subject is to overlook this working of matters, and the exteriority of their relations. It is to fabricate a beneficent God to explain geological movements. In a book, as in all things, there are lines of articulation segmentarity, strata and territories; but also,

lines of flight, movement deterritorialization and destratification. Comparative rates of flow on these lines produce phenomena of relative slowness and viscosity, or, on contrary, of acceleration and rupture. All this, lines and measurable speeds, constitutes an *assemblage*. A book is an assemblage of this kind, and as such is unattributable. It is a multiplicity-but we don't know yet at the multiple entails when it is no longer attributed, that is, after it has been elevated to the status of a substantive.”

(Deleuze & Guattari, 1987, p. 4)

This excerpt shows the complexity and fuzziness of Deleuze & Guattari writings but also points toward how a certain object or phenomenon can be conceived in multiple ways.

Assemblage thinking can in fact be used to make sense of social phenomena. For centuries, sociologists attempted to study the social, with many different approaches and results. Assemblage thinking, in contrast to other approaches, is about detecting interactions between components. Assemblage as such, rejecting essentialities, is particularly relevant as it allows to construct new ontologies of the social.

Assemblage thinking is particularly important nowadays, as its supporters claim, because it is against totalities and essences. Many current highly debated topics, despite their vital importance such as immigration and gender, might find simplistic interpretations that hardly explain their complexity characterized by myriad potential influential ties. Assemblage thinking as such, allows us to go beyond fixed meanings by constructing frameworks to make sense of these complexities without jumping to interpretation but rather limiting to describe the processes and components that constitute a phenomenon.

Assemblage thinking has been previously used in relation to food and agriculture: Levkoe & Wakefield (2014) used assemblage in combination with social network theory to understand food movement networks in Canada; Taylor & Lovell (2014) reviewed assemblage theory to disentangle the social and the ecological, material of urban home food garden; and most notably Fisher, Arce and Diaz Copado (2017) employed assemblage theory to show the embeddedness of a chili cook off in Mexico. Although new academic papers are adopting assemblage thinking as a research lens, the use of assemblages in relations to AFNs activities appears to be still unexplored.

Other theories are known to similarly investigate activities, most notably practice theory and actor network theory. However social practice theory and actor network theory appear to be limited in exploring the interconnections as the former mainly focuses on practices associated with values and motivations while the latter puts a central emphasis on the role of the actors involved rather than on the sole activities. In contrast, assemblages allow us to detect indistinctively what occurs within a phenomenon by setting specific boundaries that restrain the field of research.

Furthermore, assemblages are not random collections nor social constructions as its understandings are founded on a range of very specific principles and processes as mentioned above that allows to construct a solid framework of analysis defined by research boundaries in a way to clinically detect what composes an assemblage. For the purpose of this research, the boundaries of the assemblage are represented by the sole activities necessary for the reproduction of an initiative retained as AFNs. As in the literature, AFNs are often grouped together, this research disentangles what composes such initiatives in a specific context. This will be done by looking exclusively at the activities that compose these initiatives. The focus on activities is crucial to understand what actually composes such initiatives and what differentiates them. Activities in this research are intended as the interactions taking place among human and non-human actors within AFNs. This will also allow us to look at how the interactions contribute to the processes of the territorialisation and coding of the assemblage while also pinpoint the relation of interiority within the assemblages studied and relation of exteriority with other assemblages.

This theory helps to grasp what is really taking place and how. It does not say what the people involved think or perceive. The boundaries of this research in fact limit its scope to investigate the interactions necessary to the development of the initiatives. The outcome of this research will be limited to what emerged from the interviews, observations and conversations. Hence, it is plausible that equally relevant activities for the reproduction of the initiatives happen but are not studied.

This study does not stand to challenge the current literature on AFNs on which it relies on, but rather to contribute to understand the multiple mechanisms behind these phenomena. As the use assemblage thinking in relation to the activities of AFNs appear to be partly unexplored, besides an academic challenge, this research represents an endeavour and attempt to interpret assemblage thinking to make sense of emerging food initiatives as AFNs could be.

4. Methodological framework

This research has been inspired by my personal curiosity to understand the dynamics behind successful food initiatives. As emerged from the literature review, the practical aspects of AFNs are often overlooked, hence this research studies the activities that characterize food initiatives such AFNs. For this reason, given this gap in the academic debates and the configuration of these initiatives, I adopted an assemblage approach as explained above. Such approach is central to understand AFNs not as given thing but rather as negotiated phenomena.

As such initiatives are currently developing in many places, this research could have been carried out at different locations. However, the preference for an English-speaking country for the facilitation of the research and personal circumstances brought me to Sheffield. After

a brief pre-research, I witnessed the presence of many food related initiatives and a fertile ground for welcoming such research. Also, the historical past of the city and political-economic conditions make of Sheffield a city with unique features when compared to other large cities in Britain.

After the pre-research, the south west of the city was identified as suitable research area due to the presence of various food initiatives and the possibility to easily move around. I then proceeded with searching for potential initiatives to study. In order to do so I contacted city farms, food cooperatives and vegetarian shops that supply Sheffield with fresh vegetables grown in the west side of the city. I first looked for farms and food cooperatives by asking in organic shops that redirect me to some of their suppliers and partners, secondly I made use of the database Sheffield food network map (Sheffield Food Network, 2017). In selecting the organizations to contact I discarded farmers' markets as they only occur quarterly and other initiatives where the food supplied is processed and not fresh. Among the organizations contacted, I picked up the first ones that responded to my request of collaboration.

As result from my inquiries to the local food initiatives, I had a positive response from *Wortley Hall Walled Garden*, *Freeman biodynamic garden*, *Sheffield Organic Growers*, *New Roots*, *Beanies* and *Regather*. However, *Wortley Hall Walled Garden*, *New Roots* and *Regather* people were the ones that allowed me to work with them first, so I discarded the others but visited them anyway.

The field research for this thesis has been carried out in the first months of 2018, after having presented the proposal at the Countryside and Community Research Institute (CCRI), Gloucester, where it received critical feedback from its researchers.

The fieldwork included employed participant observations, interviews and documents' analysis to study the activities of two food initiatives considered AFNs in Sheffield: *Regather's* veg box and *New Roots* community shop.

Participant observations, intended as "purposeful, systematic and selective way of watching and listening to an interaction or phenomena as it takes place" (Kumar, 2011) were used to learn about the activities that took place within particular food initiatives. Participant observation consisted in participating and observing during the phases of production and distribution of food. The interactions occurring in the observations have been described in written notes at the end of the activities. Written notes, document, as accurately as possible, the activities done, conversations held, environments, and people present. When possible artefacts such as leaflets, pictures and maps have also been taken. Access to the activities has been requested in advance to the organizers of the initiative studied and they have been informed about the nature of this research. Participant observations are particularly relevant to ascertain the activities performed within AFNs. This method has not been obstructive as the participation contributed to the daily tasks.

The observations took place at various locations including *Regather's* building during veg box packing day, at *New Roots* shop during opening hours, at Wortley Hall walled garden and in some occasions farmers markets were visited and farms open days attended. The initiatives were observed once per week over about three months between November 2017 and April 2018. The participant observations included the participation in the phases of veg box packing at *Regather*, shop assistance at *New Roots* and farming at Wortley hall.

The observations have been combined with interviews of key actors involved such as food cooperatives and community farms coordinators, employees and volunteers. Interviews are verbal interchanges to obtain information, beliefs or opinions from a person (Kumar, 2011). The interviews aimed to explore the activities performed deepening the historical dimension that give context to specific activities. The interviewees were contacted in advance and were provided with a brief description of the research. They were given the possibility to react on such request and pose any query about it. Interviewees were informed about the use of their answers for a thesis report and eventual dissemination of the research on academic platforms.

The interviews were recorded and consequently transcribed. Such interviews allow to have the people in first place describing how what their organization does and what they do within the initiative where they are involved. At the same time their conception might not give a complete overview of the organizations and initiatives. However, the information gathered will be cross checked with the observations.

Given the potential of food and farming policies, this research also investigated the presence and role of such policies in the city. This was done by identifying key actors such as policy officers and policy coordinators to interview and find relevant documents and policies to analyse.

In total eleven interviews were conducted, including two coordinators per initiative, three volunteers, two farmers and two people informed about Sheffield food policies. Interviews were mostly held during interviewees free time at the initiatives' locations. Interview mostly addressed the activities performed following a set of premade and follow up questions to reiterate salient aspects.

For the document review, informative material about food initiatives in Sheffield including webpages from the organizations studied as well as leaflets, reports and policy documents have been collected mostly during observations and interviews has been collected at the organizations' places such as offices and farms. The material has been consequently used to enrich the descriptions of the activities.

The materials obtained from these methods in forms of observations' notes, interviews' transcripts have been consequently coded for activities related to the reproduction of the initiatives. Subsequently the clusters of text information obtained from the codes have been

compiled. This allowed to describe in depth the organizations and the activities performed in the initiatives studied. The information emerged from the activities' descriptions has been further used to elaborate on how such activities contribute to the processes of territorialisation and coding and describe the initiatives studied as assemblages. The information derived from the assemblages has been then discussed and linked to the relevant literature and used to answer the research questions posed above.

4.1 Reflections on methods

Although the methods have been chosen in order to gain specific insights about the initiatives studied, the methods might inevitably produce shortcomings as shown below.

For what concerns the sampling, as the cases chosen were not selected randomly, there are equally relevant initiatives in Sheffield which will be not studied due to time constraint. Further, the initiatives studied might not reflect AFNs in their entirety as each AFN vary depending on the characteristics and contexts where they unfold. For this reason, the initiatives studied will be context specific. At the same time, studying two initiatives hints at the efficacy of assemblage thinking to understand AFNs.

Further, I could have been biased in the initial choice of the initiatives selected by for example overlooking initiatives that are not well advertised or do not have a website or not present on the online database consulted. At the same time the choice of these organizations makes sure that the initiatives and informants are acknowledgeable and relevant for the scope of this study.

Participant observations permit us to directly experience the phenomenon studied, however, they have their own shortcomings. It is in fact plausible that other participants might refrain from behaving as usual, nevertheless the focus will be in the action aimed to the reproduction of an initiative rather than particular behaviours even if this will also inevitably impact the activities. With this method, some interactions might have not been recorded due to personal bias as well as the long intervals between the actual action and the writing of the notes. However, some of the practices can also be explored with other methods. Also, due to the long-lasting activities, it has been difficult to note all the details of the activities. Although observations are a great tool to ascertain the activities done, it is also possible the equally relevant marking activities have been carried outside the activities observed. For this reason, participant observations have been further complemented with interviews.

Interviews are a great tool for having people telling on the first-person insights about their activities. Nevertheless, their narration could be fragmented and not reflect the entirety of their activities which would inevitably affect the integrity of this research. Participant observations will eventually compensate this potential lack of information, by participating in the activities.

The writing process of the thesis report has been carried out in the subsequent months after the fieldwork. However, this last step took considerably longer than expected. This particularly due to the challenges to apply assemblage thinking to explore AFNs in a new fashion. This has been accompanied by personal circumstances that further contributed to the extension of the writing process. Nevertheless, this research relies on the material obtained at the beginning of 2018. For this reason, in the meantime there might be events that mutate the nature of the initiative studied.

Overall, the views in this research mostly reflect what happens from within the initiatives. Therefore, it is plausible that studying the initiatives from a supplier or customer point of view would have produced slightly different insights on the same initiatives.

5. Research context

Sheffield geography, history & politics

Sheffield is one of England's largest cities, as per 2016 the third largest district authority with 575.400 inhabitants. The city currently has an high presence of young people (21-24) mainly due to the presence of two universities but also a positive natural change and an increasing international migration (Sheffield City Council, 2018b). Sheffield is also considered an ethnically diverse city, with around 19% of its population from black or minority ethnic groups (Sheffield City Council, 2018b).

Being a large city, Sheffield has a long history behind characterizing its diversity and peculiarities. Without diving into its long history, past centuries strongly influenced the way this city is today. Most notably Sheffield is known for being the Steel City, for its long-standing leftist city council, a strong radical scene and its proximity to the Peak District among many other things.



Figure 3 Kelham Island, Sheffield

Sheffield is in fact is renowned for being an important pole for steel production since the industrial revolution attracting many workers from all over the country. Although many factories closed down, its industrial past can still be felt when walking past numerous old buildings scattered all over town, see figure 3.

Sheffield also used to be called 'People's Republic of South Yorkshire' for its long-standing Labour city council that for many decades challenged the national governments on multiple stances often by adopting more progressive positions (Seyd, 1990). This included policies to shift resources from the affluent west of the city to the poorer east in order to address records of unemployment derived from neoliberal policies and the world decline of steel production in the late 1970s (Thomas, Pritchard, Ballas, & Vickers, 2009). Nevertheless, subsequent

agreements with the national government triggered a series of events that would undermine the social infrastructure built over the years, although numerous regenerative initiatives were undertaken (Thomas et al., 2009).

The geography of the city also contributed to its development. Located in the south west corner of Yorkshire, Sheffield landscapes are characterized by numerous hills and water flows that join moorlands of the Peak District, the first national park established in England. The topography of the lower part in the east of Don valley, one of the main rivers, welcomed industrial development and accommodated workers, whereas the higher part of the river grounds to the west were populated by factory owners, far from the pollutions of the factories (Thomas et al., 2009). The divergences between those areas was exacerbated by the concentration of council housing to the east, making of Sheffield one of the most polarised cities in Britain (Thomas et al., 2009).

Since the world decline of steel production, Sheffield diversified into financial services, medical technology and media business. This also means that many empty factories are turning into new housing development projects, opening up for gentrification dynamics. Also as large city it see the presence of high street stores and dislocated shopping malls undermining the survival of independent shops (Thompson, 2015). Recent studies confirm how spatial differences remain across the city in regard to multiple aspects such as income, education, housing amongst others (Sheffield City Council, 2018a).

Over the years the city also maintained a strong radical scene partly due anarchic and feminist groups' actions. Recent events saw multiple protests against the cut of street trees (Sheffield Tree Action Group, 2019) and fracking (Against Fracking Sheffield, 2019) amongst others. Sheffield also has a vivid art scene being a scenario for hand crafters, street artists and musicians.

Sheffield food

When it comes to food, Sheffield, like many other cities in the country sees the presence of many supermarkets chains but also independent local food producers and outlets as shown on figure 4 (Sheffield Food Network, 2017; Thompson, 2015). In terms of independent local food producers and outlets, it can be said that there are a wide range of initiatives that covers the various stages of the food supply chain from production, distribution until consumption and even disposal and recycle.

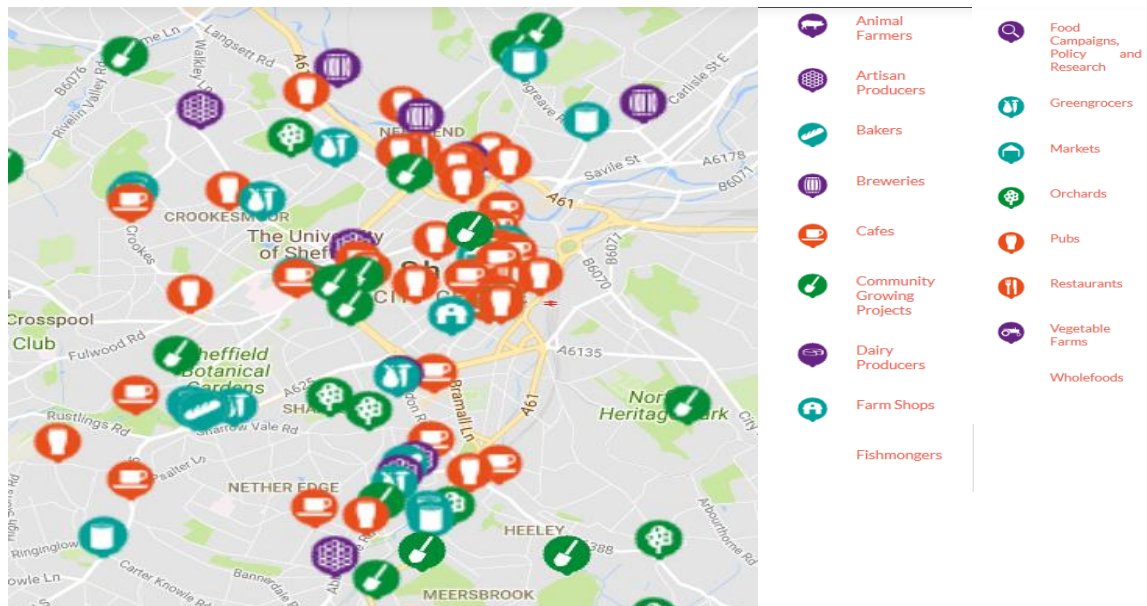


Figure 4 Map of Sheffield's alternative food initiatives (Sheffield Food Network, 2017)

For what concern organic local food production of fresh fruit and vegetables there are various farms among which:

- *Freeman Biodynamic garden*, High Riggs, is a social enterprise part of a large Ruskin Mill Land trust. The garden distributed over a 9 acres land is mainly dedicated to the growth of vegetables and flowers but also comprises woods and a meadow. The garden employs four farmers and has its own veg box while also provide fresh products to some Sheffield food outlets.
- *Sheffield Organic Growers*, Moss valley, are four independent organic growers growing a range of vegetables, fruit and herbs, sold through independent grocers and veg bag schemes all based in the city of Sheffield (Sheffield Organic Growers, 2019).
- *Wortley Hall Walled Garden*, Wortley, is an organically certified kitchen garden, and is part of *Heeley City Farm*, a friendly farm and environmental centre in Sheffield. The walled garden was built in 1790's and went through various stages. In the 2000 was taken as part of other plots, as ground to get practical work experience for horticultural courses and for the farm to make move towards food production as well social enterprise (Wortley Hall Walled Garden, 2019).

Their products are sold through various retail shops and veg box initiatives among which:

- *Barra organics*, Sharrow vale, a family run business offering a range of seasonal, local, and speciality organic and biodynamic produce for customers in the community and beyond (Barra Organics, 2018).
- *Beanies*, Crookesmoor, a shop offering mostly plant based products such fruit and vegetable (organic and non), wholefood, bread, snacks, drinks and speciality food while it also operates a veg box scheme (Beanies Wholefoods, 2018).

- *New Roots*, Broomhall, is a friendly, not-for-profit community shop, run entirely by volunteers selling vegetarian and vegan snacks, fair trade, gluten-free, and organic wholefoods, and local, organic fruit and vegetables (New Roots, 2018).
- *Regather*, Sharrow, a trade cooperative that operates a veg box scheme with organic, local and seasonal products. Besides, *Regather* also offers rooms and kitchen hires, organizes cultural events and has a brewery.
- *The incredible nutshell*, Heeley, is a vegan grocery store offering 100% vegan products. The shop wants be “a destination for people all over Sheffield and surrounding areas who are seeking all sorts of delicious foods which are suitable for vegans and vegetarians or ‘free from’” (The Incredible Nutshell, 2018).
- *Zeds*, Nether Edge, a shop providing plant-based products mostly fruit and vegetables but also wholefood, dairy and some cosmetics.

There are also other organizations dealing with food consumption and waste such as

- *Abundance*, citywide, “a volunteer based organisation that rescues, shares, cooks, and juices and enjoys fruit which may otherwise go to waste across Sheffield” (Abundance, 2017).
- *Foodhall*, city centre, a community centre that offers a public dining room, kitchen, garden, events space and workshop with the aim of bringing everyone together, creating a space for humans to be equal (Foodhall, 2019).
- *The Real Junk Food Project* now *Food Works*, Burngrave, intercepts food from a variety of streams that would be otherwise wasted and redistribute to the public at the share house on pay as you feel basis or prepared and cooked for anyone who wants it from fixtures on the high street to pop-ups and events (The Real Junk Food Project, 2019).

At the same time other independent organizations and community groups undertook various initiatives for the growth of food in public spaces such as the Common Ground community centre and the rental of gardening tools operated by Grow Sheffield. On top of these projects there are many other food initiatives such as food banks, bakeries, breweries and animal farms.

Food in fact seems an important topic in Sheffield. The city hosts a one-week long food festival that celebrates the city’s vibrant food scene, showcasing local produce, talented chefs, street food and brewers. Attracting more than 50.000 people, it is the city’s largest free festival (Sheffield Food Festival, 2019).

Nevertheless, according to recent figures, in Sheffield more than 30.000 suffer from food malnutrition and 40.000 experience food poverty (Sheffield Council, 2014) while food has become reason for inequalities as people in poorer area have the poorest diet and are likely to develop food related problems (Sheffield City Council, 2018a).

For this and other reasons the Sheffield city council adopted in the last decades various measures to address food at the city level particularly through the Sheffield food strategies. These strategies gradually addressed food related issues such as lack of access to healthy food by setting targets and developing activities to reach them (Sheffield Council, 2014). The current strategy aims to develop a healthy food and drink policy, create a better food environment, use media to change diets, develop initiatives to increase access to food, provide information and support for a healthy weight and influence national policy (Sheffield City Council, 2018a). During the last years, many other initiatives have been carried on in relation to food in the city. Amongst those ones it is important to mention the work of the Campaign to Protect Rural England (CPRE) about mapping local food webs and the Sheffield Food Network developed by Grow Sheffield and now hosted by *Regather* in collaboration with the Sustainable Cities network that aim to build a food hub for local producers, distributors and consumers.

It is also worth mentioning that in England it is very popular to use urban allotments for growing fruit and vegetable. In Sheffield there are about 3000 allotment plots over 70 sites managed by the city council with many people on the waiting lists.

Brexit

An additional dimension to the Sheffield context is provided by the prospects of the UK leaving the European Union (EU). On June 2016 people living in the UK were called to vote in favour or against leaving the EU. The vote saw the majority in favour of leaving the EU. After the referendum, the Conservative Party embarked on a series of negotiations that aimed to deliver the Brexit by March 2019. However, given the continuous delays it is unclear if and how this will happen.

Nevertheless, discussions of a potential Brexit have been impacting thinking processes of the people involved in food production and distribution. This because leaving the UK might entail leaving the custom union and single market. This might likely affect the import and exports of foods, therefore the way people eat. The uncertainty of how and if the Brexit will take place allow people involved in the food sector to speculate over plausible future scenarios that spark from stockpiling to the arrangement of new trade deals across the globe.

Summing up, Sheffield shows to be a post-industrial city with substantial demographic difference across its territory. Its food panorama reflects its demographics showing higher concentrations of food outlets in the south west in contrast to the high numbers of malnutrition and obesity in the east. Generally, it's currently possible to witness the presence of a wide range of food initiatives from cooperatives, community groups but also city council resisting to the shortcomings derived from more established food systems. From a research point of view, the Sheffield food panorama present the grounds to explore the development of various food initiatives that can according to the literature retained as AFNs. In the chapters

below, I will describe the initiatives studies in assemblages' terms, focussing on their activities.

6. Assembling AFNs' activities in Sheffield

Following what has been previously mentioned about AFNs, assemblages and Sheffield, this part of the thesis presents the food initiatives studied. Particularly, this chapter focuses on the activities performed and how they form assemblages. The following sections focus on *Regather's* veg box, *New Roots* shop assemblages. The sections present a description of the hosting organization, in depth review of the activities carried on and further elaborate on how such activities contribute to the processes of territorialisation and coding processes and on what are the relations of interiority and exteriority.

6.1 *Regather* veg box

Regather is a cooperative that operates a veg box scheme, hosts cultural events and festivals, brews beer and cider, hires kitchen and social facilities, and supports community projects (Regather, 2018a).

Regather started in 2007 from an individual initiative as trader and event organizer. The collaboration with other projects and initiatives led to establishment of the cooperative attracting and involving more likeminded people in the development of multiple initiatives that *Regather* did and currently does today.

The cooperative has a horizontal structure where decisions are taken on a consensus basis by its members. The members of the cooperative include coordinators, employees, volunteers and occasional free lancers. Coordinators oversee particular aspects and initiatives such as strategic operations, the veg box scheme, accountability, events, marketing and promotion. Coordinators lead the management of the initiatives and employees contribute to running the initiatives such as the veg box, the brewery and events. Freelancers and volunteers are employed for specific activities related to initiatives and events. Each year three new volunteers, part of the European Voluntary Service, contribute to the facilitation of the cooperative's activities.

Among the various *Regather* initiatives, in this research I studied the veg box scheme by taking part in the packing activities and interviewing two of the coordinators. The veg box scheme is one of the main initiatives of *Regather* and is very similar to a buying group where people place a subscription and *Regather* people make bulk orders and redistribute the food among customers in Sheffield.

In order to understand how the veg box scheme articulates; I will describe below the activities. During my observations I identified several activities that compose the veg box scheme. These activities are further composed by the performance of multiple tasks by the

actors involved in the initiative. For this reason, I will describe below each activity with their relative tasks and actors involved.

6.1.1 Disassembling activities

Subscriptions

The first interaction necessary for the reproduction of the veg box scheme is the subscription application for a veg box by customers. The subscription consists of choosing a type of box (i.e. veg, fruit, fruit & veg), extras (i.e. milk, honey, bread, coffee), frequency (i.e. weekly, fortnightly) and setting up a payment method.

A subscription stands as contract between subscribers and the organization that regulate the commitment from the subscribers to receive and pay for a specific veg box and for the organization to provide and deliver such box.

Subscriptions occur either at promotional stands where *Regather* promotes the veg box scheme or through *Regather* website. Most customers subscribe to the veg box through dedicated pages on the *Regather* website. On these pages (Figure 5) people can find detailed information, subscribe and make changes about the veg box type, products, sizes and frequency.

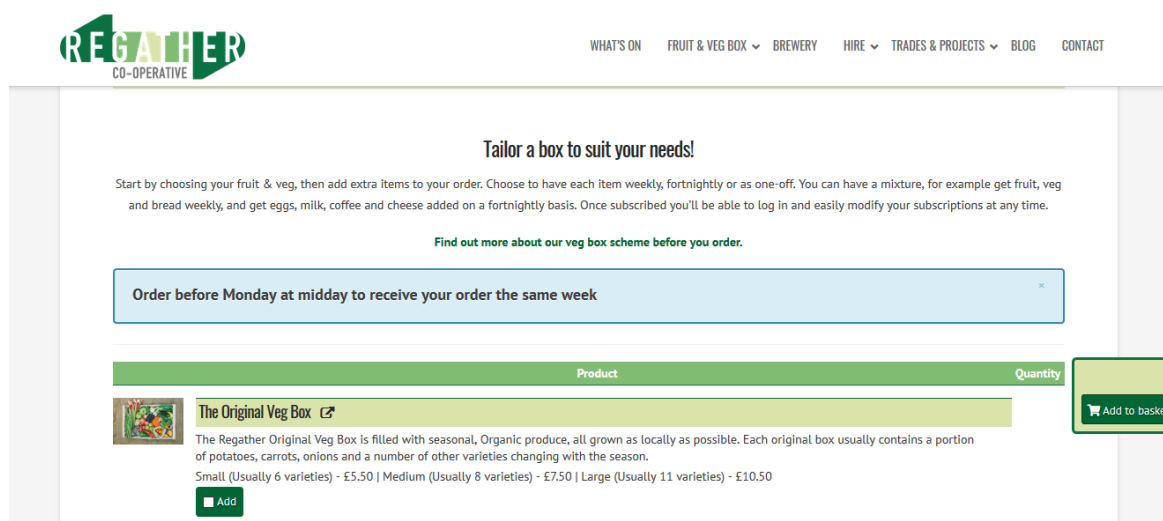


Figure 5 Veg box order web page (Regather, 2018c)

Orders changes are due on Monday, so that a coordinator can make the aggregate order for the coming week. This shows how subscriptions are strictly connected to administration, as coordinators need the information from customers to place bulk orders to the suppliers.

Administration

Once changes to the customers' subscriptions are placed, usually by Tuesday, a coordinator collects all orders through a computer in the office and calculates how much and what products can be bought with that amount of money to satisfy customers' requests.

In order to make the aggregate order, it is necessary for coordinators to know what the farmers and wholesalers can offer for that week. For this reason, the coordinators regularly communicate with farmers and wholesalers. It is important to note that during warmer months more produce comes from farms nearby rather than from the wholesalers. Based on what farmers and wholesaler have available, one or more orders are placed. The support of local producers also represents a constant opportunity for farmers to sell their products. Other orders are also placed to have fresh bread and bagels but also to keep a stock of honey, mylk¹, teas, coffee and other products.

The administration activities also produce lists of customers ordered per delivery round and invoices where veg boxes' content is indicated along with a weekly newsletter containing a recipe to prepare with the vegetables offered.

Once the orders have been placed, the coordinators make sure to have enough people to pack and delivery on Thursday and Friday. This often occurs through informal conversations at the office, this also includes taking in account when people are not available or take holidays.

Administration, together with open meetings, represent activities that determine the territorialisation of *New Roots* food sales assemblage. These activities in fact define where the food products come from, shaping therefore the spatial distribution of the assemblage.

Packing and delivering

The vegetables and fruit are generally delivered in bulk either on Wednesday afternoon or Thursday morning before 10 am. Such deliveries represent the materialisation of an interaction between *Regather* and suppliers which determine the spatial distribution of the assemblage.

Boxes are packed on Thursdays only. Coordinators, members and volunteers gather in the morning, usually about 4/5 people. They have a chat over some tea and coffee and sometimes food. Before that time a coordinator also collects the bread with a van to be delivered on that day. Once the fruits and vegetables are delivered, they are placed in the middle of an island of tables in the centre of *Regather* backroom. The produce is positioned in a way to facilitate

¹ The term Mylk is used to refer to plant-based drinks often derived from soy, coconut, rice or almond which is often used a milk substitute, particularly in vegetarian and vegan diets

the boxes to go around the island of tables, having the packers putting the produce in the boxes and pass it around. Figure 6 shows the island of table with fruit and vegetables and the team packing the veg boxes. The boxes destined to customers are reused from suppliers or given back by customers. Once the boxes are packed, they are either stacked directly on the van or trike ready to be delivered or stacked on a side of the room, ready to be stacked in the vans the day after.



Figure 6 Packing boxes at Regather

Usually after having packed the first two delivery rounds a lunch break is taken, which is an occasion to stop packing, eat food and chat a bit more. People either bring their own food or buy it at food shops on the road nearby. After lunch, collection round and the Friday delivery rounds are packed. Once the boxes are stacked they are either delivered by van or trike or collected on the same day by customers.

Collection and delivery

Once veg boxes are packed, they are either directly loaded in the van/trike or stacked against the wall. When I was involved packing, we were packing about 200 boxes. However, the number of boxes varies from week to week, depending on how subscription fluctuates. Of those 200, about 60 are for collection, 20 delivered by trike², shown on figure 7, and the rest delivered in three van rounds.

For what concerns collection, customers are welcome to collect their boxes on Thursday afternoon. When boxes are ready to collect, a coordinator sends a text message to the customers informing them about their boxes. The customers come to *Regather* building and look for their box in the shelves assisted by one of the members. A small chat can be exchanged upon collection and extra products are offered if there is a surplus towards the end. On some occasions, during collection, some customers ask the coordinator to make changes to their subscriptions.



Figure 7 Regather's trike

² A trike is a three wheeled bike. *Regather* trike has electric pedalling assistance, a boot capable of carrying about 25 veg boxes and is used to make deliveries across Sheffield

Deliveries also occur on Thursday but also on Friday. On Thursday there is a van delivery with about 50 boxes and a trike delivery round with about 20 boxes while on Friday there are two van delivery rounds with about 40 boxes each. Figure 8 indicates Thursday (light green) and Friday (dark green) delivery areas as for March 2018.

The delivery consists of going from house to house of the customers based on a premade route. The delivery person then collects the box from the back of the van or trike, check for extras to be added from the cooling box such as milk, cheese and pizza dough or leafy vegetables during warm months. The deliverer then knocks or ring at the customer door to hand in the box or place it in front of it or in a safe place as often indicate by the customer, usually in the back of the house. If the customer is home, few words or a chat is exchanged otherwise the invoice is placed on the mailbox before leaving the box. Old boxes are also collected if present. Once the delivery round is completed, old empty boxes and cooling box with ice packs are brought back at *Regather* building. As the supplier deliveries, deliveries to customers complement the spatial distribution of *Regather* assemblage indicating where food is redistributed over Sheffield territory.

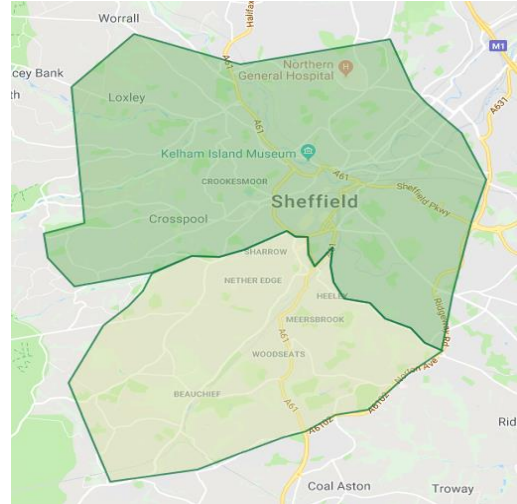


Figure 8 Veg Box delivery areas (Regather, 2018b)

Communication

Internal communication often occurs through informal conversations at *Regather* building although mail and meetings are also used to share information and take decisions. Particularly when packing, the veg box team verbally interact continuously. Conversation tend to verse towards work related details but also personal activities or local events.

Team meetings are held fortnightly whereas veg box meeting are held monthly approximately; however, it might depend on members' availability. During team meetings, agenda points address the operations of the various initiatives whereas veg box meetings address points related to the veg box such as delivery, website, volunteers and other issues. As the activities of *Regather* change throughout the year, the agenda points vary as well. Communication represent a crucial activity within the assemblage as it gets information across the team and beyond in a way to arrange and facilitate the interactions within the network.

Promotion

As said earlier *Regather* takes part in different events throughout the year such as Sheffield Food festival and Nether Edge farmer markets where it promotes its initiatives but also contribute organizing activities. When promoting the veg box scheme, usually one or two persons engaged in the veg box, set up a stall with a display box that sample the approximate veg box content as shown on figure 9, plus other extra products such as honey and beer are showcased and sometimes offered to taste. At the stall, people are welcome to have a look a sample box and ask questions about it the veg box and eventually subscribe through a paper form.



Figure 9 Veg box promotion

Socials

Each season *Regather* organises socials, intended as informal meetings for cooperative members, customers and farmers to come together, chat over drinks and celebrate being part of the same network. This is an opportunity for people to engage in conversations about *Regather* activities but also a chance to meet the person that grow the vegetables of the boxes. Socials are often organized together with 'Growers' drinks' event where people can chat about growing food. Socials represent a moment to build and strengthen a network of farmers, eaters and veg box enthusiasts. Socials are also open to people that do not have a box subscription but are interested in it. To this extent social represent an occasion to bring together all people somehow related to the veg box assemblage, where they retain their own identity but perform a different activity than usual.

Past events

Efforts to understand the current configuration of *Regather*, inevitably led to discover past events that mark how *Regather* is now. At the same time, it's hard to pinpoint all the events that might have contribute to the development of the veg box scheme until now. Nevertheless, some events were recognised as turning point in the setup of the veg box scheme. The veg box scheme emerged as an opportunity from the collaboration parallel initiatives such as the 'Making local food work' programme and the 'mapping local food webs' project done by the 'Campaign for Protection of Rural England' where likeminded people came together. The veg box scheme was then started very small and it attracted more customers, enlarging its supply volumes. However, the interviews and documents available were limited to reconstruct all the steps that led to the development of *Regather*.

This section described the activities that contribute to the assemblage of *Regather* veg box. These descriptions minutely describe how activities have been carried on. This section also

briefly touched upon side activities which, although not directly aimed at the reproduction of the initiative, ultimately influence them. The descriptions emerged will be used to understand in terms of assemblages how the activities contribute to the processes of territorialisation and coding.

6.1.2 Reassembling territorialisation, coding and relations

From the description above it is possible to understand how the people involved in the veg box scheme pursue different tasks individually and collectively needed for the reproduction of the scheme. Each activity involved in the veg box scheme is different. Each one has its own actors, place and meaning. However, they are all interrelated. The peculiarity of this lies on how the activities are performed by who, how, where.

Having described each activity necessary for the reproduction of the veg box scheme it is important to understand how these activities are spatially distributed and how they occur in a way to form an assemblage. For this reason, this section will focus on how the activities contribute to the processes of territorialisation and coding, touching upon the relation of interiority and exteriority between the components.

Territorialisation

From the description of the activities above, it is possible to understand the spatial dynamics of the veg box scheme. In other words, the concept of territorialisation allows us to capture where the assemblages occur and what this distribution means.

Fruit and vegetables, particularly during warmer months, come from farms in the outskirts of Sheffield: Wortley Hall Walled Garden, located in Wortley, a parish in the north of Sheffield; Freeman Biodynamic Garden at High Riggs, located in Stannington in the east and Sheffield Organic Growers, located in the Moss Valley, in the south of the city.

During colder months instead, when there is a low availability from local growers, fresh fruit and vegetables come from wholesalers. Wholesalers include Organic North, a cooperative of organic businesses located in Greater Manchester; Organic Pantry an organic family farm situated in North Yorkshire; and Lembas a vegetarian and organic wholefood wholesaler in Sheffield. The interchange of suppliers causes the assemblage to enlarge or shrink depending on who *Regather* collaborates with.

Extra products are usually from artisans based in Sheffield and include Forge Bakehouse, a bakery offering mainly bread but also pizza dough; Tower of Bagels, baking fresh bagels; Birdhouse, providing herbal and tea blends; Twin cafe, that offers locally roasted directly sourced coffee; Little Mester and Stanage cheese makers located in the Neepsend district and Hathersage respectively; Just Preserves and Heeley City Farm providing jams and honey. Generally, the support of local independent producers marks a specific distribution of the

Regather assemblage, which shows collaborations with other initiatives mostly based in Sheffield.

Although most of the products come from the city and the region, there are some produce that are imported from overseas. Products imported usually refer to fruit and vegetables when production declines locally but also might refer to extra products like plant-based drinks or the ingredients needed for preparations such as flour. Hence, the veg box scheme inevitably and indirectly has to rely on the production and import of overseas products. This can be problematic if products are subject to new regulations as it could happen in case of Brexit. Figure 10 shows the interactions (activities) with arrows between the components in circles (*Regather*, customers and suppliers). The interactions refer to the activities described above.

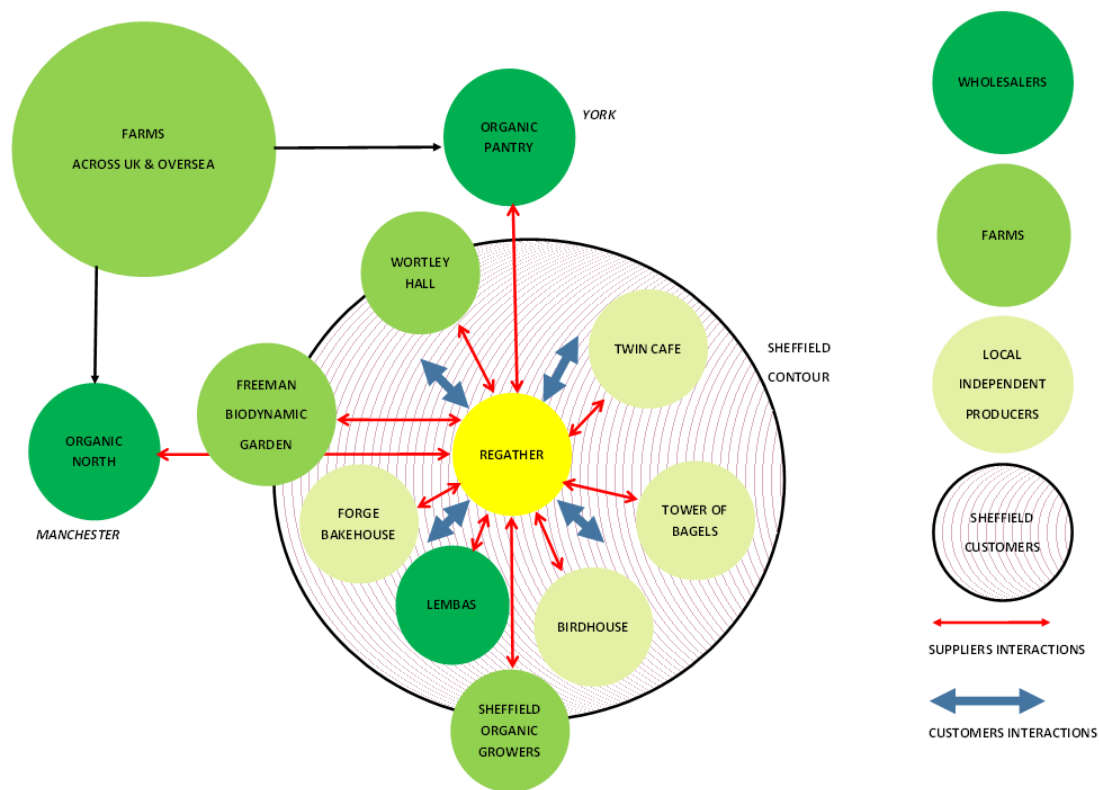


Figure 10 Veg box territorialisation assemblage map: components (circles) and interactions (arrows)

Following the map, it is possible to ascertain how the acquisition boundaries are delimited by the city edge with exception for the wholesalers which are located within the region. Nevertheless, the boundaries for some specific products go beyond their acquisition boundaries, being produced elsewhere such as southern Europe and south America. It is important to note that the arrows, intended as interactions, refer to the multiple activities interchanged between the actors involved such as communication, financial and product flows.

For what concerns *Regather* interactions with customers, it is a bit more difficult to represent visually as it would imply drawing an arrow to each customer which would not be graphically comprehensible and not possible due to the customers' privacy. Nevertheless, following *Regather* website, it is possible to determine what are their delivery boundaries, as shown earlier in figure 8, with higher concentrations of customers in the south and west areas of the city. *Regather*-customers interactions occur virtually for what concern the subscription and physically when it comes to collection and delivery. Regarding collection, customers physically have to go to *regather's* building, entering in contact with the people packing, which imply further interactions. For deliveries instead, *Regather*, in this case the delivery person, literally move around Sheffield territory to bring the veg boxes to each customer. From a territorialisation point of view, making deliveries over Sheffield territory, makes *Regather* present in various areas of the city and visible by citizens.

Beside *Regather's* interactions with suppliers and consumers, most of the activities take place at *Regather's* building located in Sharrow, a district in the south of Sheffield. *Regather's* building, formerly known as Horns works, serves for various purposes of the cooperative such as events, brewing, kitchen hire and obviously the veg box scheme. The administration of the veg box scheme is carried out at the computers either in the office upstairs or in the shop downstairs while the packing is done in what can be called the backroom. The administration is very important activity as it does not only entail the sole tasks, but it also implies an effect. To this extent it is in fact crucial to understand how the expressive character of the territorialisation has itself an effect of its spatial distribution. Administration coupled with team meetings for example are also decision-making activities. Such decisions when further adopted define somehow the relations within *Regather* assemblage.

Further, suppliers, *Regather's* members and customers get together at *Regather* building for the *Regather* socials. In these occasions, people go beyond their usual tasks but keeping their identity they join together for different activities, such as drinking, chat, learn and so on. These activities are to be added to the character of what they entail. Being part of the network, join the social, the discussions, enrich with knowledge the people involved but also build ties among the people making groups much more closely-knit.

Summarizing what physically occurs, *Regather* promotes the veg box scheme at local events and social media and people subscribe for it online. Based on the amount of subscriptions two or more bulk order are placed. In the meantime, products are produced either in the region or in the city depending on the season, except from some products that come from oversea. The products are then delivered to *Regather* building where they are finally packed in boxes and delivered to customers around Sheffield.

From this section it is possible to ascertain how the interactions within *Regather* and between *Regather* and other actors in forms of information, financial and produce flows shape the spatial distribution of the veg box assemblage. The veg box scheme can be considered

scattered on different parts of Sheffield territory: if suppliers are located on the outskirts of the city, customers tend to concentrate in the inner parts of the city with different concentrations mostly in the south west. To this extent the veg box assemblage change shape depending on the products availability and customers' requests, which also affect participation therefore enlarging or shrinking the network. Further, the spatial distribution is also the result of decisions taken about suppliers' choice and delivery delimitation areas.

Coding

Another dimension of the assemblage is given by how such activities are performed. Particularly, the interactions within those activities characterized the reproduction of the assemblage.

When undertaking this research, particularly observations, I noticed that I was mostly observing a system in place. A system characterized by a range of tasks to be fulfilled to reach the final objective, the delivery of the boxes. The peculiarity of the scheme lies on what activities but mostly on how those are reproduced. The coding to this extent, on top of what the activities are and where they occur, adds another dimension as to how such activities are conducted. This includes attitudes, languages, and power relations.

The attitude of *Regather* staff is very emphatic toward each other. People involved in the scheme are very attentive about each other, not only when conversing but also when working together by checking each other tasks' fulfilments, but also face and body expressions. There is mutual respect regardless of the roles and tasks. The respect and support go beyond work. For example, on one occasion I told the team how I struggled to move to a new house by bike and two of the other packers quickly offered themselves to help for the next time with the van.

However, when packing, it is possible to note that people with more experience direct new ones. The coordination does not occur through enforcement of the role but rather take an explicative form in way to empower the newcomer facilitating her or his role. Also, when a person is in need of anything, others are willing to step in to help. This mean, that it has an horizontal structure when it comes to work together, however there are clear ways of doing things which are implicitly implemented through verbal interactions, mostly instructions from people more acknowledged about the administration.

Especially during packing hours, people tend to converse over a variety of topics. Reoccurring topics often refer to the weekly vegetables, their state, provenience which can easily linked to how they are grown or how they can be eaten or cooked. Other topics include music preferences, personal activities and local events amongst others. The topics addressed are easily accessible by anyone as everyone share somehow interests for the topics such as food.

During the morning we discussed about sugar, starting from me wanting some sugar in the coffee and some of the packers finding it odd. Another packer embarked on a talk about the dependence from coffee and how many people tend to like sweet taste discarding others like bitterness. We exchanged some sentences together about how sugar beets are produced in UK and he replied telling how mostly British and French colonialism contributed to the spread of sugar use across the globe and all the consequences that come with it such as monocultures and widespread use of sugar in processed foods. We then briefly talked about how sugar is refined and what sugar molecule is actually extracted, and which ones are left out, we asked another packer with a chemistry background about how refining occur who kindly explained it to us.

[Veg box packing, January 2018, participant observation]

This excerption shows how conversations start from spontaneous actions, pick up on people interests and grows with the knowledge of everyone. Such conversations help in a way to know better each other, to confront different views on a topic, but also to learn about aspects of food we are not familiar with in this case.

Conversation are always held in English, although it's not everyone's first language. Therefore, the vocabulary and level of English spoken is diverse, but conversations are smooth. There is not specific order of talking. Anyone can start up a conversation just by asking a question or making a statement about something. Similarly, there are no rules about conversing, anyone can join anytime. Everyone is very attentive about others talking and the way this is done. Also, there are people that talk more and others more quiet. In few instances, people showed more or less inclinations towards the participation in the packing activities for example as shown in the excerption below. This might indicate that packing is not enjoyable for everyone in the same way.

Some of us are clearly very enthusiast about packing while other would rather perform another task (depending on what the other task would be). A packer in fact was not particularly keen on packing but she preferred packing over moving snow outside.

[Veg box packing, March 2018, participant observation]

The ways people interact within *Regather* and between *Regather* and other partners are key. People within *Regather* have informal friendly relations. Coordinators and volunteers work together for years except for new volunteers. This means that working together they became a close-knit group, which is shown by cordial interchanges of information but also common interests, mostly on food and agriculture but also other topics such as music and culture. The quote below shows how much people value working together, which do not always refer to

packing itself but also to chatting, having coffee, being in contact with food, people and really do what people actually want to do.

The best part of the week is when the vegetables turn up on Thursday morning and you get to see the vegetables and everyone come to work together, before everyone gets tired we all had fun and drink coffee and then start off the day, that's the best time. But I also like to go on deliveries and meeting all the customers and speaking to the customers and seeing if they're happy with what we're doing. I like to be on my own on the delivery round. Even if it happens every week, it happens so quick that I don't even get bored. I'm really passionate about organic vegetables, and now I have the opportunity to be a grower, that's a dream of mine.

[Veg box packer, March 2018, interview]

In this way, participating in the veg box scheme, do not only mean to develop the activities straight related to the scheme but also entail a series of side activities which became vital in its participation.

Another detail that emerged from the excerpt above and ascertained during multiple participant observations is how food is the vehicle of interaction. People involved in the veg box scheme work together because of food. To this extent it is possible to witness how, the actors involved in the assemblage of *Regather* have different relation with food for example producing, packing or even eating it. In this way, it is the contact with food that always generate reactions as it for its smell, appearance, weight, production, potential cooking recipes, evoked memories and much more. Although any food can produce reaction, specifically the food handled at *Regather* must respect a range of criteria set by *Regather* people which are not written but widely agreed. For this reason, *Regather* food might trigger positive reaction as fruit and veg would different each week, from different producers, different shape and size of the same products, different smells and so on.

This is to say that human activities per se, play a central role in the development of the assemblage but at the same time other components such as food play also a pivotal role in the interactions, actually marking the relations between the people involved.

After having shown how the activities described relate to processes of territorialisation, this section showed how the attitudes, language, discussions characterize the ways these initiatives are carried out, further shaping the identity of the veg box scheme assemblage.

Relation of interiority

Beside its material and expressive aspects, the assemblage is characterized by a relation of interiority which constitute the terms of the relationship between the parts. It is possible to observe such a relation between *Regather* and other parts but also within *Regather* itself.

For what concerns producers and customers, their relations with *Regather* is constituted by an exchange of information, products and money. Farmers are contacted to provide steady amounts of food. Whereas consumers are the ultimate receiver of the veg boxes.

Within *Regather*, people work together. The relations among people is dictated by tasks attributed. However, it's hard to define what contributes to the relation of interiority and what is part of a broader pattern of behaviour. People working on the veg boxes have distinct roles, some people are in charge of deliveries, some of customers or producers' administration. These roles mark the relations, however during some phases like packing the role kind of dissolve if not when some issues arise and the person with more knowledge about it steps in to provide more information or solution.

In this way it's possible to ascertain how the relation between the parts involved in the veg box assemblages is dictated by the tasks performed and further characterized by the ways those tasks are performed, which are therefore influenced by the values, motivations and experience of the people performing the task. To a certain extent, these relations of interiority rely on the tasks which can be performed by different people, of course reaching different outcomes somehow. Therefore, it is plausible to say that, while the people might change, in order to have the same assemblage configuration, it is needed to perform the activities as explained above. This does not mean that people do not matter, on the contrary, people with their attitudes, behaviours, language characterize the way an assemblage is in a given moment. Nevertheless, people can be replaced, in other words another person could fulfil the same tasks but still presenting slightly different attitudes and behaviours, that still fit within *Regather* values, that would ultimately affect the identity of the assemblage.

Further, it is possible to trace the relation of interiority between the activities. Such relation in this case refers to the contingency between the activities. For example, promotion aims to increase subscriptions; subscriptions are necessary to deliver boxes; administration is needed to assure subscribers their products and so on. *Regather's* promotion during food related events such as fairs and markets is an opportunity to make people in Sheffield aware of the veg box scheme and therefore getting more people to subscribe to the scheme. When subscriptions increase, not only via promotion, also the volume of products managed weekly increases which in turn influences the workload for administration, packing and deliveries. Administration, packing and deliveries are also directly connected to each other. Administration tasks of allocating products and ordering from wholesalers defines, based on subscriptions, how the packing (what vegetables) and deliveries (delivery routes) will occur.

On the other way round, it is also possible that packing and delivery capacities might limit the number of veg boxes deliverable.

Relation of exteriority

In opposition to the relation of interiority that links each component to one another shaping the identity of the veg box assemblage, the relation of exteriority refers to the involvement of the components in other assemblages.

The parts involved in the veg box scheme in fact can also be active in other assemblages. Farmers, for example, are part of the veg box assemblage but they are also part of their own farming assemblage where they work with other people to grow and distribute fruit and vegetables. The same goes for customers, in the assemblage of *Regather's* activities, they represent the final recipient of the produce but he or she can also be a cook, a eater and much more. Cooperative members in their capacities are also involved in other side projects related for example to care farming and food sales. The relation of exteriority is key to understand how people involved in the veg box are not devoted to scheme but are also engaged with other activities related to food and agriculture.

Reassembling

From these last sections, it is possible to understand how the activities previously describes feed into the processes of territorialisation and coding, while it also defines the relation between the components defining the identity of the assemblage.

The *Regather* assemblage sees interactions between a diverse range of components such as local growers and independent crafters, *Regather's* members and consumers through food. These components have their own role, such as producing, packing, distributing, consuming which enact through a series of activities that connect each other. Suppliers and customers are connected with *Regather* through exchanges of information, products and money. *Regather* people are connected by direct communication, sharing tasks such as administration, packing and distribution. However, all these activities are composed by many more sub tasks as emerged above that characterize each single interaction.

Assemblages are dynamic entities where their reproduction take place by the ongoing interaction of the parts. As said, the veg box assemblage is mostly the result of interactive processes within *Regather* and between *Regather* and other partners. However, the assemblage is not formed by indissoluble relations but on the contrary is the result of multiple collaborations with various persons that start, continue and eventually end. The relations with suppliers for example depend on the quality, proximity and seasonality of the products available at the supplier but also requested by *Regather*. Generally, following these criteria, there are few wholesalers to choose from in the region. And they offer similar service and products. However, it is the quality of products, services, prices, organization structure that

influence *Regather* in the choice of getting products from one wholesaler rather than another one. This is to say, how actually the activities of the assemblage, in this case the relation with suppliers, change depending on the choices made by the people at *Regather*. The same goes for customers as their number fluctuate, lately upwards. This is also influenced by the capacity to deliver an increasing number of boxes in different locations of the city. The capacity and the spatial distribution of potential customers can in fact limit the expansion of such network, hence de-territorialising. These fluctuations can also be visualized by imagining a network that expands its radius including more producers and consumers but also shrinks when less people are involved. The relations that might stop with some suppliers or customers can in fact start again with old or new customers and supplier. From the representation of such assemblage it is possible to understand *Regather* veg box as a dynamic initiative that is reproduced throughout the time by the adoption of specific activities connected to each other.

6.2 *New Roots* community shop

New Roots is a food shop as well as a hub for local activities and a vibrant community (New Roots, 2018). *New Roots* is in fact also a café, hosts a radical library, a community garden, operates a veg box scheme and offer an event space. The shop offers a wide range of fresh vegetables, plant-based wholefood and snacks. The products sold are organic, local and fair trade as much as possible. The shop is entirely run by volunteers and profits go to *Assist*, an organization that support refugees. *New Roots* also supports many other causes related to social and environmental justice such as LGBTQ rights and climate change amongst others.

The shop is located in the west side of the city, near to the Royal Hallamshire hospital and the University of Sheffield. It was established in 1987 by members of the ‘Methodist Christian Ashram community’ with the purpose of providing ‘a Christian Community Centre in an inner area of Sheffield west end and a ‘shop window’ for the activities of Ashram Community; a meeting place for organizations involved in social and political actions; and a practical workshop, publicity outlet and a ‘launching pad’ for community initiatives” (Vincent & Vincent, 2017). The initiation of this shop was part of a broader religious path of Grace Vincent who managed the shop for more than 20 years.

The management was passed on to two coordinators in 2013 that ever since change each year. Figure 11 shows the coordinators at the time of this research in front of the shop. The shop has a board of members and decisions about the management and initiatives are generally taken at open meetings on a consensus basis where coordinators and volunteers are invited to take part.



Figure 11 2017/18 *New Roots* coordinators

The basement of the shop, called 'speakeasy', has a cosy relaxing area with chairs and armchairs, a bookshelf, a piano and few guitars where people can enjoy drinks, reading or playing music. The speakeasy is also used as venue for small events. Next to the basement there is a storage room and a small garden where mostly vegetables, herbs and flowers are grown. The garden is used for similar purposes as the speakeasy but is more popular during warmer months. On top of the shop there is a flat, called 'the branches', used as free accommodation by the three coordinators and its kitchen is used to prepare and share communal meals. The shop also hosts a radical library with textbooks about communism, anarchism, animal rights, veganism, feminism, socialism, environmentalism and climate change amongst others.

As said, coordinators usually stay in charge about a year, after which another coordinator is chosen. At the time of this research, winter/spring 2018, there were two coordinators and a third one was added later.

New Roots holds a variety of initiatives such as food sales, café, library, reading, gigs, communal meals, veg box scheme. Amongst these, given the purpose of this research, I will focus on the food sales. In order to do so, I volunteered as shop assistant where I observed and supported the running of the shop and interviewed coordinators and volunteers.

6.2.1 Disassembling *New Roots*

In order to understand *New Roots* as an assemblage, this section describes the activities that sustain food sales. In compiling the activities, I described the various activities necessary for the reproduction of the food sales.

Shop keeping

Running the shop entails various activities. There is no clear order of how activities are carried out, as all activities are regularly reproduced. The activities described below follow the chronology of events as emerged from the participants observations.

One of the first activities carried out on a regular day is to display fresh fruit and vegetables on the shelves outside and inside the shop. Items to include depend on what is available in the storage room. Generally, when placing the products on display, the products have to be good (not rotting) and need to have clear price tags. The products are often stored in the storage room in the basement and taken upstairs first thing in the morning. The products are carefully placed with a readable price tag written with chalk on the edges of the shelves. Products are often placed in clusters, but positions can change depending on who's working. Overall the display needs to look good and neat.

An important part of the activities relates to serving customers. Often customers are regulars, therefore the greet is accompanied by an 'how are you?' or similar. It's not unusual that

volunteers and customers engage in conversations about various topics, from the weather, to what they are up to for the rest of day and more. Volunteers also support, when needed, customers with their groceries, providing information about the location of a products or ingredients and cooking instructions. Customers are also welcome to stay in for food and drinks. In this case, a volunteer would prepare and serve the drink and food after the customers has taken a seat. Lastly, when customers are done eating, drinking or shopping, a volunteer enters the prices on the till and takes the money or card. Worth mentioning that students and low-income people can have a 10% discount, while volunteers have 20% discount. To this extent, serving customers represent curating relationships within the assemblage.

The shop sells prevalently seasonal, organic food products that are regularly supplied by wholesalers and local farmers during warmer months. Therefore, coordinators keep in touch with farmers to know what is available. The orders are placed weekly and the amount and type of products depends on what's leftover in store. The orders placed usually arrive the week after. Once orders arrive, either from wholesaler or producers, the delivery person with the help of a coordinator or volunteer brings the products in. A small chat is often exchanged upon the invoice signing. One of the volunteers then checks that the products delivered correspond to the ones on the invoice. The products are then priced by charging a percentage on the wholesaler price. The products are then placed on the shelves.

The interactions between *New Roots* and suppliers indicated a relationship that determine the food available at *New Roots*.

The orders are made by either coordinators or volunteers, depending on availability. The orders are based on what is out of stock or what can be sold at discretion of people making the order. For example,

I was asked to prepare an order for wholesaler and noticed that there were no fruit juices in stock. I with the coordinator started to evaluate what juice we could stock, and we did a small research about the products/brands available at the wholesaler. We then investigated about the product, calling directly the producers to ask the provenience of the fruit, and other questions about the labour involved. Unfortunately, we did not receive exhaustive answers as the producers were not clear. Therefore, we decided to avoid the purchase of juices for that day.

[Food sales, March 2018, participant observation]

This excerption shows one of the various moments dedicated to search of potential new products, which as activity shapes the identity of *New Roots* assemblage, making sure to offer ethical products.

Cleaning

Coordinators and volunteers alike need to keep the shop tidy and clean. Cleaning activities included brushing and wiping the floor, cleaning surfaces near the till and the café, tidying up tables. Best before dates are also checked regularly and off date products are sold with discount or given for free.

The garden is also regularly maintained, however as mentioned above it is used more during warmer months. Common maintenance includes preparing the beds by weeding, adding organic material such as compost, sowing seeds, watering and harvesting.

Communication

An important aspect of running the shop is keeping up the communication between the coordinators, volunteers and of course customers and suppliers. Every person that enters in the shop is welcomed by being greeted and often engaged in a small conversation. Day to day communication among volunteers occurs via face to face interactions at the shop. For what concern communication about internal issues often occurs via social media or meetings. There is a *New Roots* Facebook group for volunteers, where coordinators and volunteers alike share posts about volunteering needs, events, communal meetings and meals.

Also, open meetings are held regularly where coordinators and volunteers gather together to discuss issues related to the running of the shop. Another activity held monthly are communal meals for volunteers, which represent occasions for volunteers to get to know each other and while sharing some food likely vegan, as shown in figure 12.



Figure 12 *New Roots* volunteers' communal meal

At the shop, it is common to make use of a a-frame blackboard, placed on the sidewalk in front of the shop, to communicate offers to people passing by. Also, a notice board is used to pin post about various topics such as yoga, gardening, housing and events.

Administration

Mostly coordinators, but sometimes also some volunteer, take care of the other administrative operations, such as arranging bank operations and paying bills related to shop expenditures such electricity and water but also supplier. Further decisions regarding the administration are taken by coordinators in concomitance with the board.

6.2.2 Reassembling territorialisation, coding and relations

This section is dedicated to analysing how the activities described above contribute to form an assemblage elaborating on the process of territorialisation and coding and the relations of interiority and exteriority.

Territorialisation

For what concern acquisition, *New Roots* tries to acquire their products from local sources as much as possible. This leads them to find suppliers that are located in the proximity of Sheffield. At the time of this research, suppliers included mainly Goosemoor Organics, fruit and vegetable wholesaler located near York and Lembas wholesaler located in Meersbrook, Sheffield. Beside these two wholesalers, *New Roots* also got pasties from the Saker Bakery in Todmorden, crisps from Yorkshire Crisp, Sheffield; jams and chutneys from Just Preserve in Nether Edge, Sheffield; coffee from Twin Cafe, Sheffield amongst others. During warmer months, when production is more abundant locally, *New Roots* sourced fruit and vegetables from local growers. In the case of Goosemoor Organics, Lembas, and Saker bakery orders were placed weekly in a way to keep the shop stocked with fruit, vegetables, pasties and wholefoods. Orders for other products would be placed when items were about to go out of stock.

Supplier-*New Roots* interactions determine the spatial distribution of the assemblage across Yorkshire region. However due to the products offered at the shop, the assemblage relies on other producing assemblages elsewhere in the world. However, the choice made about the products to offer, shape where and which other producing assemblages to work with. In this way from a territorialisation point of view, it is possible to a certain extent to control who to work with, favouring organic, fair and local products over less ethical foods.

For what concerns customers relations, as a shop, customers would come to shop for their groceries. From interviews with coordinators it emerged that people go to *New Roots* from different parts of town because of the community, plant-based products, it's no profit, volunteer led as well because they previously volunteered here (New Roots coordinator, 2018).

On the other hand, being close to one of the main hospitals and universities, customers often include people walking in the busy Glossop road. The shop is frequented by many students, as it is 500 meters from the university buildings.

This means that the interactions between the component of the *New Roots* assemblage are facilitated by the geographical location of the shop, for instance the proximity to the University of Sheffield campus, Hallamshire hospital and city centre, allows to be reached by a variety of customers and supporters.

To this extent, *New Roots* mostly curates relationships with the customers directly at the shop, see blue arrows in figure 13. Many other interactions occur at the shop itself. Conceived as community shop, *New Roots* is the place not only where to get groceries, but it is also a place where coordinators, volunteers and customers indistinctively interact with one another.

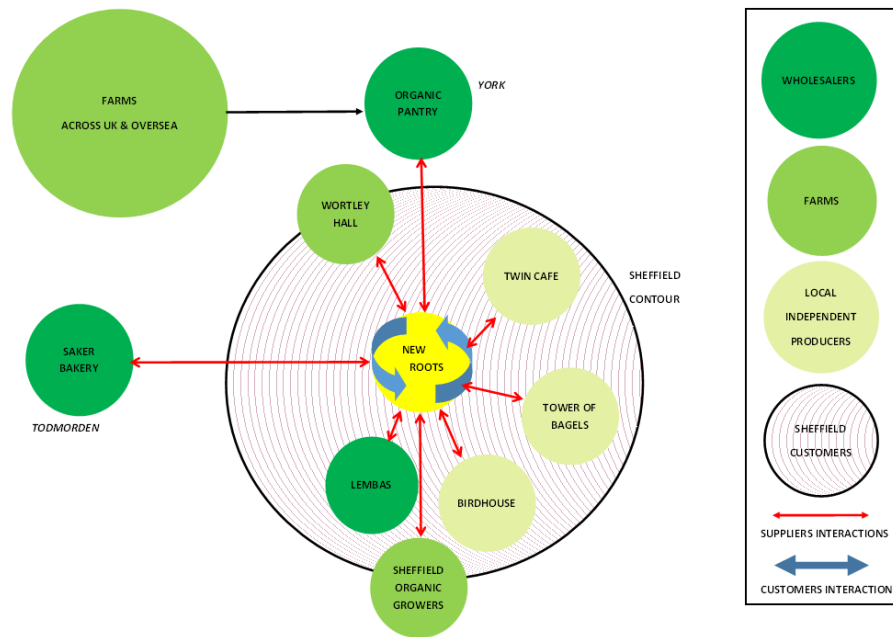


Figure 13 New Roots shop assemblage map: components (circles) and interactions (arrows)

Figure 13 show a layout of *New Roots* territorialisation from which it is possible to observe how the products' acquisition occurs within regional limits and in the case of fruit and vegetables they are purchases from local growers when possible. Nevertheless, part of the wholefoods is produced elsewhere in the world, although it is purchased from local wholesaler.

Coding

After having described how the activities feedback on the process of territorialisation, this section elaborates on how such interactions occur.

Interactions between coordinators and volunteers

The relations between coordinators and volunteers is friendly and their interactions consist mainly of informal conversations and the joint development of various tasks such as stocking the shelves and serving customers. Conversations tend to verse towards personal weekly activities but sometimes focus on specific topics that emerge from the flow of other conversations. Below, an excerption from my participant observations notes about a conversation I had with another volunteer.

I was telling another volunteer about gardening at my allotment and she showed interest by asking questions. As the conversation continued, we shifted the focus of the conversation from gardening at my allotment to arranging future gardening collaborations together such as compost collection.

[*New Roots*, March 2018, participant observations]

This excerpt from my participant observations notes, documents the type of discussions that occur continuously, and can verse on various aspects depending on what a person involved in the conversation is inclined to bring forward. Hence, it is plausible that conversations can open up to new activities. Many of the conversations versed toward food related topics but also gardening, public and sportive events. Conversations occur in all the areas of the shop, in front of the vegetables' shelves, behind the counter, at the tables in the back and behind the bar. Conversations also address matters related to the shop such as activities. For example, coordinators and volunteers talk about what needs to be done. From these conversation people undertake tasks relating to the running of the shop such as cleaning, ordering.

Besides conversing, coordinators and volunteers also engage in joint activities. They can perform together certain tasks such as restocking shelves with products, prepare banners etc. To this extent, working together on tasks, requires mutual coordination, further communication, which in some cases might amplify the understandings of each other. After numerous times, working together it has been possible to feel how the relations among coordinators and volunteers mutated. This can also be demonstrated by the fact that after months volunteering together, we would hang out outside the shop together for gardening or a meal. This is to say, volunteering together helped getting to know each other, discover new people and enlarge social networks.

Another important activity are open meetings. Open meetings are open to all the volunteers. They usually have an agenda based on point proposed or emerged since the last meeting or ongoing points. The meetings occur monthly and are combined with vegan snacks and drinks. Participants gather together and discuss point by point. Open meetings are therefore seen as an occasion to discuss the coordination of the shop as well to bring up new issues. Nevertheless, such coordination might also be discussed on an informal basis during or outside running hours. This means that the configuration of *New Roots* assemblage, is somehow the result of negotiated decisions taken at open meetings. From an historical point of view, *New Roots* can also be seen as the result of decisions taken across the years.

Similar to open meetings, there are communal meals for volunteers. They allow people involved in the assemblage, that usually work on different shifts/initiatives, to know better other volunteers. However communal meetings do not have a decisional character but rather

serve as recreational activity, which ultimately contributes to build bonds between the components of *New Roots* assemblage.

In a number of occasions, *New Roots* volunteers also gathered together outside working hours for other intentions such as day trip to Todmorden as shown in figure 14, renowned to be incredible edible town, where public spaces are used for the growth of food for the population but also to regenerate parts of the town that would be otherwise unused, in that occasion we had the chance to visit one of the suppliers that bakes pasties. On another occasion *New Roots* volunteers took part in a football tournament supporting a charity against racism.



Figure 14 *New Roots* volunteers in Todmorden - Incredible Edible tour

This shows how the relations within the assemblage go beyond volunteering and shop keeping as they also entail the development and reinforcement of a social network through shared meals.

Interactions with customers and suppliers

Interactions with customers and suppliers, maintain an informal character as described above. Customers and suppliers are greeted and respectively supported with groceries and with unloading the delivery. It is plausible that after many times *New Roots* coordinators, volunteers, customers and suppliers frequent the shop, they build bonds between them. The relation of *New Roots* with customers and suppliers also has a more formal character when it comes to food orders and payments for example.

Interactions with other people

Besides volunteers, customers and suppliers, other people such as friends of the volunteers, activists and promoters come by the shop. This was demonstrated by the various people that I met, or I was introduced to while volunteering. The people although not always directly connected to the shop, come to the shop to greet the volunteers or to ask support for ongoing causes for example.

New Roots also support various causes in multiple ways. One of these ways is to offer a notice board where people can pin posts that must be in line with *New Roots* views. It happened couple of times that activists for various causes dropped by the shop to ask for support for

example against NHS cuts as show by the quotation below from my participant observations notes.

While we were talking behind the counter, a lady came to leave some posters about a petition to protest against the closure of an emergency department of the NHS Hallamshire hospital that will be moved to the Northern hospital. She spent some time talking with the coordinator and she then explained me how inconvenient would be if this department would move away, many patients would have to travel a longer distance to get served under the care scheme for specific injuries.

[*New Roots*, January 2018, participant observation]

In this case, like others shared by *New Roots*, the coordinator in charge value whether the cause can be supported by *New Roots* and offer support when possible by either providing space in the blackboard or leaving a petition to sign. In this case we hang some posters and left the petition on a visible spot next to the fridge for people to sign it.

This means, that as a community shop, the focus is not solely on sales but also tend to support various causes which *New Roots* people are fond of.

Interactions with the shop and food

As said most interactions occur at the *New Roots* building, which consists of two connected rooms: the first where the counter, fridge and veg and the second with wholefoods, tables and bar area. The interactions at the shop take place in a relaxed atmosphere, where there was not much noise from the outside and some music playing on the radio going. The people talking were calm but enthusiast. The volume of the voice never high but tones could be squeaky sometimes.

Besides conversing and attending customers and suppliers, activities in the shop are about restocking and reorganizing the shelves, check due dates and clean the floor, which do not necessarily involve interactions with other people. One person activities, as there is not third interaction, allow to think more either about the task itself or other things. Fulfilling task alone, can generate various reactions such a self-indulgency about performing a task or introspection, however it might not be the same for everyone.

In the shop, people are surrounded by food and it's inevitable as walking around to notice a new type of tea, a special bean or just a new vegan meat replacer. Being at the shop in contact with a myriad of products, allow to discover new food. Also interacting with food, it an occasion to be close to food somehow, which is enjoyed by most people at *New Roots*.

This let conceive food as mean of interaction striking volunteers' interest and bounding people together in the assemblage through different activities. It is important to note how

specific food, like in this case, trigger specific reactions compared to other foods. This is to say, that the type of food at shop, strictly influence the interactions and therefore the identity of the assemblage.

This section showed how conversations, meetings and other activities characterize the ways interactions are carried on within *New Roots* food sales assemblage.

Relation of interiority

The relation of interiority, understood as the terms of relationship between the parts, refers to the relations among people at *New Roots* and between *New Roots* and other partners.

For what concerns people volunteering at *New Roots*, their relation is characterized by undertaking tasks together at the shop aimed at running the sales, which entail a variety of tasks. Although not explored, it is inevitable to ascertain how their relation of interiority further hints at the knowledge, experiences, values and motivations often shared among the volunteers. Volunteers nurture somehow a common interest in the mission of *New Roots* but nevertheless they volunteer for different reasons. Given the volunteer structure of the organizations, having a network of volunteers is compulsory to have the shop running and do not have people overworking.

The relations between *New Roots* and suppliers is defined by interchange of information and products for a financial compensation. Also, in this case the relation between *New Roots* volunteers and its suppliers is dictated by food, by what *New Roots* wants and what suppliers offer, which often see their values coincide.

New Roots customers choose the shop prevalently for their plant-based product range but also for the community and because of its organizational structure (New Roots coordinator, 2018).

The relation between volunteers and customers consist of an offer of products, place and support in exchange for a monetary compensation. However, although the interaction is a food exchange, it is important to highlight that the peculiarity of this exchange is strictly related to the type of food and the ways this interaction occurs.

For what concerns activities the relation of interiority is somehow implicit. The phases of acquisition, display and sale are interrelated for scope of the shop, as there would not be nothing for sale if no products are acquired. Also, the ways activities are set up influence their reproduction. For example, in order to provide local food is inevitable to work with Sheffield's farmers.

Relation of exteriority

The relation of exteriority also in this case refers to the participation of a component of *New Roots* in other assemblages. Coordinators and volunteers alike, work at the shop, for different amounts of hours. If the relation of interiority refers to volunteering and common interests, the relation of exteriority might refer to their engagement in other assemblages. Coordinators for example are often engaged in the development of similar local food initiatives. The same goes for other volunteers which are also often still enrolled as university students. Customers, retaining their own identity for participating in *New Roots* assemblage, are also part of other patterns of purchase and food consumption. Nevertheless, customers at the same time can in fact coincide with volunteers, blurring the relation and blending the role of volunteer and consumer.

Reassembling

Following the activities emerged from the participant observations and interviews, it is possible to ascertain such activities contribute to materialisation and expressivity of the assemblage.

Investigating over the components of the assemblage, it has been possible to detect how a number of diverse actors interact together in multiple fronts of the shops. Farmers, volunteers and customers interact on the same platform for different reasons. To this extent, their operate contributes to the reproduction of the assemblage, where *New Roots* as shop, community serves as platform for the deployment of these interactions.

New Roots, through its interactions with farmers and eaters connects them. It is important to note that in this case local and plant-based food represents the object of interaction, which binds the components together. The type of food proposed therefore, somehow shape who participates in the assemblages. For example, producers need to produce food with particular characteristic, such as plant based, organically and so on. And the same goes for volunteers, who need to be interested in volunteering and vegan food. Customers also need to be interested in vegan or fair-trade food. Depending on the producers, volunteers and customers participating, the assemblage might change shape. To this extent, the dynamic of *New Roots* can show that different people and different food change over time but keeping the same configuration.

7. Discussion

Assemblage thinking in this research served as analytical tool to understand food initiatives retained as AFNs. The employment of assemblages allowed to detect interactions, specifically in this research retained as activities. In doing so, it provides an accurate account of how such activities materially and expressively occur. Assemblages further allow understand how the

initiatives are spatially distributed and what characterize their interactions, touching upon the relations between its components.

Assemblage thinking appears to be an appropriate lens to understand what happens in a phenomenon like AFNs. This due to the fact that it goes beyond fixed meanings, therefore investigating in a new fashion the activities and the processes shaping AFNs in this case. By adopting an assemblage approach, it is possible to understand food initiatives not as simple alternative to conventional food systems but rather as a negotiated phenomenon where people take up decisions and perform tasks enacting initiatives. To this extent, assemblages allowed to describe each single activity and elaborate how such activities contribute to root the initiatives in the territory and they ways how such activities are conducted are at core of its understandings.

The research showed how the activities regarding the acquisition and distribution of food aim to source products as close as possible. This is possible particularly in warmer months when, local growers abound with fresh vegetable and fruits. However, when local production declines, the acquisition rely on vegetable and especially fruit produced elsewhere – deterritorialising from Sheffield and reterritorializing in other parts of the world. Moreover, other processed products, such beer and bread also often rely on ingredients that come from oversea. This shows how the assemblage of the initiatives studied can change configuration throughout the year including and excluding suppliers. However, this not only shaped by the providers, but it is also influenced by the choices made by the customers.

An important aspect of the activities developed in the initiatives studied regards the informal character of the interactions among workers, volunteers, suppliers and customers. Particularly the relations between workers and volunteers are friendly. Coordinators in fact tend to make volunteers at ease, this is done by empowering volunteers rather than enforcing tasks. Empathy also contributes to make the learning process smoother, making room for mistakes and improvements. This is also supported by interchangeable roles, where the components of the assemblages have the know-how to fulfil others' tasks.

From the results it further emerged how side activities reinforce the main activities for the reproduction of the initiatives. Conversations about food, personal and local events, common interests, listening to music together, attend socials and common meals further help to consolidate the relations between the components of the assemblages. Such activities contribute to discover aspects of fellow collaborators that would not necessarily emerge from the development of other activities. Such activities also contribute to strengthen the cohesion between the component of the assemblage and eventually lead to the connection of other assemblages.

From the initiatives studied, it is possible to ascertain how food is the mean for most interactions. Although this might seem granted, it is important to note how the characteristic

of food managed such fair traded, organic, local invoke specific reactions. Smells, taste, stories about food growth, all contribute to enrich the activities. The type of food used in the initiatives can be also understood as binder between the components of the assemblage, where people are interested in specific aspects of the food.

Further, the territorialisation of the activities show how the configurations of the assemblages studied are rooted in Sheffield territory and the activities directly bring together local actors which is indicated by Eriksen (2013) as relational and geographical proximity. The coding further shows how the food in the initiatives need to respect a range of criteria such as local, organic, seasonal, fair trade which should be shared among people involved which is recognised by Eriksen (2013) as value proximity. However, they both inevitably also rely on food assemblages elsewhere in the world. This also due to the fact that the climate in the UK does not allow to cover the dietary desires of its population all year round, deeming food imports necessary, particularly in the event of Brexit.

Assemblage thinking, as also shown by Sherwood, Arce, & Paredes (2017), demonstrate to be an adequate tool to investigate over embeddedness. The findings emerged, in fact confirm how AFNs configurations can be considered socially and ecologically embedded, in this case signified by the offer of organic and local food which is continuously communicated in various way to customers and their organizations. To this extent, although the two assemblages are connected to the similar components, they present different degrees of embeddedness.

The findings indicate that although similar, the initiatives studied have different organizations and implement different strategies to distribute food. Following the framework for alternative food economies it is possible to categorize the initiatives studies as alternative in terms of market, labour and enterprise as both adopt cooperative and volunteer structure to support the local food textile. This confirms what found by Watts et al (2005) that different configuration of AFNs led to different alternativeness.

During this research, I further learned about the development of a Sheffield food network, supported by the Sustainable City Network. From an assemblage point of view, such initiative aims to consolidate the existing relations of producers, distributors and consumers in the city optimising communication and the interchange of local food resources. However, during the data collection for this research, there were only initial talks held, hence it was not possible to explore the impact of such initiatives as the network will be further established.

Summing up, this research showed how the combination of assemblage thinking with participants observations and interview can reveal the configurations of AFNs by intersecting the interactions amongst the components involved. To this extent, it has been possible to ascertain how the initiatives adopt similar activities such as promotion, acquisition, distribution, administration and celebration but perform them differently, with different outcomes.

From a terminology point of view, as previously suggested AFNs seem fails to reflect the diversity of initiative in terms of configurations and outcomes. Therefore, when addressing particular food initiatives, it would be more appropriate to refer to them using a term reflecting the particular aspect to highlight. This would avoid confusion about what AFNs entail and dichotomies between alternative and conventional while increase the consistency between the concepts and messages to convey. In this way, it is possible to conceive food initiative based on what they do, rather than what they represent.

7.1 Contributions and limitations

As mentioned above to perform this research, I participated in the initiatives (veg box scheme and food sales) with the organizations contacted (*Regather* and *New Roots*). Working from inside the organizations, reveals the insights about the initiatives from the organization perspective. The participant observations of this research have been performed majorly from a volunteer position. From a volunteer point of view, it is plausible that some of the aspects that contribute to the reproduction of the initiative do not emerge. Although this study took into consideration all the interactions necessary for the reproduction of an AFNs, studying the initiative from a consumer or producer point of view might have generated slightly different insights. However, such a gap has been complemented by further questioning about the development of other activities through interviews. Nevertheless, it is still possible that interviewees failed to mention some activities during interviews. As this research focuses on activities, there might be equally relevant components that influence AFNs but were not studied due to the nature of this research.

It is also important for me to mention how I partly share the values of the organizations studied as I regularly supported them by getting food from *Regather* veg box scheme and *New Roots* shop. Taking this in account, I tried to be objective during the participant observations and analysis. This has been done by focussing on the sole activities emerged during the participant observations and strictly using the material emerged in forms of notes to redact this report. Having that said, although I deployed a clinical use of assemblage theory, it is plausible that another researcher might have reacted differently in the same circumstances.

During the research process, I also faced several challenges. In regard to access to the field, many people contacted showed interest, but it has been hard if not impossible to arrange an interview sometimes. Also, I felt the informant were dubious about my research and reluctant answering questions. However, this might be only a perception deriving from discrepancies between the English culture and my personal experiences elsewhere.

The result of this research might usefully feedback to the work on the development of a local food network in Sheffield, in order to better understand the dynamics between the partners involved. At the same time, it might serve AFNs participants opening for critical review and bring further improvement to existing initiatives. As this research revealed the interactions

occurring within two food initiatives in Sheffield, future research might investigate over similar initiatives and identify further relations between the assemblages.

Although this research investigates over AFNs it is not possible to extend the validity of this study for all AFNs as each food initiative is dependent on the activities adopted and the contexts where it unfolds.

8. Conclusions

AFNs are increasingly addressed in the academic literature. Major discourses around AFNs links them the concepts of localism, embeddedness, turn to quality and alternativeness. However, there is little information about what actually happens in the reproduction of AFNs. Considering AFNs as assemblages, this research explored what activities compose AFNs assemblages by studying food initiatives in Sheffield.

This report shows a review of the major debates on AFNs and interpretations of assemblage thinking. It then follows providing an overview of the initiatives studied in assemblage terms, describing the activities and elaborating on how they contribute to the territorialisation and coding of the assemblage. It concludes, reflecting on the relevance of this research for AFNs in the academic literature.

This research shows the activities marking the reproduction of AFNs assemblages which mainly entail tasks related to promotion of the initiatives, administration, acquisition of food products, distribution in loco or by delivery, internal and external communication, celebration through socials and communal meals. The reproduction of the assemblages sees the participation of local growers, crafters, volunteers and customers interacting together through food to different degrees.

The initiatives studied are shown to be rooted on the local food panorama while also relying on food imports when local production declines. The activities studied have been shown to have an informal character among the people involved, suggested by friendly conversations, frequent breaks and emphatic attitudes. On top of describing each marking activity, this research illustrated how AFNs are supported by side activities which strongly influence the experience and outcomes of the activities. Also, it identifies food as the object of the interactions. The assemblages studied in fact reveal that the type of food managed, strongly influenced the relations amongst their participants.

This thesis contributes to the existing knowledge on AFNs, particularly describing minutely the interactions occurring within food initiatives. The research in fact hints to how activities link AFNs to the concepts of localism, embeddedness, turn to quality and alternativeness. Particularly, the research shows how the adoption of specific activities result in multiple configurations, which can indeed be differentiated within AFNs. The research further shows that assemblage thinking in this case has been useful to capture not values and motivations

but what actually occurs in the deployment of the activities aimed at the reproduction of the initiatives. The research finally concludes that the assemblages of the activities suggest that food initiatives considered AFNs can be complexed, hence it is necessary to highlight the value of such initiatives when addressing them rather than flattening their relevance. This makes of assemblage an appropriate tool to go beyond fixed meanings and explore different aspects of multiple phenomena.

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