Department of
Sociology and Social Research

URBEUR Urban Studies PhD Program   Cycle XXX

IDEOLOGY, PRAGMATISM AND INNOVATION: SMALL-SCALE FARMERS IN ALTERNATIVE FOOD NETWORKS

A comparative exploration of the 'production side' of

local food systems in Milan and Manchester

Raffaele Matacena

Registration number: 798753

Turor: Prof. Enzo Mingione

Coordinator: Prof. Lavinia Bifulco

ACADEMIC YEAR 2017/2018

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Introduction

The food system crisis and the urgent need to develop a different socio-economic model for the organization of food production and consumption practices are analytical constructs about which a growing scientific consensus is coupled with increasing media attention, to the point that they have not only entered the sphere of public opinion but also the agenda of political institutions at every level. The application of intensive industrial models in food production and distribution, together with an ever growing liberalization of exchanges in international markets, have spurred the development of a highly-concentrated and capital-intensive global food market, in which prominent power imbalances grant immense directional and decisional leadership to a restricted number of big international players. This type of food chain management has shown a marked incapacity to satisfy the requirements of the triple bottom line of sustainability, thus generating serious environmental, social and economic externalities which have provoked an impact on human, social and ecosystemic life (Godfray *et al.*, 2010). Such impact is highly differentiated and variable in its forms but affects the whole planet. Global challenges, then, are paired with local ones, creating a growing need to re-internalize the economic processes linked to production, distribution and consumption of food within social and environmental frameworks able to protect the (human, cultural, social, economic, and ecological) resources which are mobilized by the agri-food chain.

In the context of European industrialized countries, agri-business developments together with the increased concentration and internationalization of the distribution sector have significantly influenced food production and consumption models, generating critical issues affecting both the spheres of consumption and production. As regards consumption, issues can be synthesized into a predominance of highly industrially processed foods, disconnected from their origin and dis-embedded from the socio-cultural-economic contexts of their production areas. This not only creates a series of negative consequences in the fields of nutrition and health, but also hinders the social and economic viability of entire agricultural communities. From the point of view of production, however, the actual model implies a strongly accentuated dependence on corporate retail commercial channels and an inevitable thrust towards concentration and growth in the average dimension of firms (both agricultural and processing), thus posing a major threat to the very existence of small and small-to-medium rural producers. Once the bedrock of the agricultural sector (and in many places they still are), today they face the severe risk of becoming economically unsustainable, 'squeezed' as they are between upstream growth of production costs (agricultural inputs, land access, inadequate regulation) and downstream price reduction. They thus risk not being able to

continue with their activity, a fact that from a systemic point of view will not only result in the gradual erosion of a highly valued gastronomic-cultural patrimony, but also in the loss of a whole range of social, environmental and territory stewardship services, which only a strong and healthy agricultural community can provide.

In this critical scenario, in the last years we have been witnessing the construction and consolidation of new 'grassroots' organizational structures, aimed at re-embedding food production, distribution and consumption practices through processes of 're-socialization' and 're-localization', within the frame of local and sustainable systems. I refer to *short food supply* chains, which can either take the form of a non-intermediated exchange between producers and consumers, or be organized and managed by organizations of citizens of various kinds. In general, these initiatives have been labeled as *alternative food networks* (AFNs): they are food chain organizational schemes – in most cases horizontal – setting up and managing short circuits to re-valorize local, traditional and sustainable production. They are seen to carry a promise to facilitate access to healthy, nutritionally-adequate and ethically correct foods, while at the same time providing an opportunity to revive the local rural fabric by building a viable alternative to the productivist structures of current capitalism and the predatory relationships inherent in them (Hassanein, 2003).

The whole set of novel commercial opportunities that short chains and AFNs provide to farmers is referred to in this work as the *alternative food economy.* The new commercial arrangements in the alternative food economy take on different forms (farmers' markets, purchasing groups, food coops, box schemes, community supported agriculture, direct selling platforms, urban gardens, and various more), though they share some common traits. One commonality is the practice of direct sales, which establishes a renewed relationship between producers and consumers, one that is not reduced to a mere service relationship but instead involves a form of mutual transfer of knowledge and collaboration based on an explicit attention to environmentally-friendly and animal-welfare-respectful production techniques. Another shared aspect is their nature as urban phenomena: it is in the city that these experiences are born, and it is from typically urban resources that they derive the means for their reproduction. In densely populated places, in fact, on the one hand the separation from the countryside and the disconnection with its productive system are more felt and, on the other hand, it is possible to activate tightly knit relational networks and reach a critical mass so that new organizational pathways can be engineered and maintained. Moreover, municipal governments are proving increasingly attentive regarding the construction of local and sustainable food systems, as exemplified by the fact that a growing number of cities – among which is Milan – elaborated (or are currently elaborating) a set of *urban food policies* with the precise aim of coordinating and harmonizing municipal-level interventions to strengthen the peri-urban and local food production apparatus.

In the last two decades, a great effort in research has brought about a robust literature on alternative food networks and the phenomena of re-localization. Many analysts have focused on the transition of consumption models towards the re-discovery of local production and the potential forms of agency and political

significance of critical-ethical consumption. Others have concentrated on the values, ideologies and relations underlying the building and working mechanisms of networks and alternative economies (for example the phenomenon of GAS in Italy).

However, the productive component of these networks remains relatively unexplored, i. e. the productive-entrepreneurial archipelago which is mobilized by these networks and which finds in them (at least potentially) a new center of gravity. A comprehensive representation of the role and prerogatives of farmers and food producers in these networks of food exchange is lacking, and very few studies adopt the point of view of farmers to analyze this increasingly relevant phenomenon (examples of which are: Corrado, 2008; Brunori *et al.*, 2011; Galt, 2013; Thilmany and Ahearn, 2013; Dupré *et al.*, 2017; Pinna, 2017; Vitale and Sivini, 2017; Charatsari *et al.*, 2018). It is surprising, because farmers lay at the foundation of every concern regarding the sustainability of food systems, and are fundamental actors in the organization of alternative sales channels: trivially enough, without the subjects who produce 'alternative' food, no 'alternative' food can be exchanged. The future of alternative food networks, as well as every other possible food production-consumption arrangement, will depend on their ability to involve food producers, proposing to them a viable – more appealing – alternative to the current configuration of the food economy. Addressing the problem by taking the farm as the unit of analysis, in addition, provides an interesting perspective through which to develop original evaluations on a broad set of issues, ranging from consumer trends, business-entrepreneurial innovations, business ethics, moral entrepreneurship, social appropriation of new technologies, rural development, and many more.

My study aims to occupy this field, and attempts to advance the knowledge of the social and economic world of small-scale farmers selling their products through short chains and AFNs-related commercial circuits in and around the city of Milan and, in a comparative perspective, in the city of Manchester and the region of north-western England.

Italy is chosen as exponent of a 'Mediterranean' socio-economic model in which family ties (and the other kinds of Granovetter's (1977) 'strong ties') exert a significant influence over daily practices and, as a consequence, over food choices and habits. This intertwines with a strongly embraced food culture and tradition (which also plays a relevant role as identity marker), thus shaping a food economy in which international corporations coexist alongside a lively fabric of small-to-medium or family businesses. Great Britain, on the contrary, features a more individualistic relation with food, defining a system which is at the same time more open to external influences and more evidently commodified. In this setting, the power of the market to shape socio-economic relations around food is heightened, and its structure reveals an accentuated inclination towards establishing a globalized and corporate-controlled food chain. This model is typical of northern European countries.

By employing qualitative methods, then, my study aims to provide an interpretation of the reality of small-scale farmers in these two regions, highlighting the innovative practices they realize to seek viability for their farms within the

alternative food economy, keeping under control the variability of the forms and expressions of 'alternativeness' assumed by the different experiences within and between the two cases. The objective is to bring out farmers' identities and stories, their representations of the problems affecting the food system and their personal strategies to cope with them, plus the requirements, logics and mechanisms of action, which define their participation in the economy of AFNs and make it possible. I analyze the set of values and ideological references inspiring their actions, the opportunities the networks furnish them, and the critical points and obstacles which threaten their own personal-entrepreneurial development as well as that of the short chains themselves. By investigating the *habitus* of this emerging field and the relational networks within which value is negotiated and exchanged, my attempt is to objectify the presence and practices of these 'new' food producers, along with the corresponding 'de-commodification' modalities with which their activities are re-integrated within an innovative system of social relations.

Such cognitive objective entails the double aim of advancing the analysis of the food and farming sector as a whole, and concurrently providing insight about the forms of social mobilization that are presently attempting to re-socialize food, involving nets of producers and consumers. The analysis therefore aspires to contribute to the debate on food sovereignty, sustainability of local food systems, and rural development, which are issues of increasing scientific interest as well as critical areas of local-regional and national policy.

The analysis begins with the depiction of a wide theoretical backdrop against which the investigation of the modalities and implications of farmers' participation in the alternative economy is situated. Chapter 1 roams through the food system literature to try to provide a comprehensive account of its evolution since the rise of productivism until the modern day, which is afflicted by a deep food and farming crisis that different actors, bearers of distinct interests, are trying to address. Among these, alternative food networks propose a radically different pathway to the reformation of the food system, based on social practices aiming to spur democratization and social justice in production-consumption arrangements. Their characteristics, their significance within the current debate, and the perspectives from which they have been studied are presented in Chapter 2, together with an analysis of their potential synergies with the newborn field of urban food policy.

Chapter 3 presents my empirical research, highlighting research questions, materials and methods. Following six months of preparatory groundwork in Milan, during which I accrued familiarity with the local food system and developed 'landscape-level' knowledge about farming and AFNs in general, and the Milanese scenario in particular, I carried out eleven months of fieldwork between Lombardy, Italy, and north-western England, where I interviewed 39 small-scale farmers who sell at least a substantial part of their production through alternative channels, 25 in the Italian field and 14 in the UK. In Chapter 3, the motivations behind the selection of the two case studies, the sampling strategy, and the other techniques employed to collect and analyze data are presented.

Successively, the analysis of the empirical material gathered begins in Chap-

ter 4. The first chapter of the analysis focuses on farmers' subjectivity. The personal trajectories of farmers are highlighted, together with the inner motivations underlying their life decisions, and their representations of the implications of the farming activity on their personal and family lives. The pathways they followed to become farmers are scrutinized, and explained through a specific typology of 'entrance into farming'. The last section proposes a theoretical interpretation of the empirical evidence reported throughout the chapter, reflecting on Van Der Ploeg's notion of 're-peasantization' (2008) and underscoring the distinction between 'new peasants' and 'converted agri-entrepreneurs' (Corrado, 2013).

Chapter 5 is dedicated to the portrayal of the food and farming crisis, previously outlined in general terms drawing on the work of food scholars, now described from the internal point of view of farmers. *Their* depiction of the critical scenario in which they are called to act points to a long-standing crisis of profitability, which is severely threatening (if not already impeding) the viability of their farms within the mainstream economy. Such a trend is due to a globalized tendency of food price reduction, coupled with a constant increase of input costs, therefore shrinking margins at the farm level (Moss, 1992). The situation is aggravated by what farmers perceive as a political-regulatory and bureaucratic environment that is unable (or unwilling) to take into account the interests of the farming sector, especially of small-holders.

A substantial part of the chapter is centered on understanding the problems afflicting the relations of farmers with supermarkets and other corporate food retailers. In the last decades, supermarkets have grown as undisputed leaders of the food system, and now employ their enormous market power to dictate terms and conditions to every other food chain player. Given this predominance, most farmers, even in the alternative economy, still see them as the mainstream outlet to sell their products, albeit an undesired one. Their undesirability stems from the fact that despite a renewed interest in establishing direct relationships with farmers, the collaborations offered by the actors of mass distribution are often one-sided and particularly risky for small-scale farmers.

The analysis continues into Chapter 6, which addresses the strategic choices taken by farmers to step out of this critical situation, improve their livelihoods, and secure the survival of their farms. Their strategies are framed as innovations, which are necessary to 'go alternative', i.e. entrust the reproduction of the farm unit to the alternative economy. In general, these strategies imply a process of 'de-industrialization' of the farm, which means resorting to less-intensive and mechanized production methods and reducing the scale of operations, to produce a higher-quality output in a more environmentally-friendly way. The natural complement to these innovations is a transformation of the marketing orientation of the farm, whose products are withdrawn (as much as possible) from the long chains of the conventional market, and marketed instead through direct and AFNs-mediated short chains. These new commercial arrangements are based on a much more intense relational exchange than those characterizing mainstream channels. Therefore farmers are called to develop a series of new relational skills that are indispensable in creating and sustaining networks of socio-economic

exchange and cooperation. The innovations that are implemented by farmers to cope with the crisis, then, affect three distinct, interrelated, spheres: the mode of *production*, the mode of *commercialization*, and the mode of *relation*. In the text, the strategies and the business behavior of farmers on these three levels are analyzed distinctly and in detail.

Based on empirical evidence, in Chapter 6 I also provide an interpretation of the peculiar entrepreneurial spirit of farmers, which I have labeled as *cautious entrepreneurship*. Farmers in the alternative economy adopt a more lively business behavior than their conventional counterparts, which is especially evident in their higher social dynamism and more relational attitude. At the same time, their entrepreneurial approach is often piecemeal; changes are incremental and a series of positive feedback is expected before further steps are taken, all in order to avoid being involved in situations that might undermine the autonomy farmers have strenuously gained in the alternative economy.

Lastly, in the final section of Chapter 6 I evaluate the scope and modalities of *de-commodification* brought about by the examined configurations of producers', consumers' and other actors' actions and relations in the alternative food economy. I suggest that by re-embedding food and food-related economic practices within a relational network, direct and AFNs-mediated short chains realize a de-commodification of farmers' labor and production. However, it appears to be a 'partial' de-commodification wherein a 'de-commodified' value is created on top of a 'capitalistic' value, which continues to be exchanged on a 'capitalistic' market, albeit in a 'niche' form.

The comparative effort of my study is constantly visible throughout the work: in every chapter I present general arguments that are inferred from the empirical material I collected in both countries, which therefore are to be considered valid for both contexts; where significant differences emerge, instead, they are duly pointed out and scrutinized all throughout the structure of the work, in relation to the theme being discussed. The last part of the work, Chapter 7, instead focuses directly on the issue of comparison, and presents a depiction of the differences between the two alternative economies in Italy and England, created by distinct manifestations of the same phenomena.

These differences are read in the light of the dissimilar cultural relevance of food in the two countries and as the outcome of distinct agricultural structures, which in turn generate a different social appropriation of the answers suggested by the alternative food movement to the problems revolving around food. The priority of English alternative schemes, in fact, is to re-embed food production within interpersonal relations in order to produce benefits at the community level, such as social cohesion, individual re-skilling and community well-being. Italian networks, conversely, re-socialize food with the purpose of mobilizing community resources to protect the whole sector that produces quality food in societally-desirable ways from the distortions of the market. This more pronounced economic orientation allows for the arguement that the Italian alternative food economy appears better positioned to develop an effective parallel market to contrast the dominance of the conventional system, although the risk of co-option from mainstreaming forces

is likewise higher.

The work concludes with a few reflections on the future of the alliance between small-scale farmers and alternative food networks. I argue that in order for this alliance to make a dent in the food system and promote a substantial transition towards a more sustainable system of food production and exchange, a coordinated effort in the two fields of consumer culture and political intervention will be needed. A cultural change is indeed required, to expand the possibilities for farmers to provide a social basis for their activities. Simultaneously it is necessary to implement appropriate policies, at the national as well as the local level, to increase the market power of small-scale farmers and furnish them with more business opportunities.

Chapter 1

The current food system

The contemporary agri-food system has recently been placed under serious scrutiny, both in its operational and governance aspects, by a conspicuous number of actors, ranging from the academia and the international as well as national and sub-national institutions, to NGOs, civil society organizations and individuals. Such efforts have unveiled power structures, distortions and disconnections which are generating concerns about the capacity of the system to assure food security[1](Godfray *et al.*, 2010), sustainability[2](Sage, 2011; Marsden and Morley, 2014b), sovereignty[3](Lang and Heasman, 2004) and justice[4] (Allen, 2010) in the provision, supply, allocation and consumption of food.

Worries are then exacerbated by the awareness that the food system, as any other system, is operating within a very problematic setting, in which environmental preoccupations related to climate change and unrestrained resource depletion (of water, soil, biodiversity, ecosystem services, fossil fuels) exist alongside social, health and demographic issues. This host of issues points to the challenge of feeding a rapidly growing population, eradicating under-nourishment while combating the propagation of overconsumption-related illnesses and, ultimately, building fairer and more equitable sustainable modernities.

The agri-food system is defined as set of activities and relationships that in-

[1]Food security is defined as a universal human right that is realized when all people have physical and economic access at all times to nutritionally and culturally adequate food or the means for its procurement, without discrimination of any kind (FAO website, accessed October 2015)

[2]Food sustainability refers to the realization of food production, processing, distribution, consumption and disposal in a way that meet the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs. More concretely, food sustainability contributes to thriving local economies and sustainable development, protects the diversity of both plants and animals and the welfare of farmed and wild species, avoids damaging or wasting natural resources or contributing to climate change, provides social benefits, such as good quality food, safe and healthy products, and educational opportunities. (adapted from World Bank website and Sustain Association website, accessed October 2015)

[3]Food sovereignty is the right of peoples to healthy and culturally appropriate food produced through ecologically sound and sustainable methods, and their right to define their own food and agriculture systems (Declaration of Nyéléni, Forum for Food Sovereignty, 2007, retrieved from https://nyeleni.org/spip.php?article290)

[4]A socially just food system is one in which power and material resources are shared equitably so that people and communities can meet their needs, and live with security and dignity, now and into the future (Allen, 2010)

teract to determine what and how much, by what method and for whom, food is produced, processed, distributed and consumed (Fine, 2013). It comprises an interconnected flow of operations and processes which starts with the preparation of agricultural inputs, passes through primary production (cultivation, rearing, capture), processing (refining, manufacturing), distribution (transportation), sale/retail, preparation, and ends with the consumption of food and its disposal (waste, recycling). Such a depiction of the food system recognizes the complex relationships between different components, embracing a more holistic and dynamic understanding (Sage, 2013) of the power balances between its elements.

Many analysts agree (see, for example, Feenstra, 1997; Pimbert *et al.*, 2001; Godfray *et al.*, 2010; Pretty *et al.*, 2010; Goodman *et al.*, 2012; Stock *et al.*, 2015) that, although it has brought a number of benefits in feeding the population and (above all) sustaining massive urbanization processes, the evolutionary path that has led to current food system arrangements is responsible, to a varying yet significant extent, for causing most of the problems the system now faces. These problematics, in turn, now threaten its reproduction as well as its capacity to deliver public goods and well-being.

What results from academic and institutional analyses is a framework of 'food crisis', which calls for urgent action to resolve the contradictions and unsustainabilities inherent in a capitalistic and corporate-driven food provisioning system. Bringing activities and operations back within a food security and sustainability paradigm is, therefore, increasingly felt as a compelling need (Pimbert *et al.*, 2001; IAASTD, 2009; Sage, 2011; Morley *et al.*, 2014). To understand the structure of the current food system and its means of reproduction, the following sections briefly analyze scholars' contributions to the illustration of the last century of the food system's evolution and to the framing of its current features.

1.1 Technology and productivism

The current characteristics of the food system result from a century-long transformation that, led by Northern countries, has had its focus on incrementing productivity through continuous technological enhancement. The application of scientific methods and industrial technologies provoked major changes in the food we eat as well as in the structure of its productive apparatus. Following the industrialization of the global North, the requirement of feeding a larger and increasingly urbanized population called for the installation of an intensive regime of food production, set up within a *productivist* paradigm. Successive advances in the mechanical and chemical industries, matched by improvements in the selection of high-yielding crops and livestock, expansion and specialization of farms (Mazoyer and Roudart, 2006) and the introduction of state subsidies to intensify national food production (Murdoch *et al.*, 2003), rapidly transformed a scenario composed of a mosaic of small and medium-sized farms of a few hectares, practicing diversified small-scale or subsistence production using animal traction (yet largely self-sufficient), into one dominated by large-scale, motorized, mechanized, and specialized commodity production (Mazoyer and Roudart, 2006).

Such 'commodified' system was quickly integrated into an increasingly globalized and export-oriented network, whose development was supported by advances in the field of transportation, of both inputs and food products, coupled with a US-led uninterrupted process of technological and market innovation (Goodman and Redclift, 1985). These processes were boosted, from the 1960s onwards, by the so-called 'green revolution', in which the application of a technological package of high-yielding crops, chemical fertilizers, herbicides, pesticides and irrigation drastically increased the amount of food produced, generating surplus and making it cheaper than ever before in the retail market (Evenson and Gollin, 2003).

Productivity achievements, though, rested upon aggravation of the environmental impacts of farming (in terms of pollution, erosion and resource depletion), caused a heavy restriction of crop biodiversity, and prompted farmers' dependence on external inputs while accelerating a trend of shrinking margins. Long before the current 'sustainability turn'[5], Lappé and Collins, commenting on the green revolution model, highlighted the principles which were not taken into account in modernizing agriculture (1982, p. 114):

> "[T]he Green Revolution represented a choice to breed seed varieties that produce high yields under optimum conditions. It was a choice not to start by developing seeds better able to withstand drought or pests. It was a choice not to concentrate first on improving traditional methods of increasing yields, such as mixed cropping. It was a choice not to develop technology that was productive, labor-intensive, and independent of foreign input supply. It was a choice not to concentrate on reinforcing the balanced, traditional diets of grain plus legumes".

The transformation of food into a cheap commodity bolstered intense processes of concentration in the sector, with big corporations accumulating enormous market power both in the upstream segments (seeds and other inputs production) and in the downstream segments of the chain (food processors and retailers) (Morley *et al.*, 2014). For instance, by 2000 four corporations controlled 82% of the beef packing industry in the USA (*ibid.*). In 2001, six companies realized 80% of overall global pesticide sales (Dinham, 2001). In 2008, 67% of the global seed market was controlled by the top ten multinational seed companies (ETC Group, 2008), while in the same year five corporations owned a 90% share of the international grain trade, and three countries produced 70% of exported maize (McMichael, 2009a). In 2013, in the USA the 20 largest food retailers accounted for 63.8% of national grocery store sales, evidencing a huge increase from the 39.9% they represented in 1993 (USDA, 2015).

Whilst these developments significantly expanded profit opportunities for the upstream and downstream operators of the chain, the farming segment bore the most negative consequences. It found itself stretched in between two highly concentrated and powerful ends of the supply chain, capable of setting the standards and governing the development of the system. Heffernan and colleagues (1999) describe the shape of the food system employing the metaphor of the 'hour-glass',

[5] It refers to the huge momentum reflections over the (un)sustainability of human activities have gained both in the academic and institutional discourse and in planning, production and consumption practices (Fahy and Rau, 2013).

whereby a huge amount of farmers feed a bigger number of consumers through an increasingly corporately controlled system that involves nets of interconnected input suppliers, food processors and retailers earning a profit from every transaction. The position of agriculture, then, is one of weakness, and many small-to-medium-sized farmers have been (and continue to be) pushed out of the market, lacking the capacity to withstand a trend of decreasing returns. This phenomenon is linked to what has been defined as the 'technological treadmill' (Cochrane, 1993) to which farmers are chained in a productivity-and-intensification-oriented regime. Appearing as a prospect of progress and improvement, the run of farmers on the treadmill implies the incessant adoption of the latest (and most expensive) technique or technology to raise yields and increase income by gaining competitive advantage. But since others adopt the innovation too, it results in higher volumes of food entering the market and a subsequent downward pressure on prices. Input costs, then, constantly increase, while farm-gate prices tend to go down, and only ever larger volumes of sales maintain profitability (Moss, 1992). Such 'cost-price squeeze' is hardly resisted by the vast majority of small and middle-scale farmers, who become dependent on public subsidies or, rather, are forced out of the market.

1.2 Post-productivism and the rise of supermarkets

In such a setting, the system endangers farmers' livelihood opportunities, and thus contributes to emigration from rural areas and to the subsequent urbanization of the world's population. With rural-urban linkages becoming increasingly weaker, from the 1980s onward greater attention has been paid to the food production model, questioning the ability of food-commodities provision to deliver food safety and security (Pimbert *et al.*, 2001). In addition, a series of food scares and crises (the most famous of which being the outbreak of the BSE or, as it is most commonly called, 'mad cow' disease), combined with a growing recognition of the environmental externalities ascribed to the intensive food production pattern (OECD, 1986), amplified the scope for a critical review of the *status quo* of the food system (Lowe *et al.*, 1990).

At the same time, the globalization path followed by the world's economy made food commodities production for global export in developing countries ever more appealing to big agri-food companies, due to the availability of large swaths of agricultural land and cheap labor costs. From a food production perspective, the countries of the global South suffered great consequences of colonialism and post-colonialism, an understanding of which proves very important in depicting current food system developments. However, while useful in acquiring a greater sense of the theoretical development of the food system, issues of colonialism and post-colonalism remain outside the scope of this research, and therefore will not be further addressed.

As the work of Marsden and Morley suggests, institutional reaction during this phase was directed towards accommodating these new developments, causing the Northern food system to enter a stage characterized by a *'post-productivist compromise'* (Marsden, 2013; Marsden and Morley, 2014a), in which the state "shed some of its productivist ideology" (Marsden and Morley, 2014a, p. 7). Yet, rather than dismantling intensive productive systems, the state attempted to

'ring-fence' them with a host of agri-environmental schemes, as well as public and private food quality standards and conventions (Busch, 2007). Meanwhile an increasing body of food safety legislation served (especially in a young European political union) to reassure consumers about food quality and constrain producers' and food processors' behavior. At the same time, progress in transport, logistics and supply chain management allowed for a further globalization of the system, wherein products could be all the time more easily supplied to the Northern consumption markets from Southern countries. Much of the intensive productivism could then be relocated to the South and to newly industrializing countries. As Marsden and Morley (2014a, p. 8) argue, food chain post-productivism had its foundations not in "eradicating intensive productivism completely, but [in] spatially containing its externalities at home (...) while stimulating and reproducing its less regulated conditions in other more distant parts of the world through highly sophisticated and neoliberalized retail-led supply chain regulation".

This new economic and spatial arrangement also created the conditions for the rise of national and global corporatism in the retail sector, whose operators have progressively acquired more power and are currently considered to hold the lead in the food system (Vorley, 2001; Hendrickson and Heffernan, 2002; Fuchs *et al.*, 2011; Havinga, 2012). Given the power accumulation corporate retailers have been able to realize, it is crucial to explore the reasons for their ascent in order to grasp the dynamics and rationales of the current food system.

Supermarkets and other retail outlets chains have reached gigantic dimensions (to cite a widely known example, Walmart is the world's largest food retailer *and* the world's largest company by revenue) and adopted the role of restructurers and directors of the entire food supply chain, dictating terms to food manufacturers who then force changes back through the food system (Konefal *et al.*, 2005). In addition, rather than relying on open wholesale markets they have been increasingly engaging in a direct relation with primary fresh produce growers through the production of contracts in which the growing (or rearing) methods, volumes, harvest dates and times, sizes and cosmetic characteristics, and (most importantly) prices of products are specified months beforehand (Sage, 2011).

Despite being the latter economic operators of the chain, retailers have placed themselves in the middle of the system's operational mechanism: employing the words of Sage (*ibid.*), retail corporations are *'Janus-faced'* in the sense that they, on the one hand, engage in dialogue with consumers not simply to understand their needs, champion their interests or procure for them the best value (Flynn and Bailey, 2014), but also to continuously re-shape their needs and wants, in a permanent feedback circle; on the other hand, when dealing with food manufacturers and suppliers they "speak on behalf of consumers, pressing for new product lines, higher standards of food safety and traceability and, above all, reductions in price" (Sage, 2011, p. 55). This helps them to maintain flexibility and an adaptive capacity to market variations, and effectively leverage on (huge) economies of scale to reduce supply prices and capture bigger shares of value (Goodman *et al.*, 2012).

From a market sociology perspective, the rise of corporate retailers can be ex-

plained as a matter of *resource dependence* (Fligstein and Dauter, 2007), which exists when "power in markets is unequally distributed [and] one side of the exchange is more dependent on what is being exchanged than the other party" (*ibid.*, p. 114). In the contemporary food system, producers and manufacturers' sales heavily rely on the main retail players, whose revenues, on the opposite, come from a very ample base of differentiated sources: the data collected in Britain by Martin (1990, quoted in Goodman *et al.*, 2012) illustrates how, already in the late 1980s, the top-four supermarkets accounted for 50-80% of most major food manufacturers' sales, whereas no single food manufacturer represented more than 1% of Sainsbury's or Tesco's (the leading UK retailers) turnover. An outstanding purchasing power, then, that derives from an asymmetric situation of *oligopsony* (Pimbert *et al.*, 2001), defined a market in which a small number of buyers exerts power over a large number of sellers.

Although supermarkets have been judged positively for their ability to deliver consumer benefits in terms of price, product safety and variety (Competition Commission, 2000), the concentration of power into retailers' hands generates imbalances within the supply chain (Hingley, 2005): collaborative partnerships with corporate retailer are often one-sided and show a low level of mutuality (Cox and Chicksand, 2005). Rather than allowing sustainable competitive advantage for all participants, these partnerships frequently translate for supermarkets' suppliers into a commercial 'treadmill to oblivion' of continuous operational improvement, with low and declining returns (Cox *et al.*, 2007). Nevertheless, supermarkets have become part of the daily experience of most individuals in the global North. Retail companies' action might be controversial, yet it is in their outlets that most of our food purchases are realized, and they are proving able to combine a capacity to drive the market together with responsiveness to its variations, as the recent and astonishing rise in shelf space for organic production can testify.

1.3 The new arena: facing a 'food crisis'

In recent decades, many variations of the food scene have been emerging from both internal (market) forces and external inputs. In fact, since the 2000s a new arena has been taking shape, due to the confluence of many factors and contingencies that have been redefining the way the elements composing the food system are perceived and prioritized. Through the lens of the sustainable development approach, whose rhetoric has gained an ever greater momentum since its first introduction by the Brundtland Report in 1987 (UN, 1987), the manifold and interconnected socio-environmental externalities of the system have become more evident. Growing concerns over food security, the actual conceptualization of which came to the fore at the 1996 FAO World Food Summit held in Rome (FAO, 1997), have been coupled with a number of concurrent phenomena, such as speculative and financial crises, recognition of resource depletion (McMichael, 2012), climate change (IPCC, 2007), the rise of biofuel production (which started competing with agriculture for land) (Mol, 2007), extensive land grabbing[6] (Borras

[6]Defined as the appropriation of 'empty' land often in distant countries by powerful transnational and national economic actors, from corporations to national governments (especially fastly-developing countries, such as China) and private equity funds, that can serve as sites for fuel and food production in the event of future price spikes (Borras *et al.*, 2011)

et al., 2011), and the rapid diffusion of obesity and diet-related illnesses both in the North and South. These concerns, in turn, spurred a consolidation of food activists' discourse (Hesterman, 2011; Petrini, 2013) and contributed to the emergence of major perturbations in existing productivist and post-productivist food systems (Marsden and Morley, 2014a). In addition, the urgency to reform the system became more evident after the food price spikes of 2007-2008 (Sage, 2011). Following a decades-long declination trend of food prices, after year 2000 the market experienced a period of abrupt escalation and strong volatility of prices, which reached a peak in 2007-2008 and was felt as a real novelty. This shock had major repercussions: it spurred riots not only in the most food insecure countries of the South but also in middle and high-income countries (K. Morgan and Sonnino, 2010), unveiled the entanglement of food and oil markets[7] (Sage, 2011), accelerated the process of land grabbing, and led many observers to conceptualize the occurrence of a *food crisis* (Lee and Stokes, 2009; Godfray *et al.*, 2010; Almås and Campbell, 2012; Maye and Kirwan, 2013; Spaargaren *et al.*, 2013).

The exposure of these real and potentially irreversible social, economic and ecological 'by-products' of the food production and distribution system caused the interest and focus of governments to be shifted to an approach more globally profound than in the earlier phase of productivist and post-productivist food regulation. The need to address relevant issues in a more holistic way is emphasized, given the acknowledged interconnection of the food sector with other resource sectors and the inopportunity to compartmentalize it as a separate regulatory or provisional system (Marsden, 2013). Therefore, 'food concerns' gradually enlarged their scope to embrace more general considerations regarding human and animal biosecurity and well-being (Lang and Rayner, 2012). In Burton and Wilson's analysis (2012), this called for innovations around a *neo-productivism* , the productivist regime having lost its capacity to legitimate itself without accommodating at least some ecological modernizing principles. How this 'modernization' has been conceived and conducted is a theme that will be addressed later in the next section, which will highlight institutional, business players' and alternative food movements' responses to the food crisis.

To summarize, the food scenario nowadays is very complex. The 'world of food' (K. Morgan *et al.*, 2006) we are witnessing today is still shaped by the architecture and infrastructure of productivist and post-productivist agri-food regimes, with its heritage of 'sunk costs', spatial fixes and inertia. Drawing on Reimer and Apedaile (1996), Pimbert and his colleagues (2001) describe contemporary agriculture as composed of three diverging worlds. Rural World 1 is a competitive minority (in Canada it represents around 5-10% of national agriculture, for example) connected to the global agri-food economy. Highly industrialized and mechanized, this portion of agriculture can be considered an extension of agri-business. Rural World 2, once the bedrock of the rural economy, is composed of (many) family farmers and landed peasantry which are currently severely threatened by declining returns and increased risk from agricultural commodity production and trade liberalization. Rural World 3 is made of fragile entitlements, self-exploitation and unwaged family labor income, and focuses mainly on survival. For the global

[7] An explication of the mechanism of interdependence between food and fuel markets is beyond the scope of thiswork. For a detailed analysis see Sage, 2011.

market, the authors argue, Rural World 3 is redundant.

The development trajectory of the food system I have tried to briefly depict has had these three worlds constantly incrementing their relative distance rather than jointly co-evolving towards reducing inequalities, thus giving way for a capitalist and profit-seeking system to reproduce following a concentration trajectory, and ultimately posing a major threat to millions of people, livelihoods and food security. To conclude, I propose Heasman and Mellentin's (2001, p. 28) recapitulation of the global dynamics of the agri-food system, which, in their opinion, has:

> "witnessed a massive increase in food supply regardless of broader human and environmental health aspects, the economic costs of which are "externalized"; become dominated by certain grains (wheat, maize, rice) and livestock production which promotes meat and dairy products consumption; promoted the intensification of agriculture and chemical use with a tendency towards larger production units and fewer crops and farmers; involved costly farm support measures, in the form of subsidies, in the trade dominating blocs, often at the expenses of smaller producers and rural communities and alternative use of monies; distorted markets and prompted unequal and unfair trade, mainly to the detriment of poorer countries; created a culture of food dependency in developing countries, characterized by "food aid" and food imports from rich producers, and the setting up of domestic production in poor countries for the export markets of the rich food shopper; seen increasing national, regional and global restructuring by large food business and its associated supply industries, built around a select number of commodities; seen environmental concerns (such as falling water tables, reduced biodiversity, soil erosion, chemical contamination and disposal of animal waste) become major problems."

The future development of the food system, then, cannot afford to overlook the inconsistencies and 'distortions' that affect the current scenario. The *business-as-usual* model, as the International Assessment of Agricultural Knowledge, Science and Technology for Development asserts, is "no longer an option" (IAASTD, 2009, p. 3). Exclusive reliance on market mechanisms combined with the profit-seeking behavior of companies have encouraged the production of cheap, unhealthy food (rich in salt, fats and sugar), failing to ensure equitable access to appropriate food and nutrition for all. Hence the paradoxical co-existence of under-nourishment and over-nourishment-related health issues is not only created, but its negative effects are being alarmingly magnified. In addition, system activities have often been realized at the expense of the world's social and ecological resources, concretizing a severe threat for communities and ecosystems viability and resilience. Scientific reflection on these consequences calls for a revision of this model, founded on a sustainability paradigm and planned around innovations in food and livelihood security (IAASTD, 2009; Pretty *et al.*, 2010) and food governance (Lang *et al.*, 2009). The proposition of such discourses and practices by various actors of the food system will be addressed in the following sections.

1.4 International organizations and business operators' response to the food crisis

On the international and high-level governmental organizations scene, the urgency of reforming the food system is nowadays widely acknowledged. Within the past two decades, conceptual progress widened the scope of the notion of sustainability to include people's quality-of-life, present and future equity, and the socio-ethical dimensions of human well-being (IUCN/UNEP/WWF, 1991). Over the same period, the United Nations expressed the need to establish equitable cooperation relationships on a global level to respect everyone's interests as well as environmental integrity (UNCED, 1992), and introduced the concept of 'food sovereignty' into institutional discourse (FAO, 1997).

Nowadays food is conceived as a key factor in pursuing human development in the face of the apprehensions posed by constant population growth, increasingly accelerated climate change and environmental pressures. The food crisis 'narrative' has gained a prominent position in high-level political organisms' statements, and a body of analyses and recommendations on how to construct a sustainable food future emanates from their reports and conferences. For instance, of the 169 targets of the 'Sustainable Development Goals' the United Nations recently released to guide the world's development until 2030, 70 regard food and agriculture, more or less directly.

In turn, business corporations, the most powerful actors of the food system, do not demonstrate indifference regarding these issues, as they attempt to respond to the crisis with a market-based and private-led transition towards 'greener' processes and operations (Flynn and Bailey, 2014). Such corporatist-interest food governance (Marsden and Morley, 2014a) leverages the application of technology to obtain more production with less ecological pressure, and applies marketing rationales of product innovation and customer segmentation to enlarge profit opportunities while addressing sustainability challenges.

In the next two sections, we illustrate the rhetoric for counteracting the emerging food crisis which stems from international governmental organizations' discourse, and the prevailing backdrop against which large business operators posit their strategies.

1.4.1 *International governmental organizations*

To portray the international understanding with regard to food system's challenges and future development, I will briefly analyze three recent position statements: the United Nations' Rio+20 Conference on Sustainable Development outcome document *The Future We Want* (UN, 2012); the FAO's contribution document to the same conference *Towards the Future We Want* (FAO, 2012); and the European Union's Scientific Steering Committee discussion paper *The Role of Research in Global Food and Nutrition Security* (European Commission, 2015), prepared for the occasion of Expo Milan 2015.

What they all have in common is the recognition of the existence of a food crisis (which adds to a complicated environmental and social scenario), of which

the food system is both a cause, and at the same time, exposed to its consequences. In addition, they commonly state that efforts to feed a growing population should be directed towards increasing production in a sustainable way.

In promoting a sustainable future, the United Nations document acknowledges the role of cooperatives and microenterprises in contributing to social inclusion, and stresses the importance of fostering the participation of farmers, especially small-holders, in community, domestic, regional and international markets, since small-scale farmers and traditional farming practices (e.g. traditional seeds supply systems) are seen as capable of making important contributions to sustainable development, economic growth and food security. Farmers should be empowered to choose among diverse methods of achieving sustainable production, and strategies to strengthen urban-rural linkages should be developed.

As per the market, the UN advocate the realization of equitable multilateral trading systems and suggest addressing the root and structural causes of food price volatility; without, however, pointing to any possible instrument to achieve this goal. Regarding industry, UN's position is limited to "take note of the ongoing discussions on responsible agricultural investment" (UN, 2012, p. 23), and to recommend industry to exercise principles of corporate social responsibility as well as to integrate sustainability practices and green economy policies into its activities.

The FAO document, on its part, is relatively in line with the UN paper, especially in considering small-scale farming as crucial in both a development and food security context, if supported by appropriate infrastructures and agricultural extension. What the FAO stresses, however, is a need for reform that is based on the governance of agricultural and food systems, rather than on production increase. Emphasis is placed on measures that work towards the right to food and equality, not on how to enhance yields or productivity.

In turn, the EU Scientific Steering Committee, on the behalf of the Commission of the European Union, illustrates a picture, which is at the same time more detailed and more controversial. Advocating a systemic and agro-ecology approach for building sustainable food systems, its discourse is very attentive to social and localized priorities, and well aware that a one-size-fits-all non-localized approach is likely to fail. It recommends enhancing food quality through the promotion of alternative farming systems of different crops, thus raising the issue of the current focus on a limited number of agri-products (monocultures), which is perceived to risk contributing to the homogenization of production and consumption. It considers the development of proper communication tools for ethical, environmental and social attributes of food products a necessity, while recognizing the poor nutrient composition and highly caloric content of cheap foods (the term 'industrial foods' is unsurprisingly not mentioned). It encourages governments of every scale to facilitate the diffusion of alternative (ecological) farming systems, as

well as urban and peri-urban agriculture, agroforestry[8] and permaculture[9] , and to grant greater protection to cultural and social heritage (cuisine, dress, customs, language, architecture). It even affirms that economic power often resides in a few large institutions, further citing the importance of an investigation of the relations between food sovereignty and institutional power.

Despite these statements, and despite the paper's identification (without explanation) in the global and sophisticated just-in-time supply chain of a risk for local economic growth and resilience, for the European Commission, the main instrument to construct a sustainable food system is found in productivity enhancement, obtained through technology-driven sustainable intensification. Small-scale farming is seen more as a provider of services (social, educational, heritage protection) than a capable means of feeding the world. Global trade is conceived as a way to maximize efficiency, adjust to market shocks and, ultimately, as an export opportunity for the European Union, with the main problem associated with long chains identified as transparency and food adulteration risk.

A last feature worth mentioning is that, while the UN and FAO documents were non-committal about genetically modified organisms, the EU scientific committee supports nanotechnology and genetic improvement of crops and livestock, the latter ranging from conventional breeding to genetic modification, though it acknowledges the need to engage in significant dialogue with society to ensure legitimacy.

1.4.2 *Agri-business corporations and mainstream 'sustainabilization'*

As it can be argued, the position of the most important supra-national institutions is quite unclear in regards to the main economic constituents of the food system. Indeed, while a rhetoric of an inclusive and 'reflexive' governance (Marsden and Morley, 2014a) to revise power relations within the food system is increasingly being built, consolidating neoliberalization processes are giving precedence to the 'free-flow' of food goods in markets at every scale, and enabling a wide range of corporatist interests to shape forms of non-reflexive governance of the food system and guide its much needed 'sustainabilization' process (*ibid.*).

The food system modernization corporate players propose, as the analysis of Morley, Mc Entee and Marsden suggest (Morley *et al.*), has at its core a sustainable intensification model, brought about by technological solutions and aimed at realizing productivity gains. Through investments in research and development and process 'greening' (Flynn and Bailey, 2014), the business perspective relies upon a market-based transition to a food system in which sustainability is centered

[8] Agroforestry is a dynamic, ecological based, natural resources management system that, through the integration of trees on farms and in the agricultural landscape, diversifies and sustains production for increased social, economic and environmental benefits (FAO website, visited October 2015).

[9] Permaculture, originally 'Permanent Agriculture', is a set of gardening techniques whose central theme is the creation of a system which provides for human needs, using many natural elements and drawing inspiration from natural ecosystems. Its goals and priorities coincide with what many people see as the core requirements for sustainability (adapted from The Permaculture Magazine website, visited October 2015).

on informed consumer choice. These directions appear to reformulate food security and sustainability around a more bio-economic, rather than eco-economic, basis (Marsden and Morley, 2014a): research and development seek to manage plant and animal genetics to produce 'more for less', whilst the majority of industrial commitments are new and additional, focusing on adding new lines of product innovation (organic, low calorie, animal friendly, etc.) to provide the consumer with more 'choice' rather than operating a systemic transformation of product lines (*ibid.*).

The consumers' 'quality and sustainability turn' – whether supported by a truly renewed ethical consciousness or by processes of 'fetishization' of some features of food products, which turn them into commodities whose value is easily captured by the market (Goodman and Redclift, 1985; Hudson and Hudson, 2003; Vitale and Sivini, 2017) – results in the opening up of more markets and profit-generation opportunities for the leading actors of the chain, who end up striving to enhance their performance both in greening their activities and in maintaining their market leadership. Corporate-interest governance then partially co-opts some sustainability characteristics in the name of public health and safety, and adopts strategies that compartmentalize food security, health and sustainability into a revised form of category management (Morley *et al.*, 2014). Morley and his colleagues conclude that change, then, is reformist rather than radical, since it operates within the corporate logics rather than challenging them. With regard to this conceptualization, Flynn and Bailey (2014, p. 117) make the point:

> "Inevitably, the more powerful interests in the food system will seek to shape both the debates and practices of sustainability (...), [promoting] narrow economic dominated notions of sustainability in which problems and solutions are constructed around ideas of flexibility of supply chain, global markets, efficiency in supply chains, reduced waste, technological innovations along the supply chain and consumer choice. Private sector-dominated constructions of food sustainability will produce more efficient use of resources (e.g. land, materials and energy) and so will have benefits for these narrow notions of food sustainability, but change will take place within the system and remain 'managed' by key private sector actors in the food system".

Having its main focus on developing corporate-controlled new food market opportunities, the corporate response to the food crisis thus embodies the risk of marginalizing and fragmenting the true substance of sustainability, neglecting its nature of holistic and reflexive governance concern. Such risk is heightened by the incumbent neoliberal milieu, in which governments' interventions in food governance are progressively being substituted by the involvement of private actors. Mainstream food governance, indeed, as the studies of Marsden and Morley (2014a) illustrate, is shaped by minimal government intervention in setting the agenda for agri-food research and development, combined with a strong 'industrial focus'. This type of governance emphasizes the concept of sustainable intensification and places the focus on export generation, leaving the reduction of 'externalities' (i.e. carbon emissions) to market/trading mechanisms. The market is also made responsible to decide the structure and shape of the agricultural sector. Food, health and nutrition issues are addressed through labeling and expanding the possibilities of choice for consumers, whose confidence is gained

through attempts to build 'green credentialism' and by initiatives of corporate social responsibility - both being generally based on voluntarism, 'responsibility deals' with manufacturers and retailers, and fragmented projects (*ibid.*).

Novel agri-food strategies, aiming to counteract neoliberalization forces and recalibrate power dynamics within the system, evidently have to be found elsewhere. In the following section I will argue that a more radical proposition for food system reform is embedded in the logics and dynamics of alternative food networks, which represent an emergent and rapidly growing phenomenon whose characteristics and implications on the reformulation of the food system will be outlined in the next chapter. Their potential for inclusiveness, collective problem solving and adaptation may suggest a distinct and more reflexive pathway to tackle the ever growing challenges of the food system.

Chapter 2

Alternative food networks

Analyzing the food system, Moya Kneafsey and her colleagues (2008) focus on the issue of 'disconnection', regarded as one of the negative consequences of the predomination of capitalistic corporate forces in the food provisioning chain:

> "Many of the problems regarding the food system are attributable, at least partly, to the disconnections of consumers from food, in the sense that many consumers know very little about where much of their food comes from, what it is made of, how it is produced, and by whom" (Kneafsey *et al.*, 2008, p. 5).

This increasing gap, both cultural and spatial, between production and consumption generates a series of implications, for both producers and consumers. The former suffer from a decrease in economic relevance (and income), tied to a loss of autonomy and capacity to use traditional and inherited knowledge-practices regarding land and livestock, resulting in the consequent disappearance of traditional knowledges, memories and stories associated with nature. The latter's lack of knowledge and reduced ability to judge generates anxieties in their relationship with food, especially considering that consumers are being called to choose from an ever larger range of foods, in an increasingly neoliberal political-economic which often causes the degeneration of social disadvantages into difficulties to access healthy food (*ibid.*).

As a response to the 'disconnecting' track globalized food follows, a great number of initiatives centered on experimenting with different models of food provisioning have sprawled throughout the world, the common nature of which is referred to with the umbrella term 'alternative food systems' (or networks, AFNs). The denomination refers to a wide variety of rapidly diffusing initiatives and schemes of food provisioning that express a sense of differentiation from, and to some extent counteraction to, mainstream modes which dominate the conventional[10] food system.

They are generally organized to 're-socialize' (Kneafsey *et al.*, 2008; Sage, 2011;

[10]With 'conventional' or 'mainstream' food system I denote the types of food production and distribution which have come to dominate the market, and that manifest a heavy reliance on industrialized methods of food production and processing, global sources and means of supply, corporate modes of financing and governance, and an imperative towards operational efficiency (Tregear, 2011).

Goodman *et al.*, 2012) and 're-localize' food (Hinrichs, 2003; Mount, 2012). Re-socialization rests upon bringing food out of the highly individualized fashion in which consumers make personal choices among the wide range offered by supermarkets and other corporate retailers, and more fully into the civic arena where public goods issues are given weight and consideration (Sage, 2011). It operates by building relations and promoting stronger connections among a whole set of food-related actors, not limited to producers and consumers but also comprising restauranteurs, food writers, grassroots food movements, civil society organizations, consumer co-ops and social entrepreneurs, all to some degree engaged in finding a way out of the more standardized patterns of conventional food supply.

Re-rooting food in a specific place is the strategy employed in pursuing such alternative provision models. Food re-localization is practiced either when production, processing, retailing and consumption all take place within a prescribed area (as in the case of short chains, farmers' markets[11], community supported agriculture[12], box schemes[13], solidarity-based purchasing groups[14], food hubs [15], urban agriculture[16], community gardens[17]), and/or when the products that are exchanged embody the natural and/or cultural characteristics of a particular area, even if retailed or consumed far outside the production area (for example, organic agriculture, *terroir* and specialty products, craft products, products with denomination of origin, fair trade products[18]) (Tregear, 2011). In both cases, these traits of embeddedness of food products in peculiar places and ecologies act to contrast the perceived rootless nature characterizing the conventional system and its outputs.

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[11] Markets where food is sold directly by producers.

[12] Community supported agriculture exists when a community of individuals pledge support to a farm operation, so that growers and consumers provide mutual support and share the risks and benefits of the growing activity. Commonly, the members of the community cover in advance the anticipated costs of the farm operation and farmer's salary. In return, they receive shares of the farm production regularly throughout the growing season, usually through a periodic fresh food box scheme. In addition to the risk reduction, thanks to such initiatives growers receive better prices for their crops, gain some financial security, and are relieved of much of the burden of marketing.

[13] A box scheme is an operation that delivers fresh fruit and vegetables, often locally grown and organic, either directly to the customer or to a local collection point. Typically the produce is sold as an ongoing weekly subscription and the offering may vary week to week depending on what is in season.

[14] Solidarity-based purchasing groups are defined as those non-profit associations set up to carry out collective purchase of foods and distribution thereof, without application of any charge to members, with ethical purposes, of social solidarity, environmental sustainability and food quality (adapted from the 2007 Finance Act of the Italian Government).

[15] A food hub is a business or organization that actively manages the aggregation, distribution, and marketing of source-identified food products primarily from local and regional producers in order to satisfy wholesale, retail, and institutional demand (National Food Hub Collaboration website, visited October 2015).

[16] Defined as the use of (intra- and peri-) urban spaces for growing food, feed and ornamental plants, either individually or on a collective or community basis.

[17] They are plots of land where groups of citizens work regularly together to propagate agricultural produce for personal or public consumption, both growers and consumers being mostly residents of the neighborhood that hosts the garden.

[18] Fair Trade is a trading partnership, based on dialogue, transparency and respect, that seeks greater equity in international trade. It contributes to sustainable development by offering better trading conditions to, and securing the rights of, marginalized producers and workers – especially in the South (World Fair Trade Organization website, visited October 2015).

AFNs are gaining vibrancy, membership and participation, as well as sparking academic interest, for they are seen as creating, in a varied and multifaceted way, new spatial and social connections which can pave the way to the construction of a real sustainable food paradigm, founded on the renewal of linkages in and across urban and rural spaces, and on the capsize of our established spatial theories and supply chain models (Feagan, 2007; Allen, 2010; Marsden and Morley, 2014a). In a context framed by food security and sustainability crises, these networks' response is directed to ultimately empower both the 'urban food consumer' to become a more knowledgeable producer of his own and his family's health and well-being (Roberts, 2008), and the 'rural producer' to become a multifunctional provider of sustainable goods and services for rural and urban groups (Franklin and Morgan, 2014).

2.1 Potential and shortcomings of AFNs

As said, research interest in AFNs in the last two decades has sharply increased and produced a remarkable body of work. In her analysis of AFNs scholarship, Angela Tregear (2011) detects three main sets of perspectives through which the alternative food phenomena and their relations with the mainstream provisioning system have been viewed and conceptualized. The first is the political economy perspective (Allen, 2010; Goodman *et al.*, 2012; Marsden and Franklin, 2013; Fonte and Cucco, 2015; Pinna, 2017), for which the emergence of AFNs is the result of large-scale political and economic structures and it is conceptualized as both the outcome of and a counteracting force to the inequality-and-injustice-producing dynamics of global capitalism. The second is described as a rural sociology or development perspective (Renting *et al.*, 2003; Kirwan, 2004; Watts *et al.*, 2005; Jarosz, 2008; Van der Ploeg, 2008; Kneafsey *et al.*, 2013; Hebinck *et al.*, 2014; Bos and Owen, 2016; Le Velly and Dufeu, 2016), that conceives AFNs as social constructions and embodiments of the members of local communities, expressions of their beliefs, and values and motivations in pursuing socio-economic gains, highlighting the potential for such initiatives to remedy the marginalizing and de-humanizing effects of the mainstream agri-food sector. The last set refers to the modes of governance and network theory perspectives (Brunori and Rossi, 2007; Higgins *et al.*, 2008; Lockie, 2009; Mount, 2012; Stroink and Nelson, 2013; Denny *et al.*, 2016). Focusing on a meso-level scale, they explore the interaction and negotiation processes between actor groups, the development of alternative systems here being explained in terms of networks or clusters of actors operating at the scale of regions or states. Their interactions along with the power and control issues they face shape AFNs strategies and evolution, against an active backdrop of a regulatory and institutional environment.

According to this body of contributions, the bases upon which the 'alternativeness' of such networks is defined widely vary, resulting from a multifaceted mix of features, whose relative weight in contributing to an overall judgement of 'alterity' significantly differs from case to case (Martindale *et al.*, 2018). Most commonly, the channel structure tends to be arranged so as to re-balance the appropriation of value along the chain, whether it be short and lacking in intermediaries (as in the case of farmers' markets or box schemes), or working as to

ensure equitable relations among participants (i.e. fair trade). The governance or financing arrangements generally exhibit unconventional characteristics, such as peculiar trading structures (as in the cases of community supported agriculture or solidarity-based purchasing groups, whose efforts are directed toward assuring an adequate income and economic viability to local ecologically-committed primary producers). Sometimes the stress is on the characteristics of the products, for they incorporate environmental values and/or the natural and cultural features distinctive to a local area (e.g. organic agriculture, traditional products and products with denomination of origin). Lastly, the goals and motivations of the participants are considered capable of distinguishing alternative initiatives from conventional food provision modes, for they generally share a peculiar vision of the production-consumption relationship, revolving around the already cited idea of 're-connection' (Kneafsey *et al.*, 2008), which aims at providing/obtaining quality food whilst professing social justice and environmental sustainability.

A vast potential for AFNs to generate an array of beneficial outcomes is significantly highlighted by researchers. The most frequently reported relate to (often overlapping) elements of (positive) local anchorage, economic viability, ecological sustainability, and social justice. Moving towards a localized food system helps primarily to avoid the appropriation of value by distant or transnational companies, revitalizing primary production sectors, especially in peripheral areas (Ilbery *et al.*, 2004). It also offers the potential basis for more collective solutions for community development, enhancing trust and social capital that can spill over into other collective and community initiatives, and provides opportunities for building synergies with other sectors, such as tourism (Sage, 2011).

From an economic standpoint, AFNs viability lies in the possibility for consumers to purchase fresh and healthy food at a reasonable price (Little *et al.*, 2009), which combines, on the producers' side, with enhanced possibilities to increase margins (La Trobe, 2001), stimulate diversification and entrepreneurship (Morris and Buller, 2003; S. L. Morgan *et al.*, 2010) and develop new skills (Brown and Miller, 2008). Furthermore, the wider community may also benefit via multiplier effects and employment generation in non-agricultural sectors (Ilbery *et al.*, 2004). From an ecological perspective, local-based food initiatives are generally centered on organic and environmentally-friendly farming methods and enjoy the ecological gains associated with a short supply chain, such as the increase of (agro-) biodiversity and the reduction of food miles[19] and carbon emissions, thus stimulating progress for the sustainability agenda (Sage, 2011). As per the social justice characteristics of AFNs, researchers argue that reconnecting participants' relations brings the actors into closer proximity and mutual understanding (Kneafsey *et al.*, 2008), generating respect, trust and commitment (Kirwan, 2004), fostering more harmonious community relations, and engaging participants in a broader reflection about the interrelations between economy, environment and society (Psarikidou and Szerszynski, 2012).

Despite these many claims, a number of critical points have been raised by AFNs analysts regarding their problematics. For example, in a recent scientific

[19]The distance food travels from where it is grown to where it is ultimately purchased or consumed by the end user.

report to the European Commission edited by Santini and Gomez y Paloma (2013), it is argued that the commonly quoted economic and environmental benefits of local food systems are still debated, mainly due to the lack in current research of reliable qualitative and quantitative indicators of their impacts. Furthermore, there are two other major shortcomings which are frequently cited in alternative food literature. The first criticizes AFNs on the ground of equity, citing that, in some cases, their effect is to perpetuate pre-existing social inequalities rather than dismantle them (Donald and Blay-Palmer, 2006; Goodman *et al.*, 2012; Marsden and Morley, 2014a), contrary to what most ideology would suggest. This strand of critique accuses AFNs of failing to include the disadvantaged and the food poor and expand their possibilities to access food. The argument is that many AFNs participants come from affluent segments of society, thus these initiatives appear more as a product, rather than a driver, of socio-economic development in a region (Tregear, 2011). Other contributions, though, bring evidence of a more mixed composition of participants' socio-economic provenance (Cavazzani, 2008; Kneafsey *et al.*, 2008; Corrado, 2013), and reveal a complex scenario that results from many different contingencies, which should be analyzed with a context-based case by case approach (let's just think about the huge differences that may exist between organic food purchased in a specialized shop and local food provided by a solidarity-based purchasing group).

A second area of criticism regards the notion of 'local'. It is widely acknowledged that research efforts must avoid falling into the 'local trap' of ascribing an inherent desirability to the local (Born and Purcell, 2006), since it is not possible to aprioristically determine that a localized food system will in itself deliver a range of positive outcomes. Re-localization, furthermore, can hide 'defensive localism' attitudes (Winter, 2003) that manifest the conservative desires of a community to defend itself from outside threatening forces rather than adopt an open and inclusive approach to build communitarian, ecologically-sound forms of food provisioning.

Another interesting critical insight is offered by Tregear (2011), who reports of the uncertainties she detects in literature's effectiveness in explaining AFNs' impact on wider economies, and in giving a sense of the personal values, motivations, and interaction of practitioners. She underscores a certain research tendency towards conflating alternative food systems spatial or structural characteristics with specific desirable outcomes, actor behaviors or food properties. In the opinion of the author, such conflations often lead scholars to a *priori* evaluations of the potential of alternative food provision re-arrangements, thus hiding a more complex reality that is shaped by interrelated socio-political processes, for the understanding of which a plurality of perspectives and a stronger empirical basis are needed.

2.2 Alternative vs conventional

The complexity of AFNs' reality also finds an explication in the fact that they do not exist in a separate sphere from the conventional food systems, rather they are deeply embedded in it and depend on the capitalistic market for their social and material reproduction (Goodman *et al.*, 2012). They are not to be seen, as

Goodman and his colleagues assert (*ibid.*), as 'oppositional' in the sense that they seek to overthrow the hegemonic capitalist system. Rather, they interact and co-evolve with the conventional food system and attempt to change it from within, challenging its productivity-driven socio-spatial arrangements by creating alternative economic spaces within which to develop different operational logics and value systems. A varying yet significant level of 'hybridity' is then detectable (Mount, 2012), as hybrid are the strategies and routines of the actors involved (an example being consumers' diffused habit to purchase both from the conventional and the alternative food system, or producers contemporarily selling through more than one channel, e.g supermarkets and farmers' markets) as well as the spaces where the exchange is realized (e.g. the supermarkets where organic food is increasingly sold).

As all economic geographies, AFNs are constrained by the requirements of materially effective circuits of consumption, exchange and production (Leyshon *et al.*, 2003) and thus engage in a peculiar relationship with the consolidated food system, one that is concurrently competitive and symbiotic. In building a moral and sustainable economy they compete with the dominant market structures, appropriating flows that otherwise would be channeled through corporate circuits of value creation. At the same time, for their exchange and reproduction needs they leverage on conventional market structures (Goodman *et al.*, 2012). Because of this peculiar nature, alternative food critical discourses and practices are exposed to the co-option by mainstreaming forces (Marsden and Franklin, 2013) that occurs when conventional operators adopt (at least partly) AFNs movements' counter-cultural values (the most evident of which to date is the mainstreaming of organic agriculture, which now fills the shelves of almost every supermarket). Analyzing the permanent tension between markets and social movements in the case of value-laden transaction, Wilkinson (2009) argues that processes of 'endogenization' are likely when collective action is directed more toward the market than the state. The author sees in this tension a continuous procedure of 'dialectics without synthesis', whereby market endogenization is not an endpoint, because it gives social movements the possibility to rearticulate their demands, and new forms of collective action may emerge to further take on progressive change (*ibid.*). However, whether such appropriation dynamics of alternative food discourse by more powerful actors of the chain can contribute to broaden social access to quality food and foster a more ethical, equitable and sustainable future is still a debated issue (Goodman *et al.*, 2012).

To maintain legitimacy, then, Mount (2012) suggests that local and alternative food systems will have to preserve an alternative identity within a context of hybridity. This poses a series of questions about their potential to scale up and out and deepen their impact on the wider food system. As the global financial and resources crises unfold, Marsden and Franklin foresee (2013), it is likely that more voids and spaces will begin to open up for new post-neoliberal institutional platforms to take hold, which can favor the convergence of alternative food movements and empower them to become "major social and political vehicles for embedding and creating the means of transitions to the post-neoliberal eco-economy " (*ibid.*, p. 640). To grow in size or in number, however, local and alternative food networks must develop the ability to undermine the inertial forces of the conventional food system and reconfigure routines, integrating new

complexes of production-consumption into the practices of daily life (Goodman *et al.*, 2012). AFNs' socio-ecological projects have to become assemblages of production-consumption practices, knowledge, routines and imaginaries, able to reconfigure the 'orderings' engendered by conventional agri-food (*ibid.*), while at the same time avoid the risks 'dis-embedding' and 'de-localization' scaling-up processes imply, which may cause the loss of the distinctive local connection and 'regard' for the producers.

This calls for a 'reflexive' approach to governance, based on a continuous negotiation among a diversity of interests, interpretations and priorities, in which the focus is not on the shared goals and values, but on the process through which goals and values come to be shaped (Mount, 2012). In order to operate a truly food system reform, in addition, a new food governance will have to overcome a host of regulatory constraints, whose nature reveals the productivist orientation that guided their development. Most regulations, indeed, are designed to favor big operators and in many places produced the disappearance of local food infrastructures and facilities in the name of scale efficiencies and concentration (an example being the closure of most small and medium-sized town slaughterhouses in many parts of the EU), thus posing logistical barriers for small-scale producers' operations (*ibid.*). Mount and Andrée (2013) delineate four major areas of constraint of current food regulation in Northern countries that have to be addressed to foster convergence and scale improvements in alternative food systems. They refer to: rigidities on the application of health and safety legislation; inflexible definitions of land-use classes; food blindness in existing zoning to food market developments; and temporary and ephemeral funding for food initiatives and infrastructure.

In conclusion, given this regulatory and hybrid operational context, in order to scale-up, alternative food systems will need an open-governance structure, one able to provide reflexivity, (re)negotiations of boundaries, flexibility, adaptation and responsiveness; directed towards creating and maintaining value, legitimacy and identity, carrying out open discussions between producers and consumers, and exposing the reasons for food system ecological reform and re-localization to a broader audience (Mount, 2012). A proper institutional setting is therefore much needed, to create further institutional and interstitial space for the clustered agglomeration and crossover innovation in the convergent development of alternative food movements. In this direction, a novel institutional arrangement is taking shape in many cities of the global North, which are equipping themselves with innovative tools to create and sustain local food systems built around the notion of environmental, social and economic viability. In many localities, indeed, the adoption of urban food policies and the institutionalization of food policy councils are framing a municipal-based response to the distortions of the global food system. These novel policy instruments, we will argue, can play a role as facilitators in the development of an alternative to the conventional food system, and contribute to the overall sustainability of food provisioning. The theme of the urban food policies will be discussed in the following section.

2.3 Urban food policy

The most recent institutional innovation regarding the governance of the food system is based in the city. It is brought by municipal governments that holistically conceive of their city or regional food system as interconnected with many other urban functions, and manifest the intention to exert power of coordination over its development. To do so, many cities are elaborating their own set of urban food strategies, pursued through the adoption of urban food policies and/or through the establishment of food policy councils. Alternative food networks seem to be naturally comprised within these promotions and regulation efforts, since their aims of inclusion and re-localization are deeply intertwined with city governments attempts to realize a better management of local foodscapes, attempts directed toward building a healthier and more just local food system.

The shifting regulatory role of cities, to which growing political power is attributed, is not a complete novelty. Many urban and economic sociologists have testified to the increasingly important role cities have assumed as political actors, as an effect of a 'neo-localist' regulatory scalar restructuring (Bagnasco, 1988; Trigilia, 1998). As Jessop (2002) asserts, local states are being reorganized as new forms of local and regional partnerships to guide and promote the development of local and regional resources, and cities have become important nodes and nexuses of political arrangements in shepherding economic regulation and coordinating interests among diverse groups of actors. City-and-regional-level governments are becoming more and more crucial in promoting new forms of public intervention, which is concretized through the formulation of urban and economic policies (Le Galès, 1998) that do not only take into account the market forces that shape the economic relations, but also reckon the geographical proximity where these relations are integrated by extra-economic factors, such as cooperation and reciprocity (Pichierri, 2002).

Food regulation is not an exception, since an increasingly relevant policy option to counteract the inequality-and insecurity-producing forces of current food system is emanating from cities, in the form of *urban food policies* (UFP). Since the 80s, cities have come to recognize the important role local governments can play in addressing food security and promote sustainable agriculture (Feenstra, 1997). Nonetheless, it is now that, more than ever, urban consumers are seeking new allies, after the exposure to the effects of the food crisis has caused the previously incumbent 'consumers-government-industrial food alliance' to break (Goodman *et al.*, 2012). As a result, local food strategies are brought to the fore and increasingly implemented by local institutions.

Morgan and Sonnino (2010) put forward that cities are acquiring the new role of driving the ecological survival of the human species by finding ways for large concentrations of people to coevolve with nature. They are conceived as a critical development frontier characterized by particular dynamics and cross-scale linkages that need to be considered in order to understand – and ultimately address – the growing epidemic of food insecurity (Crush and Frayne, 2011). Throughout the world, pioneering city governments are beginning to see themselves as food system players on the national and international scene, creating new forms of connectivity

across urban and rural landscapes by forging new alliances between food producers and consumers, giving cities a scope for becoming important centers of change in the food system and contributing to the sustainable food paradigm (Sonnino and Spayde, 2014).

Why, then, has food become such an urgent issue in cities? For a long time, food issues have suffered from a lesser 'urban visibility', which confined their conceptualization to the realm of agricultural issues grounded in rural settings. Pothukuchi and Kaufman (1999) analyze the relevance of food as an 'urban system' and delineate four factors that are most significant in understanding the reason why the food system is less visible and has long been given "a back seat to other urban systems like housing, transportation, employment, and the environment" (*ibid.*, p. 213). What they argue is that: firstly, urban residents generally take the food system for granted and few perceive problems related to food access, availability or affordability; secondly, food is not considered as an urban issue in the same magnitude as housing, crime or transportation because the historical development of cities led to the definition of specific issues as predominantly urban, in opposition to or contrast with rural and agricultural matters; thirdly, food has always been 'there', in the sense that the industrial and technological advances in food processing, refrigeration and transportation made the loss of agricultural land that historically served the city to go unnoticed; fourthly, a persistent institutional separation sustained the dichotomization of public policies into urban and rural.

Nevertheless, despite its relegation to the lower end of the urban agenda, the authors argue that "food is very much an urban issue, affecting the local economy, the environment, public health and quality of neighborhoods" (*ibid.*, p. 217). Following their lines of argumentation, I will highlight the elements that do make food a critical urban feature.

We'll start with the economic acknowledgement that food sector operators (restaurants, fast food outlets, supermarkets, specialty food stores, bars, taverns and food wholesaling) are an important part of any city's economy and provide employment for many city residents. On the consumption end, expenditure on food has always represented (and still does) a significant part of household purchases (and income).

From an environmental standpoint, the preservation of agricultural land is increasingly becoming a high-priority regional issue with cities being asked to adopt measures to reduce sprawl. In addition, the food waste resulting from current production and consumption patterns is not only one of the most alarming features of the food system, but also a significant proportion of the overall household, commercial and institutional urban waste that ends up in many city landfills. Furthermore, in several places agricultural and urban pollution are linked, due to chemical fertilizers and pesticides used on farms finding their way into local water systems, compromising the provision of healthy water to urban residents.

Further social and health reasons include the spread of food-related health diseases, which is primarily considered an urban problem, because it is in cities where unhealthy diet patterns are most likely to be found. Food issues also have an im-

pact on urban transportation, whose volume is significantly affected by individual and household trips to supermarkets and other food outlets. In addition, this calls city transit systems to be designed to allow people to access fresh healthy food on a regular basis (especially for the disadvantaged strata of the population living in urban 'food deserts'[20]). Even housing is linked to food security by the fact that housing payments receive priority over food purchases; food is more easily obtained from other sources than shelter. Thus, when affordable housing is lacking, poorer city residents may be at greater risk of hunger, due to the graver short-term consequences of rent default over food intake reduction. Lastly, as it is analyzed above, it is in cities (rather than in rural areas) where socio-economic deprivation may more easily translate into severe difficulties in accessing food, demonstrated by the sizable (and growing) number of low income urban residents dependent on emergency sources of food available in soup kitchens and food banks[21].

This 'urbanization' of food is also explicable from a larger perspective, a political economy approach which is adopted by Morgan *et al.* (2006) to state that, traditionally, agri-food policy has been defined by a more or less formal partnership between national governments and international bodies (WTO, NGOs, etc.), and a narrow and self-referential agri-business sector (the previously cited 'consumers-government-industrial food alliance' that Goodman *et al.* (2012) consider to be wrecked). This global approach has placed too much emphasis on food production and neglected the other fundamental dimension of the accessibility of healthy and nutritious food, that together shape food security. From the urban perspective, the negative consequences of what the authors define as a 'narrow' approach, are especially evident. From the consumption side, urban residents (especially low income residents) are more likely to suffer from food deprivation or nutritional insufficiency, with respect to their rural counterparts, since the former depend almost exclusively on the market for their food provisioning, while the latter are, at least to some extent, closer to and more involved in the food production process. From the production side, this body of food policies has thus far sorted the effect of squeezing out urban and peri-urban food producers and enabled the fast food industry to colonize the urban environment (K. Morgan, 2009), while posing an ever growing challenge to small- and mid-sized regional producers in the face of an increasingly globalized food system.

To address these issues, a new focus is increasingly needed, one that the FAO (2011) recognizes as a new paradigm of ecosystem-based, territorial food system planning, whose aim is not to replace the global food supply chain but to improve the local management of food systems which are both global and local. Although a number of urban organizations involved in the city's food system have long ex-

[20]Food deserts are defined as urban neighborhoods and rural towns without ready access to fresh, healthy, and affordable food. Instead of supermarkets and grocery stores, these communities may have no food access or are served only by fast food restaurants and convenience stores that offer few healthy, affordable food options. The lack of access contributes to a poor diet and can lead to higher levels of obesity and other diet-related diseases, such as diabetes and heart disease (United States Departure of Agriculture website, visited October 2015).

[21]The number of food banks in the United States has strongly increased over the last years, leading Marsden and Morley (2014a) to observe that their rise has 'institutionalized' food poverty in the country.

isted, for many years urban food governance has been addressed with a piecemeal approach, with organization often pursuing separate paths and the various public institutional branches following different short-term or short-sighted projects (Pothukuchi and Kaufman, 1999). The need for a policy coordination effort regarding food has been expressed even at the governmental level. For instance, as reported by Tim Lang and his colleagues (2005), the UK House of Commons' Health Committee's report on obesity, published in 2004, concluded that national food and health policy lacked coherence, integration and effectiveness, and UK consumer bodies began to lobby for the establishment of a food policy council at the national level.

2.3.1 *Food policy councils and urban food strategies*

As a counterweight to the piecemeal approach reported on in the previous section, we are recently witnessing the rise of a new urban food policy and planning approach that aims to address the new food security challenges in a more structural, systemic and place-based way, implementing two novel instruments: the 'food policy councils' and the 'urban food strategies'. In the following part of the text we will briefly outline the features food policy scholarship attributes to these interesting policy tools.

Aiming at facilitating the creation of a comprehensive food system policy framework improving public health and the general quality of life (Muller *et al.*, 2009), *food policy councils*(FPCs) are, in the words of Sonnino and Spayde (2014, p. 189), "organization[s] of people who are endowed with a mandate and, at least ideally, the power and the authority to effect food system change through the design of policies that integrate food with other policy areas – including health, the environment, transport and anti-poverty". Their efforts are directed towards setting policy level coherence and a communication ground between various governmental functions to catalyze policy formation. Interestingly, policy implementation appears to be excluded, since it remains within the pre-existing political administrative framework. For scholars, one of the most innovative features of FPCs is their heavy reliance on the involvement of civil society (environmental organizations, food movements, NGOs, consumer organizations, retailers, cooks, shopkeepers and many other food system stakeholders); they interestingly represent, at least partly, a bottom-up response to the failure of national and global policies (*ibid.*).

Analyzing the emerging literature on the topic, Sonnino and Spayde (*ibid.*) detect four basic functions of FPCs. The first is to give advice and provide background scenarios, identification of problems, evaluation of solutions, definition of potential policies fit for the specific city context, and monitoring of progress and implementation. The second deals with encouraging change in the food system; mobilizing relevant organizations, and providing policies, standards and funding opportunities. As a third aspect, FPCs should engage with stakeholders to promote networking between different stakeholders, policy makers and organizations, involving large business; advocating and building consensus on food issues among the stakeholders involved, and eventually mediating when necessary. Lastly, they are seen as having the capacity to educate the public about the issues and the possible solutions, providing policy learning and promoting youth education, aimed at the creation of the necessary cultural context for ensuring lasting policy changes. In addition,

drawing on Le Galés (1998), we might argue that FPCs could carry out the crucial task of providing institutional legitimation of discourses and practices around food, which could influence or even expedite the policymaking process at a national scale.

Being complementary to FPCs, *urban food strategies* (UFSs) refer to documents (such as food charters and plans) containing a vision statement along with action plans, indicators or strategies, allowing cities to monitor changes and progress in the transition towards a more sustainable urban/regional food system, usually establishing a concrete willingness to help regional farmers leverage on food to improve public health and create new and more sustainable connections between urban, peri-urban and rural environments (Sonnino, 2009b; Marsden and Sonnino, 2012). Their aim is to create synergies and coherence (Brunori and Rossi, 2000) among a variety of activities and roles both within the city and between the city and its surrounding rural hinterland.

Many cities in the global North have already adopted their own urban food policies. Existing examples of urban food policies suggest that re-localizaton is generally pursued as a crucial strategy in the achievement of city food objectives (Sonnino and Spayde, 2014). In an era of increasing food insecurity, city food management aims, first and foremost, to re-establish more sustainable relations with the surrounding countryside, from an environmental, social and economic point of view. Research on urban food policy is still in its infancy, since in many cities these governance innovations have only recently been introduced, and it appears to be early to judge their effectiveness in developing a sustainable food system (Schiff, 2008). Nevertheless, an emerging body of empirical work suggests the existence of a set of common principles and features that shape the nature of these new policy instruments. The already cited push to re-localization, in fact, is matched by a specific attention to farming methods, fair labor practices, environmental indicators and animal welfare, in the pursuit of three main (and shared) objectives: *justice* and rights over food (Lang *et al.*, 2005; Friedmann, 2007; Wiskerke, 2009), *control* of the food chain (Welsh and MacRae, 1998; Caraher and Coveney, 2004), and *environmental conservation* (Lang *et al.*, 2005; Wiskerke, 2009; K. Morgan and Sonnino, 2010). Many urban food policies have a strong focus on justice and rights, including mention of the right to access to food and the principles of food citizenship, food insecurity and social justice. Many strategies attached to this new urban food governance aim at taking control of the food chain back from global corporations, addressing the local de-skilling, isolation, and loss of market opportunities for the local provisioning sector caused by the global food system. Lastly, UFPs often prioritize local agriculture as a way to promote environmental conservation, usually protecting agricultural land for environmental and cultural heritage reasons. They also address issues of food waste and loss. Against this common background, however, cities appear to be proposing different central narratives in their food strategies: some mainly target their urban/regional food economy (New York, Bristol), while others focus primarily on the health needs of their residents (Toronto, Los Angeles, Malmoe). There is also the case of a more equilibrated narrative, supporting both aspects (as in the example of London) (Sonnino and Spayde, 2014).

The momentum this new policy trend is gaining is demonstrated by the lat-

est development on the urban food policy scenario, which has been the creation of the Milan Urban Food Policy Pact. On October 15th 2015, it was signed by 113 city government representatives from the North and the South of the globe, thus allowing analysts to forecast that food policy efforts might soon diffuse in many places of the world. The document contains a statement in which the cities commit to realize an urban food policy framework, whose aims and focuses are summarized as follows:

> By signing the pact, cities commit to: develop sustainable food systems and contrast incumbent climate change; coordinate departments and public agencies to favor the development of food policies; promote coherence between municipal policies and other governmental levels; involve all food system sectors; reform existing policies; set up an urban food system through the adoption of an 'Action Plan' (a sort of urban food strategies); share the process with and involve other cities. The areas upon which the document invites cities to focus their strategies include the governance of existing or new food initiatives, the promotion of sustainable diets and social and economic justice, the development of novel patterns of local and short chain food production (among which 'alternative market systems'), the re-examination and improvement of current distribution and retail, and the fight against food waste (Comune di Milano, 2015).

2.3.2 *The potential for guiding the development of alternative food networks*

If these guiding principles are a common denominator of emerging urban food institutional arrangements, then the strand that binds them with alternative food networks, and to the bottom-up response to the incumbent food crisis these represent, appears inevitably short. In the way they are conceptualized, urban food policies appear to offer the potential to facilitate the scale and scope of the development of alternative food systems. Both indeed, at least rhetorically, embrace the complexity of the food system, which involves integrating ecology and social thinking (Lang, 2005) and dismissing the individualistic, linear and mechanistic thinking that emphasizes consumer choices, and which ultimately distracts attention from the real determinants of food insecurity, such as history, class, gender, income, ethnicity, affordability and global supply patterns (Caraher and Coveney, 2004). Urban food policies and alternative food networks appear as two sides of the same coin, both products of the general recognition of the unsustainability attached to the food system, and both intended to generate mechanisms to cope with those 'failures of coordination' (Lang *et al.*, 2005) that created the space for a corporate-controlled productivist model to establish itself as the only available development paradigm for the food system.

AFNs' major weakness is found in the difficulties they face in involving greater numbers of people in the contingent process of social learning and innovation that aims to 'normalize' novel patterns of production-consumption - with their distinctive material, cultural and moral economies - into the practices and routines of daily life (Goodman *et al.*, 2012). In a sector dominated by very attentive and dynamic corporations, keen on strategically appropriating the latest alternative

conceptual resource susceptible to market exploitation, the diffusion of AFNs as organizational expressions of recursive material and symbolic interaction between production and consumption will need producers and consumer to acquire knowledge and skills, both new and revived. Food movements and initiatives will need support, in communicating their message as well as organizing their practice. The coordination potential and the declared objectives of the urban food policies which are spreading throughout the world seem to act in the same direction, thus coming to represent the most innovative instruments to facilitate the transition towards a local and sustainable food system. As commented by Marsden and Franklin (2013, p. 639), the growth of city food councils reflects the "need to tackle the scalar politics of institutional rigidity, blindness and inertia with regard to the potential convergence and scaling out of alternative food movements".

Reviewing what food policy scholars consider to be the most common functions and operational instruments cities are relying on to implement their urban food policies will illustrate the tight relationship that can exist between them and the development of alternative food initiatives.

Food policy councils and strategies play a key role as *networking* actors: they can create "new links and new relationships between different stages and actors of the food chain" (Sonnino, 2009a, p. 431), operating as networkers and facilitators across the spectrum of the food system to increase the implementation capacity of other organizations (Schiff, 2008), facilitate dialogue (Blay-Palmer, 2009), bring together stakeholders (Kim and Blanck, 2011) and create avenues for alliances and lobbying (Caraher and Coveney, 2004); especially if they are effectively resourced and include members representing different interests and expertise. Many AFN initiatives or ecological projects, which are often scattered over territory and involve small numbers of people, lack the capacity to interact with and/or agglomerate into larger territorial clusters. A stronger network of alternative projects within a city or a region can help overcome the barriers to participation for both consumers and producers. Individuals interested in consuming local or sustainable food may find easier access to a more complete range of food obtained through alternative sources, thus enjoying the possibility of reducing dependence on supermarkets for their food purchasing routines; while farmers or manufacturers willing to cater responsibly-produced food through a shorter chain may find easier access to a critical mass of customers to reach through alternative channels, thus enjoying the possibility of reducing their dependence on conventional supply operators.

Another function UFPs are expected to perform is helping organizations to gain *political capital* and credit for the food projects they are involved in. It proves crucial especially for the alternative, non-profit, disadvantaged or neighborhood food organizations that chronically suffer from lack of political empowerment. This fits within the framework depicted by Le Galès (1998), who explains the growing role of the political in local regulation not in a dominating sense but in the sense of mobilizing and organizing interests so that new regulations can be defined within the framework of a collective plan. Additionally, such a policy approach recognizes the need to enhance what different groups with similar goals are doing, rather than have them competing (Schiff, 2008). This design promises to realize the 'reflexive localism' Goodman and his colleagues (2012) advocate

for a proper governance of alternative food systems. It involves a reflexive and process-based understanding of local food politics and food justice, articulated as an open, process-oriented and inclusive vision to lead the discussion about what a just food system would look like, with the ultimate aim of discovering practices that make society 'better' without reinforcing inequalities (*ibid.*).

A certain contribution to the *social construction of food security and sustainability* issues is also deemed to be one of the effects of the implementation of UFPs. They can provide a platform where city issues and problems are made more visible. Wright Mills (1959) argues that a problem is not perceived as a 'social problem' to be addressed collectively by society if it is not presented as such. This is particularly true for food-related problems, such as diet-related diseases, food access and food choices, which are commonly perceived as individual problems or personal issues of choice and knowledge, scarcely related to the underlying cultural and economic structure. That is why the role of "raising the visibility of a broad spectrum of food system interests in government policy, planning and decision-making activities" (Schiff, 2008, p. 216) is of great importance: it helps to incorporate ideas of justice, health, and support for the struggling and marginalized small local farmers into the collective conscious of the city. It potentially boosts a double process affecting the ability of AFNs to strengthen their impacts: on the one side, by directly conferring legitimization to alternative movements and endorsing advocacy discourses over food-related concerns, it facilitates the development of new or larger alternative groups and activities; on the other side, by fostering public education over these same concerns, it contributes to promoting the public health agenda and sets the ground for a broader participation in food citizenship revindication initiatives.

From an operational standpoint, there are three types of public intervention that are increasingly levered to concretize an integrated food policy approach: infrastructural development, spatial planning, and public procurement. *Infrastructures* can be developed to satisfy the need for reconnecting local food producers with urban consumers through the creation, for instance, of alternative retail outlets like farmers' markets, neighborhood markets and CSA schemes, or regional food hubs and permanent wholesale markets. Providing such facilities can support removing the logistical and operational obstacles to the up-scaling and convergence of AFNs.

Spatial planning can also facilitate the production and distribution of local foods in urban areas and help to re-regulate other aspects of the urban foodscape (Sonnino and Spayde, 2014), through supportive land ordinances that protect the accessibility of food retail outlets and discourage food waste or unhealthy consumption habits. An example of the latter is detectable in London, where many boroughs have successfully banned fast food outlets from areas adjacent to schools (*ibid.*). Furthermore, urban land zoning can be responsible for the development of urban agriculture, a community-based food production model which is gaining ever greater vibrancy in many metropoles all over the world.

A third and last strategic option cities have at their disposal is *public procurement*. Guiding public food purchases towards local, environmentally-friendly and healthy sources realizes a direct intervention in the regional economy, contributes to public

health and, is argued, fosters collaboration between urban communities and food producers, processors and suppliers located within and around the city. Through food procurement, for instance, city institutions can favor small-scale, local and ecological food suppliers, with the dual effect of providing healthier meals to individuals (especially to those most exposed to health risk, such as school children or patients in hospitals) and to detract money from the mainstream global system, thus reinforcing the local economic fabric and strengthening the relations between regional producers and urban areas. By also attaching an educational dimension, then, these renewed procurement choices can stimulate a wider collaborative relationship, involving numerous food system stakeholders (such as local food advocates, anti-waste or healthy-eating movements, and many more) and embark on an open discussion about food production-consumption patterns and their consequences on health, society, economy, and the environment.

In conclusion, urban food policies, as they are currently being conceptualized and implemented all over the world, emphasize a new, multifunctional vision of food, stressing the need to enhance networking within and between food systems and to give visibility to food-related socio-economic issues and problems. Given these characteristics, they can provide a context for alternative food networks to increase their relevance as stakeholders in advancing food system reformation.

Nevertheless, my empirical study confirms that it is still too early to express judgments about both AFNs and UFPs' concrete ability to make a dent in current food system, and further research is needed to monitor and evaluate future developments in the field. The next chapter will introduce my empirical research, detailing cognitive objectives and investigation methods.

Chapter 3

Research questions and methods

In the last two decades, a great effort in research has brought about robust literature on the phenomena of re-localization and on alternative food networks. Many analysts have focused on the subject of the transition of consumption models towards the re-discovery of local production and the potential forms of agency and political significance of critical-ethical consumption. Others have concentrated on the values, ideologies and relations underlying the building and working of networks and alternative economies (for example the phenomenon of GAS in Italy). However, the productive component of these networks remains relatively unexplored, i. e. the productive-entrepreneurial archipelago which is mobilized by these networks and which finds in them (at least potentially) a new center of gravity. My study aims to occupy this field, and attempts to advance the knowledge of the social and economic world of small food producers selling their products through AFNs-related commercial circuits. Given that, this exploratory research aims to answer to the following research questions:

> What are the characteristics and representations of small-scale farmers who sell through AFNs and short chains in the two areas, in terms of: personal profile, motivations, value references, identity aspects, objectives, dimensions of economic operation, opportunities and incentives, obstacles, and horizons?
>
> How do farmers interact with AFNs and the other organizations of the alternative food economy and how do they benefit from the social innovation AFNs foster? What patterns of re-socialization and 'sustainabilization' of the local food system result from this collaboration?
>
> What are the strategic innovations that are currently being implemented by the small-scale farming sector to resist the 'food crisis' and increase chances of survival in the market?
>
> What are the assumptions and requirements for access and economic reproduction inside these alternative economic spaces?

How is ‘alternativeness’ interpreted, experienced and represented by the producers? Is it rooted in a definite system of identity references or does it embody a form of post-modern economic rationality?

To what extent and how does the city, i.e. operating close to a densely populated place, influence ‘alternativeness’ and the building and operating of innovative food economies?

Observing the phenomenon through the prism of polanyian categories of reciprocity, redistribution and exchange, what can be understood regarding the undergoing attempt to de-commodify food production-consumption activities? How can (if existing) the shifting movement of the axis of socio-economic relations in the field from the economic to the social sphere be described?

3.1 Research strategy and methods

Food studies is a recent field of multidisciplinary research, emerged in the 80s of the twentieth century thanks to publications such as Sidney Mintz’s *Sweetness and Power* (1985) and Warren Belasco’s Appetite for Change (1989). But only at the beginning of the new century did it start to be connoted more specifically through departments, peer review journals, conferences and associations (Ortolani *et al.*, 2014). Even more recent is the interest in alternative food networks, a crossroad between food studies and rural sociology which is just over ten years old (Goodman *et al.*, 2012; Vitale and Sivini, 2017). The interdisciplinarity and greenness of both the field of study and research topic impacts their lacking academic debate with respect to research strategy and tools, as noted already by Lockie and Collie (1999).

The shortcoming of publications that develop a reflexive and detailed account about the methodology of food studies – with a few exceptions like Venn *et al.* (2006) and Holloway *et al.* (2007) – and the very limited number of studies on the relations between farming and alternative food networks, i.e. the productive components of AFNs and the dynamics of their membership in the alternative food economy, have determined the design of my research and my fieldwork, forcing me to take an exploratory and cautious attitude in approaching them. This meant organizing my research work into two main phases: the first was a six months preparatory phase in Milan, where I became familiar with the world of alternative food networks; the second phase was the proper fieldwork, a 15 months research experience between the Milan province (9 months) and the north-west of England, namely the areas around and between the urban centers of Lancaster and Manchester (6 months), where I interviewed 39 small-scale farmers across the two countries. The decision to employ qualitative methods to study farmers’ experiences and attitudes is in line with other researches (Vesala and Peura, 2003; Hingley, 2005; Pinna, 2017; Vitale and Sivini, 2017) in food studies that highlighted how these tools are the most suitable to investigate sub-researched themes such as mine and study in depth farmers’ practices, attitudes and interpretations.

3.1.1 *'Ploughing' the field*

The first six months of my research can be framed as a preparatory phase, the fundamental starting point for carrying out the empirical work that will inform the following chapters of analysis. The groundwork took place in Milan where I accrued familiarity with the local food system, alternative food networks in general and the Milanese scenario in particular. I slowly entered this world to understand how it works, the actors involved, the *ethos* of consumers and their practices, the places where stakeholders meet and/or where food is exchanged, the degree of accessibility of local food, its price *versus* that of conventional food, and so on. In addition, I attempted to trace the historical development of AFNs and other food-related initiatives in the city, especially in the light of the opportunities furnished by the most recent online networking technologies. Collecting such information and developing 'landscape-level' knowledge about the local food system and the alternative food economy helped me during the interviews with farmers and the analysis. I have conducted this initial phase of groundwork through different strategies:

A desk analysis of relevant literature, documental and promotional material of farmers, AFNs and other food-related organizations, printed and online.

Non-participant observation of the places and practices of the alternative food economy and of the local food scene: farmers' markets, AFNs meetings and events, collection days of purchasing groups, and other food-related fairs and events. I subscribed to the newsletter of every organization or AFN I met, in order to keep track of their internal communication. I visited 10 farmers' markets in the city, in order to get a sense of the types of producers and products available, the prices, the types of customers and their interaction with producers. I attended all the internal meetings and events that were held or organized during those months by the *DESR Parco Sud* (District of Solidarity Rural Economy of the South Agricultural Park of Milan), of two GAS groups and of *BuonMercato* (a *super-GAS* purchasing local food for many GAS groups and organizing various food-related events), in order to gain first-hand knowledge of their agenda and their decisional processes. I was present at several collection days of the same organizations, with the purpose of assisting the interaction between producers, AFN managers and customers. I subscribed to an 'online purchasing group' and shopped through it in order to live the same experience as an ordinary consumer. Lastly, I attended large food advocacy events and local food exhibitions, such as Slow Food's events, and fairs.

Non-participant observation of the places and practices of the non-alternative food economy and large retail food economy such as supermarkets, traditional shops and delis, general wholesale markets. It was helpful to understand what's on offer, the degree and modality of penetration of the 'alternative' and local food in the mass distribution economy, and the rhetoric employed by conventional food players to

promote it.

Numerous informal face-to-face conversations during the observation with various stakeholders and expert of the alternative food economy such as AFNs managers, advocates, organizations members, AFNs shoppers, farmers' market shoppers, and food academics. Some of these insights were useful to direct later choices about research design and interviewee's selection, whereas others served to aid understanding of the *milieu* of the local-alternative food system and the intellectual atmosphere of its environment.

3.1.2 *Empirical research*

After six months of groundwork I evaluated my knowledge of AFNs sufficient to begin the empirical work of data collection. To answer the research questions presented at the beginning of the chapter, I decided to select two case studies in different nations in order to identify congruencies and differences between different economic systems. Furthermore, this choice allowed me to interpret the phenomena under study within a Europe-wide scope. I have adopted a comparative viewpoint by selecting Italy and England, because in both there exists an interesting transformation process of agriculture as well as an attempt to establish a renewed city-country dialogue, yet they are exponents of two different socio-economic models in Europe, especially with respect to food, for they are representative of two economic-cultural approaches to food and nutrition.

Italy is chosen as exponent of a 'Mediterranean' socio-economic model in which family ties (and the other kinds of granovetterian 'strong ties' (1977) exert a significant influence over daily practices and, as a consequence, over food choices and habits. This intertwines with a strongly embraced food culture and tradition, also playing a relevant role as an identity marker (Scarpellini, 2014). Intertwined with other geographical and historical reasons, this sparked the construction of a food economy in which international corporations coexist with a lively fabric of small-to-medium or family rural and food-related businesses. Great Britain, on the contrary, features a more individualistic relation with food, where tradition doesn't hold as much power as in Italy, thus defining a system which is at the same time more open to external influences and more evidently commodified. In this setting, the power of the market to shape socio-economic relations around food is heightened, and its structure reveals an accentuated inclination towards establishing a globalized and corporate-controlled food chain. This model is typical of northern European countries.

Milan and the cities of Manchester and Lancaster are chosen respectively as case studies for Italy and the United Kingdom. The choice of the Milan province in Lombardy and the Manchester-Lancaster axis in the north-west of England as specific fieldsites is corroborated by the presence of some structural similarities facilitating the comparison: both areas are highly populated and significantly urbanized and in both of them there is a metropolis (Milan in one, and the Manchester-Liverpool conurbation in the other) and a series of medium-and-small-sized towns in the hinterland; the two areas' main vocation (as well as the main contribution to the national economy) is industrial but at the same time

they maintain a lively agricultural fabric, therefore the potential for urban-rural re-connection is very high in both contexts.

I spent the first several months mapping the small-scale farmers of both case studies, mainly for organizing the interviewees selection process. For this task the key informants were particularly important: in Milan they were the people I had met during the non-participant observation and those with whom I had informal face-to-face conversations; while in the UK I realized a similar non-participant observation (but for a smaller amount of time) that allowed me to meet some informants. I could count also on the previous knowledge of the research group that welcomed me (Whittle, 2009; Psarikidou and Szerszynski, 2012; Martindale, 2015; Karaliotas and Bettini, 2016; Beacham, 2018). For the farmers' mapping, even the interviewees were fundamental together with the key informants, as they advised me about other possible farmers to interview, according to the principle of the snowball method (Seale and Filmer, 1998).

For both the case studies I planned to interview 20 small-scale farmers who sell at least a substantial part of their production through alternative channels. They were selected in an attempt to give voice to the various typologies of farm businesses and to collect different experiences and attitudes toward the AFN world. The sample was selected by profiling the interviewees, a process through which the profiles of interest for the subject to interview were outlined (Cardano, 2011). The main variables considered in the profiling process were gender[22] , type of production (cereals, fruit and vegetables or animal husbandry), and distance from the city. The other variables that I kept under control in the selection of the interviewees were age, their agricultural socialization (if they grew up in a peasant family or not), and sales channels (farmers' markets, GAS, home delivery, etc).

When one of the farmers was not available or it was not possible to organize the interview for practical reasons, then a substitute who had similar characteristics was contacted. These new farmers have very tight and tiring work rhythms, so it was not easy to obtain their willingness to be interviewed. It must be added that some farmers told me that they had already been approached in the past by other researchers and were not interested in repeating the experience. The Italian farmers resulted to be more helpful, and this, together with the heterogeneity of their experiences and the complexity of the Italian alternative food system, brought me to enlarge the sample by adding five more interviews for this case study. On the contrary, it was less easy to engage with English farmers, since the interviews were carried out during agricultural peak season (late spring to mid-summer), therefore farmers' schedules were intensely busy. Furthermore, as stated, the system of AFNs in the English field showed a lesser degree of development and a lesser complexity than in Italy, allowing me to evaluate the insights I had gathered at a certain moment of the fieldwork – given the inevitable time constraints – as sufficient to perform a thorough evaluation of the phenomena at stake. For these reasons and following the recommendation of Glaser and Strauss (1967) about the saturation of data in grounded theory, I reduced the

[22]I tried to involve the largest number of female respondents, but they are the minority of the sample because this is a sector in which the majority of operators are male (European Commission, 2017b).

English sample of 6 units. I finally made 39 interviews in total, 25 with Italian farmers and 16 with English ones as shown, respectively, in Table 3.1 and Table 3.2. For precision's sake, 39 were the farms I selected and visited, while the actual number of interviewees mounted up to 43, because in some instances more than one family member (working on the farm) took part in the interview[23]. The table specifies in which cases two members of the family took part in the interview, and gives demographic information about both[24].

Table 3.1: *Interviewees in the Italian fieldwork*

#	Inter viewee	Gender	Age	Paesant family	Type of production[25]	Sales channels[26]	Distance to Milan (km)
1	ITA1	M	66	No	Ort	S+Gas	32
2	ITA2	M	50	Yes	ZooF	Mkt+Wafn	30
3	ITA3	M	33	Yes	ZooC+Cer	S+R+Gas+Mkt+Wafn	24
4	ITA4	M	62	No	V	S+R+MKt+GAS	60
5	ITA5	M	32	Yes	Ort+Altro	S+WebD+ Wafn+Gas	40
6	ITA6	M	50	Yes	Ort+Cer	GAS+GDO+S+R	40
7	ITA7	M	50	Yes	Ort+Cer+V	Mkt+GAS+S+Gro+R	40
8	ITA8	M	36	No	ZooC+ZooF+Cer	S+Gas+Mkt+R	40
9	ITA9	M	57	No	Ort	Mkt+Box+R	100
10	ITA10	F	30	Yes	ZooF+Cer	S+Wafn+GAS+ Mkt+Gro+R	18
11	ITA11	M	36	Yes	ZooF+Cert+Ort	S+R+Gro	35
12	ITA12	M	35	No	Ort+Cer	S+GAS+Wafn+Mkt+R	25
13	ITA13	M	45	Yes	Ort	Mkt+Gro+R	100
14	ITA14	M	38	Yes	V	S+Mkt+Wafn	70
15	ITA15	M	32	Yes	ZooC+Cer	S+GAS+Wafn+ R+Mkt	25
16	ITA16	M	34	No	Ort+Altro	S+GAS+R	20
17	ITA17	F	60	Yes	ZooF	Gro+Gas+Wafn+R	30
18	ITA18	F	58	No	Ort+ZooF+ZooC	S+Mkt+GAS+R	25
19	ITA19	F	50	No	Cer	Gas+Wafn+GDO	43
20	ITA20	M	50	N.A.	Cer+ZooF+ ZooC+Ort	S+Gas+Gro+R	38
21	ITA21	M	40	No	Altro	S+GAS+R	10
22	ITA22	F	55	Yes	ZooC+Cer	S+Gas+Gro+R	11
23	ITA23	F	45	No	Ort	CSA	45
24	ITA24	M	65	Yes	ZooF+Cer	Gro+Gdo	5
25	ITA25	F	40	No	Ort+ZooC+Cer	Gro+Gdo+Mkt+ Wafn+S	20

[23]In addition, I registered an even greater number of life stories, because in some cases our interviewees were able to provide a detailed account of the trajectories of other relatives, most commonly parents or partners who had had (or still have) a role in starting/developing the farm.

[24]For in-text quotations, instead, only the person who is actually quoted will be referenced.

[25]Codes for types of production: Ort = horticulture; Cer = cereals; ZooC = Animal husbandry for meat; ZooF = Animal husbandry for dairy; V = wine; Altro = other.

[26]Codes for sales channels: S = farmshop/farmgate; R = small retailers, restaurants and other independent food businesses; Gro = wholesalers and large collectors; Gdo = mass distribution (supermarkets); WebD = online to order; WebP = online through e-commerce portals; Gas = GAS and purchasing groups; Mkt = farmers' markets; Box = box schemes.

Table 3.2: *Interviewees in the English fieldwork*

#	Inter viewee	Gender	Age	Paesant family	Type of production	Sales channels	Distance to Milan (km)
1	UK1	M	20	Yes	ZooC (eggs)	Mkt+S+R	96
2	UK2	F	40	No	ZooC	WebD+Mkt	82
3	UK3	M	60	Yes	Ort	Box	88
4	UK4	M	40	No	ZooF	R+Wafn+Mkt+WebD	37
5	UK5	F	50	No	Ort	R+Gro+GAS	67
6	UK6	F	55	No	ZooC	Mkt+Wafn+R+S	65
7	UK7	F	44	No	ZooC	R+GDO+Wafn+WebD	37
8	UK8	M & M	60 & 30	Yes	Altro	S+R+Gro+GDO+WebD	169
9	UK9	M & F	35 & 32	Yes	Ort	Box	29
10	UK10	M	59	Yes	ZooC	S+Mkt+R+WebD	112
11	UK11	M & F	65 & 65	No	Ort	R+Gro+Box	83
12	UK12	M	56	Yes	ZooC	S+R	93
13	UK13	F & F	78 & 54	No	Ort	S (pick your own)	93
14	UK14	M	27	Yes	ZooF	Gro+R	97

All the interviews were realized on the farm's premises, with the exception of three cases where it was not possible for reasons outside of the researcher's control. Therefore for 36 out of 39 interviews the setting was the interviewees' workplace or house, a context that would seem to have helped them in answering the questions according to their active involvement and references to the environment; these were preceded or followed by a tour of the farm. The farms were all small-scale businesses with smaller amounts of land with respect to the average conventional farm (relative to their type of production – clearly cereal growing or animal husbandry require more land than vegetable production), with the exception of a few larger holdings (still engaged in 'alternative' sales) that were selected precisely in order to highlight existing differences. In many cases the farm also served as the home of my interviewees and their families, and accessing their private house gave me the opportunity to better grasp the human-personal dimension of farmers' experiences.

A feature that particularly caught my attention was found in England, where a number of farmers opted to live for many years in a caravan in order to live on their farms, thus highlighting the strong (at times indissoluble) link between farming as an economic activity and farming as a lifestyle choice. In addition, almost all farmers offered me (without me asking) a detailed tour of the farm and explained to me all of their productions and their techniques, showing a great pride in carrying out their activities and a genuine satisfaction of their tight relationship with nature. To provide a visualization of the area covered by my study, Figure 3.1 and 3.2 show the location of my interviewees' farms on the maps of, respectively, western Lombardy and north-western England.

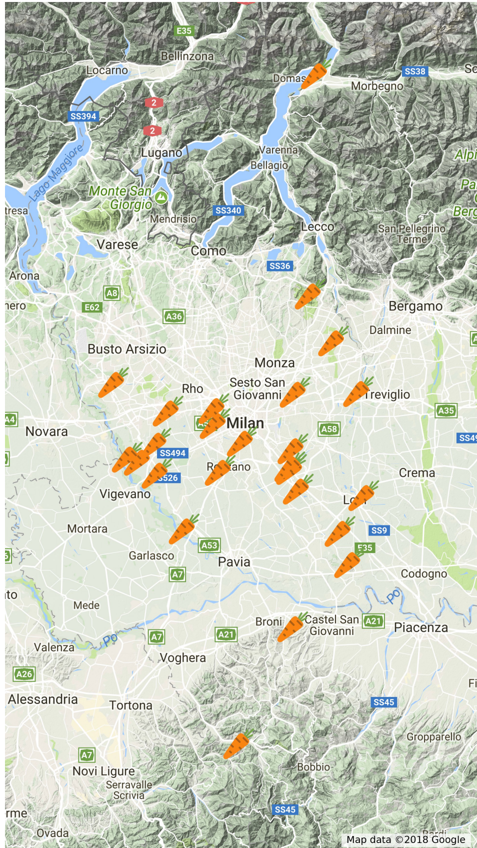

Figure 3.1: Location of interviewees' farms in the Italian fieldwork

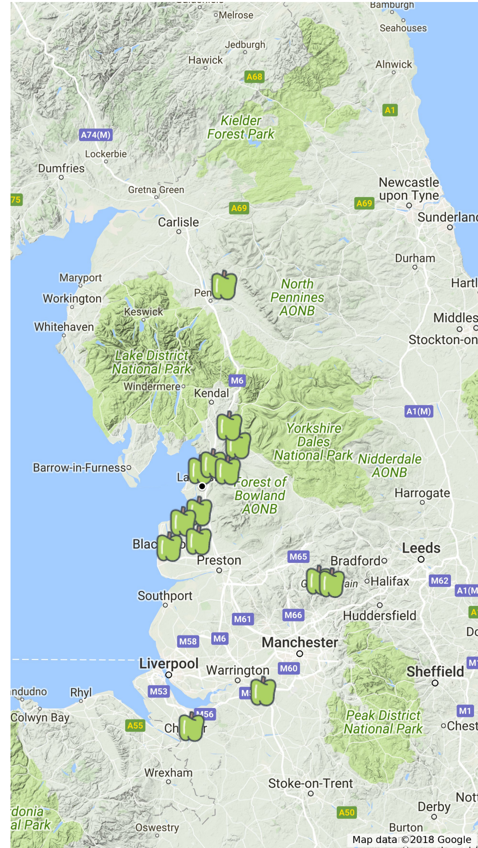

Figure 3.2: Location of interviewees' farms in the English fieldwork

The average length of the interviews was around two hours, ranging from a minimum of one hour and a half to a maximum of three hours and a half. This is a voluntary outcome, following Hingley (2005) who invites researchers to employ personal, semi-structured interviews to collect farmers' experiences, attitudes, and interpretations. The interview guideline was constructed by identifying some main themes, but no strict questions were defined to provide interviewees as much freedom in their answers as possible (Glaser and Strauss, 1967). The starting point of the interview was a request of general information, useful in order to contextualize the farmers' accounts, and general data about them and their structure: biographical data, number of employees, farm size, type of products, year of establishment. Then, taking into consideration the aim to collect farmers' accounts and perspectives of their lives and labour choices, I drew inspiration from life-history methodology (Bertaux, 1981), starting the narrative section of the interview with a biographical question that would allow farmers to share their experience in agriculture and in the alternative food economy from their point of view, using their words and highlighting the themes that were most important to them. Based on what the interviewees said, I asked deliberately broad questions to deepen some previously chosen dimensions: work and business practices; contexts, ties and networks; attitudes about the alternative and innovative ethos; opinions toward the general agricultural and food system; their presence within the alternative economy; representations of the future. Lastly, if necessary, I pointed more direct

or specific questions in order to saturate the dimension of analysis. For a detailed view of the dimensions and their sub-themes, see Annex 1.

All interviews were first taped and then transcribed to favor the coding process needed to compare and systematize the collected material (Pinna, 2017). During this process a coding scheme (see Annex 2) was developed to help the standardization of interviews, this scheme was not defined a priori thanks to a theory-driven approach, but it has developed through the codification according to a data-driven approach closer to grounded theory (Glaser and Strauss, 1967).

Chapter 4

Farming life and producers' trajectories

There are three elements that almost all the farmers I interviewed share: their farms operate on a *smaller scale* than the average of their region; their farms underwent (or are still undergoing) a *crisis* threatening their economic sustainability and eventually their survival; they consider farming as a *life choice* to which they commit, rather than as an economically-justifiable decision.

As a sampling strategy, I selected farmers on the basis of their participation in an AFN or, more broadly, their engagement in forms of direct selling. As highlighted by literature (Renting *et al.*, 2003; Van der Ploeg, 2008; Sage, 2011; Goodman *et al.*, 2012; Marsden and Morley, 2014b), these market tools are mainly adopted by small-to-medium-scale primary producers, whose economic size no longer allows for the existence and reproduction of their businesses (exclusively) within the conventional (long chain) system, and thus seek – mainly and among other benefits – alternative market avenues in order to retain a higher share of added value. The observation of such a size-related feature, then, was expected and confirmed by my empirical work.

Also theoretically grounded (Moss, 1992; Cochrane, 1993; Heffernan *et al.*, 1999; Bové and Dufour, 2005; Mazoyer and Roudart, 2006; McMichael, 2009a) was the expectancy to witness stories of economic hardships caused by the constraints imposed by the conventional food system, as well as the use of AFNs by producers as part of their strategy to cope with the decline of the profitability of their farms. Nevertheless, it was impressive to find out that the vast majority of the farmers interviewed in the two countries reported having suffered (or still suffering) a serious crisis that called for a (sometimes thorough) restructuring of the business model as the only possibility for survival (with only few exceptions being represented by a) farms with a larger economic dimension and a stronger business model for which approaching AFNs only becomes an additional/incremental business diversification opportunity, or b) newly-established farm businesses which are architected for selling directly to the customers from the very beginning, and thus are completely detached from the conventional system). The nature of these crises is also similar. It refers, as I have illustrated in the previous sections and how I will analyze in detail later, to the adverse market conditions 'commodity' farmers have found themselves in due to corporatization and internationalization

of the food economy, and the subsequent concentration of market power in the non-agricultural steps of the chain.

This chapter aims to explore the personal and professional trajectories of my interviewees and how they intertwine with their own perception of the farming world. As mentioned earlier, the decision to become a farmer is portrayed by my interviewees primarily as a life choice, motivated by extra-economic stimuli. Their representation is not one of a strictly professional career, but one of a totalizing life arrangement to which they (and their families, as a consequence) adhere thoroughly, even if well aware of the limitations (both in terms of lifestyle and achievable economic wealth) it entails. Therefore, to better understand how they frame the crises of their farms and the ways they reacted to them, I'll give priority to analyzing their conception of the farming life and the ways they got into being professional farmers. The following sub-sections, thus, will try to depict my interviewees' self-representation of their life as farmers, balancing between hardships and elements of personal satisfaction, for then delineating the different paths they have followed to become agricultural producers together with the main motivations corroborating their choices, and providing a typology of trajectories that can be inferred from the data I gathered.

4.1 Farming as a life choice, between hardships and satisfaction

The depiction of farming life presented by farmers themselves provides an image of a life in which almost unbearable hardships and fatigue are coupled with a high degree of personal satisfaction. Farming is exhausting: it's made of lengthy working days involving a lot of physical labour, and bears no promise of wealth accumulation, as is colorfully summarized by ITA9, an event management entrepreneur who, at the age of 50, left Milan and his job behind to become a horticultural farmer in the countryside north of the city:

> "I knew when I decided to do this thing that I wouldn't become rich, that I would bust my ass. But I can sustain myself, yes absolutely. I also have some savings but it's important to me to try and live on what I can make [farming]. But if I think how much I work my ass off now, with respect to what I was doing before when I was earning ten times as much... I mean, if I had put before the same effort and the same time and the same labour I do now, I probably would have been a millionaire by now". (ITA9, 57, male)

Farmers seem to be well aware of these constraints, and take them into account when reflecting upon their decision to take (or carry) on farming. They state the need to possess certain specific personal characteristics and life views in order to be able to do such job, for the specific commitment it requires and for that it entails an almost inevitable overlapping of professional and personal life. As ITA24, a dairy farmer who's been working on his family's farm his whole life, puts it:

> "The agricultural activity, with respect to others, has the characteristic that you are basically immersed in a reality in which family life and working life almost coincide". (ITA24, 65, male)

Many producers also discourage others to follow their paths, even their own children. They often employ the concept of 'struggle' to define their existence as farmers (like ITA1 (66, male), who says that "to make a living out of this activity you need to extend the same effort you do in producing, you've got to fight"), and are aware of the lack of appeal such choice has for the majority of the population. As UK13, a 78-year-old woman who, after retiring from an academic job, joined her husband's fruit farm to help him cope with its decline, comments on the decision to become a professional farmer:

> "If you are intelligent enough to be able to get a job which is 9 to 5, and you have your weekends off and your evenings off, unless you are totally dedicated to working outside in this sort of life, you don't do it". (UK13, 78, female)

The reason lies mainly in the imbalance between the requirements of physical labour plus the high degree of commitment, and the expectations of economic return. Commitment stems from the fact that working paces don't follow societal conventions, but the needs of nature, resulting in very early or very late workdays, the almost constant need to be present on the land (especially in the case of animal husbandry), and the marked seasonality of activities, which makes it difficult to go on holiday or even take a break (the summer, which is when the rest of society finds it easier to take a break or rest from work, is the busiest period for farmers). In addition, the low economic returns threaten the economic sustainability of the farm units, and thus prevent farmers from investing generated resources into their businesses, which therefore end up being characterized by low levels of mechanization and systematic understaffing. This translates into a loop in which farmers are obliged to increase the intensity of their personal physical work in order to keep up with their activity and secure the farm's survival, to an extent which has been interpreted as aform of *self-exploitation* (Hinrichs, 2000; Jarosz, 2008; Galt, 2013). We shall not consider this concept in its original sense of "excruciating labor by underfed peasant families damaging their physical and mental selves for a return which is below that of the ordinary wages of labor power" (Shanin, 1986, p. 6, paraphrasing Chayanov), but rather along the line of the drier definition provided by Guthman (2014, p. 83) of "not earning revenues equal to the cost of their own labor".

Self-exploitation-related accounts are often brought up by the farmers I encountered, and their effect on life are seemingly accepted, as the example of UK11 – a couple coming from agricultural-unrelated walks of life who set up a hardly profitable market garden which is nevertheless up and running since 1984 – can testify:

> "I supposed we were inspired in the 70s by the movement of self-sufficiency. Obviously we were never going to be self-sufficient because we didn't have animals, but then the idea of that changed to having a proper business rather than just being hippies. [. . .] We lived for little because we lived in a caravan, we didn't have a rent to pay, we [later] built the house fairly cheaply so. . . otherwise I don't see how we would have been able to do it. [. . .] We probably wouldn't be seen as hugely economically viable, but we're prepared to live for less than a lot of people". (UK11, 65, male)

In this instance, in line with what Galt (2013) asserts, resistance includes the ability to self-exploit, also in the form of 'underconsumption', i.e. "foregoing the basic needs of individuals in the family to compete" (*ibid.*, p.10). In many cases, though, the most severe forms of self-exploitation, like those involving underconsumption, are avoided by relying on other sources of (off-farm) income. These can be savings from a previous job farming families tap into while trying to build for a better future, or incomes/pensions of other family members who are/were employed elsewhere. The following quotation synthetizes this attitude, which combines acceptance of a condition of self-exploitation mitigated by off-farm economic resources, with an attitude of positivity and commitment. It comes from UK7, a lesbian couple in their forties who decided to quit their urban jobs in the city of London to move to rural Yorkshire to raise pigs:

> "Me? I'm not making a living just yet. No, no. We're still subsidizing it from other ways and means of our savings, and things like that. We don't go on holidays, we don't spend on ourselves, because we believe it's a good way to farm, it's the right way to farm. And we believe that there's gonna be a time when it's actually gonna be appreciated". (UK7, 44, female).

In addition, as I found during my fieldwork, approaching the AFNs and the direct chains has the effect of further increasing farmers' workload, thus complicating their already over-scheduled daily routine. As I will illustrate later in the text, this is due to a multiplication of the tasks and processes that are required to cater directly to the customer, especially from a logistical point of view. Given the aforementioned scarcity of labour resources within small-scale farms, the farm owner is subsequently called to take on him/herself a wide array of roles – from the accountant, to the lorry driver, to the social media manager, and so on – thus making the conduction of the farm even more challenging and demanding.

Lastly, another element adding a further layer of difficulty to farming life is revealed in the complexity of conjugating it with social and familiar life. Tight schedules, long workdays, tiredness and (sometimes) geographical isolation prevent off-farm social relations from being easily enjoyed, or at least not lived as wholeheartedly as desired, especially for individuals over the age of forty. At the same time, the farming family is also highly conditioned by the profession of one of its members, even if the others are not employed on the farm. This is admittedly reported by ITA2, a 50 years old man who in 1996 shifted from an agricultural consultancy job to actual farming after discovering his passion for goat rearing and cheese-making, who is married with children but recognizes a deficit of familiar life, and goes on to add:

> "The highest duty I had to pay for the realization of this [passion of mine] has been the almost complete cancellation of my social life. [...] I work too many hours and there is never a break. I often don't take lunch. I live a thief's life". (ITA2, 50, male)

ITA9, instead, is divorced and moved to the countryside to farm. He reflects upon the difficulty of finding a partner:

> "I don't have a partner because fundamentally you would have to find a person that would want to share this type of life. If you get into a

> relationship with an office clerk, after a month she tells you to go to hell. No Saturdays or Sundays exist, you wake up at dawn, you come back home and you're dead. Some nights I don't even eat anything because I'm too tired". (ITA9, 57, male)

Despite all these difficulties, the farmers I have met report being happy about their choice of running a farm business, which, as said, they portray more as being motivated by a desire of living a certain type of life rather than being strictly (or even significantly) driven by economic rationality. Farming affects life in a multifaceted and almost totalizing way, it entails the adoption of a specific lifestyle, and in most cases it is supported by a strong passion for nature, the countryside, the soil and the production of food. But especially, in spite of all the shortcomings listed above, farming is reportedly able to provide *satisfaction*. After having presented his complaints, ITA9 proceeds to tell us his overall judgment:

> "I'm 57, I've been working this job professionally for 7 years, and I regret not having started earlier. But this is life, it's the way it is, and I hope I can do it for 20 years more. It's a very tiresome job but it's very fulfilling, from a professional point of view, for what it gives to you, the life, the contact you have, [sometimes] I'm not even aware I'm working". (ITA9, 57, male)

In the same vein, one of the two UK7 farmers-partners affirms she's being enjoying her farming life, even though she often asks herself the question 'why am I farming?', and reflecting upon her previous urban life in London. She replies to herself:

> "This is a life lesson. This is a different way of doing things. I think if we'd stayed in London... I don't know if we'd get bored, but we'd get into a routine, you become just the same as everybody else then. You know, we wake up in a house in London and we have the same view on somebody else's house. You go places to try and get away from your head that you live in London, so you spend all your money you make in London trying to escape London". (UK7, 44, female)

In my interviewees' words, then, the tension between the asperity of a hard-working existence bearing no sufficient economic results and the desire to conduct a different life finds an apparent solution in the concept of satisfaction, which they frequently mention as the main motivation behind their choices. The source of such positive feeling is varied, but it first and foremost relates to a sense of *freedom* farmers perceive in their life. Albeit requiring a constant care and allowing for no distraction, working the fields or raising animals provide farmers an opportunity for self-organization and hence a sensation of not being dependent on anyone else (for a similar empirical finding, see Vitale and Sivini, 2017). ITA12, a 35 year-old who started farming a small family-owned patch after acknowledging the unsuitability of a career as an architect, feels this sensation especially under certain climatic circumstances:

> "The aspect of my job I like most is being free. Free to organize the way I want. When I go to the fields in the autumn days, when the sun shines but it's not hot, I feel a sensation of beauty, which I can't even explain". (ITA12, 35, male)

On a less poetic but more pragmatic note, many other interviewees frame freedom as the possibility of managing your own shifts according to your needs and desires, without having to give account to a boss or any other person. This is what both UK11 and UK13 express when asked if they regret their farming choice. They both quit an agricultural-unrelated job to, respectively, set up a market garden with his wife and join her father's fruit farm, and reportedly consider freedom an element that counter-balances farming life's downfalls and eventually provides satisfaction:

> "Sometimes [you regret it], when it's pouring down... [*chuckles*] but in general no, you don't. There's a certain amount of freedom you're allowed [...], if you want to do anything you've got your own time, you can go and have an afternoon off whenever you want. You can please yourself kind of things. You don't want to do that job today, you don't have to do it". (UK11, 65, male)

> "Parts of me regret it. Sometimes I wish I had a nice job with a paycheck at the end of the month, but you have a lot of freedom as well. If I need to do something on a particular day I can say 'yes I'm fine'. But yeah, I love being out here when it's nice" (UK13, 54, female)

Another layer contributing to the realization of a satisfactory experience is concretized in the act of *creation*, i.e. the manipulation of nature to craft a product from scratch, which is then offered to the public for consumption. Mastering the process of craftsmanship is often lived with pride by farmers, and delivers a sense of fulfillment. This is summarized by UK4, a former IT worker who joined the ranks of his wife's family's (declining) dairy farm to start processing milk into cheese. With respect to his previous life he says:

> "It's different, it's a lot more different, but it's a lot more satisfying. You get a lot less money for the work you do, but we survive, and it's a lot more satisfying. Because you're actually creating something, we create a product, we see it from start to finish. In restaurants you see it on a menu and things, it's quite satisfying. Before, in IT, no one really sees what you do, because it's all inside, whereas here you can see it building". (UK4, 40, male)

What UK4 also expresses is a sense of satisfaction deriving from the *appreciation* demonstrated by the public for the product of his work, which represents an underlying theme that is detectable in many interviewees' discourses. The positive feedback of consumers, retailers or restauranteurs who enjoy the product and keep coming back to buy it is a much sought-after outcome, both for economic and for personal motivations. Economy-wise, when selling direct it is important for farmers to develop and maintain a solid base of loyal customers, whose presence assures the survival of the farm business, thus becoming an essential asset. Appreciation also has the effect of disseminating knowledge about the product and increases the reputation of the farm, word-of-mouth and interpersonal communication (especially among peers) being the main advertisement instruments in the world of small-scale producers. Added to this, though, the appreciation of products is tied to a rationale of personal satisfaction, that translates into feelings of pride

and gratification stemming from the awareness of having crafted something that is appropriated by people and used for their own well-being. This is an important element that cannot be neglected if we aim to understand farmers' attitudes and strategies. As noted by Dupré *et al.* (2017), this exchange between producers and consumers contribute to the creation of a form of 'social support' that (together with what the authors call 'decision latitude', i.e. "the possibility for workers to exert control over their work, to have room for manoeuvre, and to put into practice and develop their competences" (*ibid.*, p.398) – a concept to which the notion of freedom as proposed by the farmers in my study I deem to ontologically belong) sustains the farmer's activity and helps "to create rewarding professional identities and social recognition that strengthens professional satisfaction" (*ibid.*, p. 410).

In this vein, the satisfaction that derives from the appreciation of the products by the customers does not embody an accessory outcome, but becomes a primary goal for many farmers in my fieldwork. The wine-maker ITA4, for example, explicitly expresses the high level of satisfaction generated by the loyalty of his customers:

> "When a customer of ours comes [to the winery], that you've been serving for 20 years... for instance a couple buying from us for 25 years, maybe you don't get to see them for many years, but you know they always get the wine, and when you see them physically the pleasure you feel is extreme. Knowing that they keep drinking my wine gives me pleasure, and I'm happy to produce for them". (ITA4, 62, male)

In the case of the goat cheesemaker ITA2, instead, this source of gratification assumes the same (if not greater) importance as the monetary one:

> "You've got to follow a logic of maximum satisfaction, not one of maximum profit *tout court.* [...] Having a customer that comes and tells you that the cheese is delicious but it's a bit expensive doesn't give you the maximum satisfaction, even if you have more money in your pocket, with respect to another customer telling you that the cheese is delicious and it's not even that expensive". (ITA2, 50, male)

In some instances, this outward-oriented attitude can even take on the role of the main driver of the farmers' activity, attributing meaningfulness to a life of hardships and precarious livelihoods. ITA18, a 58 year-old woman owning and managing a multifunctional organic market garden, is an example of these types of farmers:

> "To us – who work 7 days a week, 17 hours a day – seeing people who appreciate your things, who smile at you, who thank you every time you bring them [to the market] is the motivation that keeps us alive". (ITA18, 58, female)

From a different perspective, the satisfying exchange arising from the contact between farmers and their customers can be seen as one of the ways in which the much theorized process of *re-connection* (Kneafsey *et al.*, 2008; Sage, 2011; Goodman *et al.*, 2012) brought about by AFNs operates. As I have already

analyzed, the word 're-connection' evokes an attempt to restore or revive a 'lost' or disrupted connection, namely by filling the (hugely increased) socio-cultural and spatial gap between food production and food consumption (Kneafsey *et al.*, 2008). AFNs and short chains are considered responsible for facilitating the processes of re-connection, for their operations imply forms of *re-socialization* that take food out of the individualized and de-personalized fashion in which consumers make personal choices within the wide range offered by the conventional food system players, and bring it back into the civic arena where food is given weight and consideration as a societal issue (Sage, 2011). In other words, quoting Bové and Dufour (2005, p. 49), the direct farmer-consumer exchange fosters a "connection between the act of production, which consists of giving life, and the social act of eating and appreciating the value of our daily bread". By renewing this set of (presumably) broken food-centered relationships and practices, a space for the recognition of the value of 'good' food is created, which translates not only into society-level benefits in terms of health, social justice and the environment (Kneafsey *et al.*, 2008), but also into specific attainments relieving the socio-economic condition of small-scale farmers. Through re-connection, indeed, the latter are assumed to be able to enjoy a higher degree of autonomy from market forces, and subsequently obtain increased margins and better economic conditions (La Trobe, 2001), while at the same time they are given the conditions to develop trust and social capital (Sage, 2011), new skills (Brown and Miller, 2008), and new diversification and entrepreneurship opportunities (Morris and Buller, 2003).

What is not specifically emphasized by the literature, but clearly found in my research, is that, on a more human note, the process of re-connection is a source of personal gratification:

> "In Milan, the fact that people bring you the quiche made with your courgettes to let you taste how good it is tells you a lot about the type of approach you have. I repeat, [today] everything is very de-personalized and this way of approaching pays you back, even from a human point of view. I feel pleasure for it". (ITA9, 57, male)

What ITA9 expresses is a view that is shared among many producers and refers to a feeling of personal reward deriving from the confirmation of the usefulness of their social role as farmers. As a sector, farming in recent decades has not only decreased in economic importance, but has also relatedly undergone a continuous loss of political and social relevance. In this sense, this reborn attention the public is increasingly devoting to the primary production of food – together with the alternative market channels, which are both expressions of it and at the same time instruments of its realization – can operate an uplifting of the social recognition of small-sized agriculture on a local scale. As shown by my study, this recognition is sought by those who produce food sustainably, as a form of psychological reward able to compensate for the lack of economic gratifications. In order to advance the sustainability agenda, then, this element must not be overlooked, since it refers to a group of crucially important operators of the transition towards sustainability, i.e. farmers who provide healthy and nutritious food employing methods of environmental protection. In addition, social recognition of farmers is regarded to be a stimulating factor of group identity formation, especially on a local level (De Weerd and Klandermans, 1999), which in turn appears to influence their predisposition to collective action (Klandermans *et al.*, 2002). Any attempt to

strengthen the lobbying capacity of the critical-consumers-sustainable-producers alliance for the construction of a fairer and more localized food system should then always take into account the *soft*, personal variables upon which farmers' life and working decisions are based, for they assume a critical role in shaping producers' interests and motivations.

As seen throughout this section, personal elements such as satisfaction, passion, interpersonal contact, public appreciation, and freedom are fundamental foundations of and motivations for farmers' professional lives. To navigate the world of small-scale farming, I'll make use of these references as a compass, for they will help to shed light on the strategies producers implement to adapt to a changing and often hostile environment, and will assist us in unveiling the peculiar blend of value-driven attitudes and pragmatism that guide their action. To conclude this section, though, I will quote an excerpt from the interview to UK8, a young man who after years working as a system manager for a hotel in Chester moved to Cumbria to lend a hand to his mother and stepfather in the running of their organic milling and grain-mix-producing business. His collaboration was meant to be temporary, but to date he has not left because, all in all, he feels *happy*. This helps us to introduce a new category – happiness –, which not only adds another layer of meaning but also serves to summarize the existential condition of farmers depicted by my interviewees:

> "I'm relatively happy here. So I just thought that if I move back down there [in the city] and get a job in accountancy I'd make good money and see my friends again, but I'd quite easily not be happy". (UK8, 30, male)

Ultimately, then, the activity of farmers appears to be directed by a mix of desires and ambitions, many of which are extra-economic and run parallel to the economic orientation of the farm as a business. The human engagement is so high that, for these individuals, life becomes farming and farming becomes life. And in the same way human beings tend to adopt a varied and very personal set of criteria for creating their own lifestyle and setting their own life goals, these farmers interpret their professional activity following their characters and inclinations. In this scenario, AFNs and the direct relationship with the consumers result for farmers in one (of the very few available) mean(s) to reproduce their livelihoods and their existence as small-scale food producers, for they couple a space for expression with a (variably) reliable economic infrastructure. Before delving into these concepts, though, it seems important to try to grasp the variability of trajectories as deductible from the life stories of the farmers I met. To do so, and to enlarge the perspective on the phenomenon of small-scale farming, the next section will focus on the foundation of my interviewees' lives as farmers, attempting to provide and detail a typology summarizing the various ways of 'entering' the world of professional agriculture.

4.2 The 'entrance', i.e. how small-scale farmers get into farming

A part of each of the 39 interviews I conducted in the two countries was directed at reconstructing the life stories of the interviewees. The reason for this research

interest was to try to better understand the trajectories of farmers and their families[27], the dynamics influencing their life decisions regarding farming to be taken, and the main motivations backing those decisions. The ultimate aim, then, was to get a sense[28] of the personal profiles of the small-scale farmers in the two contexts, not only to grasp their socio-demographic characteristics, but also to place them in historical perspective in order to thicken the description and analyze the possible linkages with farmers' own attitudes, strategies and evaluations. This helps us to address the issue of their 'entrance' into agriculture, meaning the ways in which and the reasons why they got into farming and made it their main professional activity. As we will see later, different trajectories, i.e. different starting points, are linked to different conditions of path-dependency, which in turn (together with personal inclinations and value sets) affect the ways they cope with their farm crises and their commercial orientations.

4.2.1 *Land access*

A first important element to highlight is that the majority of my interviewees are working on what prior to their engagement was already an established *family farm*. This is the case of individuals – mostly sons and daughters of farmers, but also partners – who following different paths, began working on a farm that was already up and running and managed by their family members, without autonomously setting up their own. This feature was observed in 23 of the 39 farms I studied, with no striking differences between Italy and England (where, respectively, I found it in 15 out of 25 cases, and in 8 out of 14). Interestingly, the number of instances of engagement in family farms is even higher among young people. Of the 10 individuals under 35 years of age I interviewed, 7 are involved in running a farm business that was initiated in earlier times by some other member of their family. This connects to the theme of the access to *agricultural land* which, in western countries, has undergone decades of constant reduction, and currently stands as not only one of the major barriers for beginning farmers (Ahearn, 2016), but also as an issue of major importance for small-scale farmers, since for them, as Vitale and Sivini (2017, p. 272) put it, "land is not a mere object or factor of production, but it is transformed in a place of life". Good farming land is scarcely available and its price is incommensurate with the expectations of economic returns from agricultural activity, thus, what results is a cost-prohibitiveness that often hampers young people's entrance into the farming sector (Scrufari, 2016). The pressure on farmland prices is to be attributed to the impacts of population growth, urbanization, globalization of markets and activities, international investment flows, trade negotiations, and climate change, and it is likely to increase over future decades (Cotula *et al.*, 2006).

My farmers seem to be aware of this, as many express concerns about the possibility for new people to begin farming in the future. Those who purchased

[27] For precision's sake, 39 were the farms I selected as case studies and visited, while the actual number of interviewees mounted up to 43, because in some instances more than one family member (working on the farm) took part in the interview. In addition, I registered an even greater number of life stories, because in some cases our interviewees were able to provide a detailed account of the trajectories of other relatives, most commonly parents or partners who had had (or still have) a role in starting/developing the farm.

[28] With absolutely no aims for statistical significance.

land years ago recognize that if they had to start again now, current market prices would make it impossible. UK2 (40, female), for example, reports having bought her 23 acres in the year 2000 for 2.000 pounds each, whereas now it would require an investment of 10.000 pounds per acre. In another area, but on a similar note, UK3 tells us that the 9.000 pounds he invested 30 years ago to set up his vegetable growing business today wouldn't be enough to buy even a fifth of the land he owns. He reckons this as a key obstacle:

> "Somebody wanting to come into this business, and do what we've done, they would find it incredibly difficult. All of our costs have gone up, everything's gone up, except the prices we get for our vegetables". (UK3, 60, male)

In the UK, actually, farmland prices have strongly increased in recent times, escalating over the 2010-2015 period during which they doubled due to a growth of demand by wealthy individuals, as well as pension funds looking for investment goods (Collinson, 2015), and reaching a peak in mid-2015. The couple from UK7 has witnessed this phenomenon. They affirm that an acre of the land they bought in 2011, in fact, is now worth 10-15.000 pounds, while it was evaluated at just a tenth of that at the moment of their purchase. Even those who have not bought the land, like UK10 (59, male) – who inherited a 120 hectares dairy farm from his parents – acknowledge the huge difficulty of acquiring agricultural land today. Despite his farm being operating since 1952, he indeed admits that if he had not inherited the land, he wouldn't be able to buy it now, because his holding would now cost 1.25 million pounds.

Nevertheless, in the UK, still 5 out of 6 people I interviewed who did not have a family farm to join, had purchased their land from the market (with the only exception being UK6 (55, female), who started rearing pigs on a plot her husband already owned, and was not in use for food growing purposes). In Italy, on the contrary, opportunities for buying land at market prices appear even more limited. Of the 10 people falling under the same category (not working on their family farm), in fact, only 3 acquired ownership of their holding in the countryside around Milan from the market (one of which though, (ITA7, male, 50), also enjoys the synergy deriving from producing Mediterranean produce such as oil, wine and citrus on his family-owned fields in Sicily). The rest relied on an array of means to procure land for farming, which testifies to the important role that social networking has taken on in the world of agriculture, and is worth detailing: ITA2 (50, male) and ITA13 (35, male) were able to access unused family-owned plots; ITA8 (36, male) doesn't own the business (nor the land), and works on the farm as an employee; ITA16 (34, male) took over, together with two partners, the management of an already established organic market garden, whose owner desired to retire and to whom they pay a rent (they don't have the property of the land, subsequently); ITA23 (45, female) works as a grower for a CSA; ITA9 (57, male) received the plot he farms for free, pursuant to an agreement with an agro-touristic firm which gave him use of part of its land in exchange for a constant supply of fresh produce; and lastly ITA21, who wanted to begin farming but had no possibility for having land, decided to become a landless bee-keeper, and currently keeps the hives in various places throughout the city of Milan and its hinterland (like other farms or the garden of an abbey).

In this world of small-scale farming and direct marketing, then, networking becomes crucial. Social networks, whether linking producers with consumers, with other producers or with food solidarity/sovereignty advocates and organizations, become considerably valuable not only in providing commercial and organizational advantages, but also in facilitating the act of getting hold of a very fundamental factor of production, i.e. land, which is becoming increasingly harder to obtain, as the stories of my interviewees demonstrate. As commented, I could detect two lines of differentiation with regard to the issue of land access. The first is context-based: market conditions in the north-west of England appear relatively more favorable to buy land than the ones in the Lombard plains, as the mix of unconventional arrangements my Italian farmers have relied on to acquire their land suggests. The second is generational: young people tend to find it harder to acquire land than their elder colleagues who bought it even just a few decades before, in both countries. Nevertheless, in the AFNs sector I observed a significant presence of young producers (of the 39 farm businesses I met, 10 were run by individuals younger than 35), especially noticeable when compared to the aggregate European data, which show that only 5.6% of farmers in the Union are under 35 years of age (European Commission, 2017b). To an extent, this confirms direct marketing to be a tool commonly adopted by beginning farmers, who seek to by-pass the structure of the conventional system and the high level of capital investments it requires, aiming to develop a successful niche for their products (Key, 2016) because it is often the only viable entry into agriculture they have (Thilmany and Ahearn, 2013).

4.2.2 *A typology of 'entrance into farming'*

For the topic of the entrance into the agricultural profession, farmers' personal choices and motivations are as meaningful and worth analyzing as the issue of land access. The biographies I registered allow us to jointly evaluate these two aspects and propose a typology of *entrance into farming.* I found three main patterns that describe the way the individuals in my study began farming, the first two of which can be further outlined as being composed of two sub-categories. These types are defined in the following scheme:

a) Begin farming by *joining the family farm*
    a.1) Since the beginning of one's working life
    a.2) Later in life
b) Begin farming *as a choice of passion*
    b.1) For love for agriculture
    b.2) For a desire to have good food
c) Begin farming *because unsatisfied with other jobs, or for the lack thereof*

These three categories, I argue, have the capacity to describe all the trajectories and motivations of the individuals I included in my study, and provide a suggestive point of view on the dynamics of access to small-scale agriculture in current times. It just takes a quick glance, though, to understand that they are not necessarily mutually exclusive, since single cases can fit more than one category or sub-category at the same time. It is clear that, for example, *joining the family farm*

can be a choice taken out of *love for agriculture*, or that *dissatisfaction with one's job* can be coupled with a *desire to have good food*. Every combination is indeed possible and cannot be excluded *a priori*. Nevertheless, the majority of the life stories I have collected reveal a *main* thread that my interviewees have followed to create their current life situation, wherein some sets of motivations and expected outcomes show a greater prominence than others, thus allowing for the allocation of the case under a specific heading and demonstrating the proposed typology to be a useful analytical track.

4.2.3 *Joining the family farm*

The biggest group in my case study is composed of individuals falling under the category a), i.e. farmers who have joined their *family-run farm*. As previously commented, I observed this prevalence in both countries, even though the relative share is higher in Italy than in England, probably due to the aforementioned British market conditions which makes it relatively easier for aspiring farmers to buy agricultural land. Within this category, the entrance most commonly happens at a young age (sub-category a.1), and it affects mainly the children of farmers. They have either grown up *on* the farm, or have at least been significantly exposed to its activities from a very young age. ITA24, for example, has spent all of his 65 years living on his family *cascina*[29] , which he now manages, and comments on having engaged in agricultural activities from a very young age:

> "In agriculture you work since you're 6. I used to go on the tractor when I still wasn't tall enough to get to the gas pedal. [. . .] I'm not saying that you work 15 hours a day when you're 6, but when I was 6-7 years old I used to know what was happening, what hay was, when you need to cut the grass, how to collect it, how to drive the tractor, how to roll the fields. . . " (ITA24, 65, male).

This is not limited to the older generations, since it appears to be a common feature even among the younger cohorts of children born into a farming family. ITA3 is 33 and had the responsibility of running his farm, together with his younger brother, at the age of 16, due to the premature death of his father. When he was expressing the obvious difficulty he had to face back then, he nevertheless adds:

> "You know, we have always seen it, it's always been – let's say – our life. . . Our dad's work has always been. . . the motivation, since we were very small. It's always been a normal thing. [. . .] We have always seen the things that you must and must not do. In short, we've always been part of that life." (ITA3, 33, male).

The children of agricultural entrepreneurs are thus familiar with the farming environment and the practices needed to run an agricultural business, and opt to engage full time on the farm as soon as they complete their education, as a form of (often unquestioned) natural personal development. ITA13, who is 45, says he has always worked on his family's fruit orchard on the hills of the Oltrepò region[30] , where he was born and lived his whole life. He seemingly never had a doubt about his working career:

[29] An architecturally-typical Northern Italy farmhouse.

[30] About 100 km south of Milan, in the Pavia province

> "I took an agricultural high school exactly to do this, and once I got my diploma I threw my heart and soul into my business precisely because it was my family's business. I feel it totally mine. I don't come from Milan, I don't come from a different reality, I've never been a blue-collar, I've always done this". (ITA13, 45, male)

Like ITA13, many children of farmers express a similar feeling, which appears to be spurred by a strong sense of belonging to the land, the territory, and the farming world in general. It is openly conveyed by ITA14, who is the child of a family running a wine-making farm, which he didn't join right after school, but only after many years of working as an IT technician (so, according to my classification, he pertains to the category a.2). He re-joined his family farm a few years after his parents passed away, leaving his brother to take over. He realized his brother needed help, but mentions passion as the main motivation that brought him back:

> "It's been a choice of passion. Because even if I liked my job, it was [only] my second passion. My first passion has always been the land, so I was feeling the desire to come back". (ITA14, 38, male)

However, not every farmer in the same situation feels this desire, and similarly, the choice to take over the family farm was not undisputed or natural for all of them. UK10, for example, despite being the heir of a 120 hectares dairy farm, wanted to work as a mechanic, fixing cars. He couldn't though, as he explains in his interview:

> "It was assumed that one of the siblings stayed at home and farmed with their father. And that was me. So I'm still here. I have two brothers and two sisters and they all didn't want to stay here. [...] I don't mind doing here, but I knew I could do a lot better being a mechanic". [UK10, 59, male].

Regardless of their personal inclination, many children of farmers consider themselves to be trained more on the job than in the books. Nonetheless, as we have seen, it is also frequent for them to have realized agriculture-related studies, with a tendency for the younger generations to have also undertaken university-level studies, always in the field of agriculture, albeit in many instances not completed, having been regarded not useful enough to subtract time and energy from the family business. This is explained by several of my interviewees:

> "Yeah, you learn the technical stuff behind what you do, but there's quite a lot of things at [agricultural] college we could have told the tutors what to do". (UK10, 59, male)

> "During teenage I had the classic existential crisis in which I was grossed out by my reality, so I moved to Milan to study agriculture at university, but I regretted it. I wanted to kill myself, I then came back, I said 'never more in my life'. I had chosen [to study] agriculture, but I wasn't very convinced, I had already tried the test for medicine and dentistry but I didn't pass it. So I came back to [my family farm] in 2012 to take care of the family business. Eventually I didn't graduate from university, I left behind three exams. I came back because it felt

> like I was wasting time, and also studying is not my passion". (ITA10, 30, female).

> "I am *perito agrario*[31] and then I tried to study agriculture at university. I didn't complete it because I had realized that on the farm they needed help, and I like being in the countryside, and the projects on the farm were very stimulating" (ITA11, 36, male)

> "I began studying agri-tech and animal production at university, and I wasn't even bad at it, but university itself caused my wish to study to fade away... I wasn't even liking the environment, the colleagues. Before throwing myself into the farm, however, since the situation was not optimal I started looking around and I found a job I still do today: analyses on seeds and seeds certifications. I like it, I'm passionate about it and I still do it, even if with laughable fixed term contracts". (ITA15, 32, male)

Even if in smaller numbers, I also encountered people who started working on their family farm at a later moment in life, after having realized other unrelated professional experiences (sub-category a.2). In this group, there is a significant presence of relatives other than children, namely siblings (like the aforementioned ITA14, who joined his brother to conduct his family-inherited winery, see previous page) and partners. The latter often have no farming background and generally joined their partner/spouse farm either to help with its crisis or due to struggles with their jobs, or both. Almost all the small farms I studied had to face or are currently facing a critical scenario, which generally reflects the situation of economic distress affecting the farming sector as a whole, but that can also take on specific forms which are context- or case-dependent, as I will detail later in the text. What is relevant to the topic of this section, though, is that the entrance of partners (or more generally family members) as workers of the farm is often crucial to the development of a new economic trajectory aimed at coping with the crisis and allowing for the resistance of the farm. Given the cost-prohibitiveness of hiring a (almost always much-needed) workforce from the market, small agri-entrepreneurs have to rely on family to introduce new energies and ideas to the business. New entrants, in turn, often become responsible for envisioning and handling new lines of action, and introducing innovations to the spheres of production, commercialization, or public relations that increasingly involve direct marketing and AFNs.

The story of UK4 exemplifies this. UK4 is 49, and from the age of 18 to 40 worked in IT for a bank. His partner also worked for a bank, but came from a dairy farming family (whereas UK4 had no farming background). She left banking in 2000 and returned to the family dairy farm to help milk the cows. But the price of milk was gradually decreasing, so, together with her brother, she decided to convert to organic, to gain more money from the milk. For the same reason, beginning in 2000, UK4 tried to think of what could be done with the farm, how to process the milk on the farm in order to get more value. He eventually also quit his bank job, and dedicated himself to cheese-making on the farm:

> "For years and years I looked at cheeses, ice creams, butter, and

[31] The qualification obtained in Italy from graduating agricultural high school.

> eventually decided I would start making cheese. So in 2008 I left the bank and started experimenting with cheese. [...] This process of trying to add more value to the product – from conventional to organic and then from just milk to cheese – was a necessity. Without it, the farm would probably have had to stop". (UK4, 49, male)

ITA22, instead, is a woman who lived a similar experience but had to face a different problem: the threat urbanization posed to her husband's peri-urban farm in Milan. She's the daughter of two Milanese farmers, and is married to another farmer. Yet she spent her first 12 years of marriage working in an office because she rejected the idea of working in agriculture, an idea she eventually had to reconcile with when she engaged in a political struggle to save her husband's farm:

> "At the beginning when I got married I rejected the agricultural world, because I had seen the sacrifice of my parents. I didn't understand the heritage of this agricultural world, when I was young I was in denial. I worked in an office until I had the second child, then I stayed home, thinking I could lend a bit of a hand to my husband, but as soon as I quit my job our eviction started, so I threw myself into politics, I got really angry and I defended agriculture in Milan. I've been the first ne to oppose the concreting of productive agricultural land. I've engaged in harsh battles, I've also been threatened. [...] These battles eventually saved the *cascina*, but not all the land [we had]". (ITA22, 55, female)

Another relevant circumstance motivating the entrance into the family farm is the lack of an off-farm job, or the dissatisfaction with it. Struggling to maintain a decent source of income outside of the farm, relatives or spouses of farmers opt to channel their energies into the family business, often taking on the responsibility of fuelling the relationship with the direct market outlets, which, if on the one hand are on the rise, on the other require significant labour and personal commitment. During my fieldwork I met ITA25, whose husband owns a long-established horticultural farm, which is not in a state of crisis, thanks to its higher-than-average dimension and stronger market-orientation. The farm is big enough to sell to wholesalers and other middlemen, yet, at the same time, directly markets part of its production. Despite being the wife of the owner, ITA25 did not always work on the farm. Instead, she managed a clothing shop with her parents. But, due to the crisis of traditional retail, the profitability of their shop constantly declined, to a point where, in 2013, they decided to shut it down. Consequently, she devoted herself full-time to her husband's farm, and began to take on what her previous job had made her familiar with, i.e. selling directly to customers:

> "I'm a retailer. Pure retail. That's why I manage the farmers' markets. [...] I'm better [than my husband and his brother] in the relationship with the public, I use to come up with things to try and give the best service. [...] Since when I'm fully dedicated [to the farm] we increased the number of [farmers'] markets, and the turnover from markets has doubled". (ITA25, 40, female).

Clearly, situations in which these two circumstances converge – need for workforce on the farm and lack or insecurity of an off-farm job – are not missing. The

daughter of UK13 (78, female), for example, is 54 and up until 20 years ago worked as a retailing manager in groceries. As per her mother's account, she hated her job, but she did it until her father became ill and help on the family fruit orchard was needed. Eventually her father passed away, and she found herself doing almost all of the work on the farm. Similarly, ITA19 became a farmer after working many years as a nurse. Her husband worked his entire life as a doctor, but in 1997, he inherited part of his parents' farm. In the last years of his parents' lives the farm was rented out, because they were too old to manage it. But ITA19 and her husband decided to work the land directly, she being the one who took care of managing all operations:

> "When we became owners, I was working as a nurse in Lodi[32], but we decided to try to work the farm ourselves. Because in the meanwhile it was very hard for me to get a permanent contract at the hospital, and he [the husband] was already working a big job, so it seemed to me to be lighter and more logical to try to conduct the land myself, because you know, you have the land and you have to do something with it". (ITA19, 50, female)

A second group of farmers in my case study is characterized as not having joined a family farm, either because their family didn't run a farm that could have employed them, or because, despite their family actually owning a farm, they set up their own independently (this instance, though, is limited to a very few cases). I divided them into two categories: those whose *main* motivation for setting up a farm was a strong *passion towards the world of food and agriculture* (category b), and those whose main motivation was *dissatisfaction with other jobs or lack thereof* (category c). In the following sections I will quickly take a glance at these two circumstances and provide some empirical examples.

4.2.4 *Falling in love with agriculture*

In the introduction to this chapter I have affirmed that working in agriculture entails a totalizing life arrangement to which farmers tend to adhere thoroughly. Through the words of my interviewees I have highlighted how the choice of farming is often motivated by a desire of living a certain type of life and thus relates to the adoption of a specific lifestyle in which a strong interest in nature, the countryside, the soil and the food is openly pursued. Those who started farming for reasons of passion, then, report having aspired to enter the world of agriculture, exactly because its features matched their personal inclinations. Some of them, we could say, opt to farm because they 'fell in *love* ' with agriculture (category b.1). Their life stories sparked their interest in food, which grew to so strong a degree they eventually desired for it to become their profession. UK3, a 60 year-old who runs a fruit and vegetables box scheme, explicitly affirms such a desire. He grew up in Blackpool, down the road from market gardens where he worked summer jobs from the age of 14. In 1976, after graduating from school, he spent a whole year with a group of friends, touring the UK and France in a camper and working on various farms all year round. He remembers it as a crucial year for his later career, especially the summer:

[32] A town about 30 km south-west of Milan.

> "The sun came out April 14th and it didn't go to bed until October 20th, and there wasn't a day of rain in between. After that year, I fell in love with agriculture". (UK3, 60, male)

He decided he wanted to work as a farmer, first as an employee on someone else's farm and then, as soon as he had the opportunity to buy land, setting up his own business, which was geared from the very beginning towards organic production and direct marketing through a weekly box subscription. A similar situation is reflected in UK5's story, a woman who grew up in Devon, also with no farming background. Like UK3, she had student jobs at market gardens, which she enjoyed so much she later decided to take a university degree in soil science, to then begin a career in agriculture, which she also recognizes as very hard and unappealing to many people:

> "It's something I've always wanted to do, to have my own market garden. In the 80s I first took a job at an agricultural college, where I grew cucumbers. Then I met a lady who had some land of her own in Yorkshire, who offered me to get into business. Since an interest in organic was sparking back then, I decided to grow everything organic. Later, in the early 90s, when [my husband] took a job in the area here [Lancashire], we bought the land and the house, moved and started from nothing [...] It's hard work, farming. You've got to love doing it, really. And you don't earn much money. So you can understand why young people don't want to get into the business". (UK5, 50, female)

Nevertheless, I found similar accounts of passion throughout the study, also in the Italian fieldwork. ITA4, for example, not only fell in love with agriculture, but also with a specific territory, suited to the production of wine. He – born and raised in the city of Milan – was an agricultural university student when he first went to San Colombano[33] to realize some studies for his thesis. He liked the place and the activity of wine-making so much that, once he graduated, he decided that would be his life, moved to the area, and founded a winery.

> "Thanks to the thesis I could choose my profession, and avoid going to work in a bank, or as an asset valuer, or as a seller of agri-chemical inputs, or as a teacher". (ITA4, 62, male)

The story of the aforementioned landless bee-keeper ITA21 (see p. 57) also explicitly testifies to this sort of passion, which proves strong enough to orientate life decisions. He had always wanted to have an agricultural business, and chose to keep bees because it enabled him to be a farmer without owning land:

> "I grew up in Milan, and my family didn't have an agricultural background. I chose to take agrarian studies at university because my dream was to have an agricultural activity, and a *cascina*. [...] I started 15 years ago to be a bee-keeper exactly because there were no needs for investment on the land. With the bees I could have an agricultural activity without big initial investments". (ITA21, 40, male)

[33]San Colombano is a peculiar round-shaped hill standing out in the Lombard plains, some 50 km south-east of Milan. The flatland around the Lombard capital aren't really suited to the production of wine, except for the San Colombano hill, whose wine got subsequently nicknamed 'the wine of Milan'.

After many years he eventually managed to rent a small laboratory where he processes his honey, but he still owns no land, and keeps the hives in various places in and around the city of Milan, in private or public gardens or hosted by other farmers. ITA21's is a story of determination and strong desire to become a farmer, demonstrating that sometimes love for agriculture stems out of an accident which, when paired with a particular sensitivity towards care for the environment, can translate into the beginning of a farming career. This is the case of ITA18, a 58 year-old woman who always lived in the city, until she inherited a *cascina* with its land from her father in 1992. The farm had always been leased out; no one from her family had ever managed it, and she had no agricultural knowledge at all. She used to work as a therapist and a journalist. Nevertheless, she couldn't accept the way her land was farmed:

> "Because the *cascina* was under my responsibility, I had to deal with it. I couldn't stand that it was farmed in a chemical way, and the tenants didn't want to convert to organic, so I decided to do it myself". (ITA18, 58, female)

She eventually started farming following the *permaculture principles*, and now the *cascina* is markedly multifunctional: it has rooms for accommodating tourists, it offers courses on permaculture and environmental good practices, and it hosts a social cooperative run only by women that provides education services in the field of social and environmental responsibility.

Sometimes the spirit underlying the choice to become a farmer is less inclined towards issues of environmental and social justice (like my last example ITA18) and also less motivated by an overall appreciation of farming as a profession (like my previous examples), but more geared towards the satisfaction of intimate desires. This helps us to introduce the sub-category b.2, i.e. to begin farming as a passionate choice *motivated by the desire to have good food*. Interestingly, I have found that issues of consumption, and especially the possibility to consume healthy and tasty food, play an important role in the determination of the choice to become a farmer. This is true mainly for people who get into farming at a later stage of their life, after having worked in unrelated fields for long periods of time. For these people, farming not only embodies a new and more satisfying lifestyle, but also a way to live in a pleasant surrounding and enjoy a constant procurement of nutritious natural food. During my research I met ITA7, a 50 year-old man from Sicily who moved to Milan in 2002. He's the son of farmers, but when he moved to Milan he worked various agriculture-unrelated jobs, such as teaching music in schools. In 2012 he bought a farmhouse some 40 km south-west of the city, where he moved with his wife and started farming professionally. He tells us that there were two motivations that pushed him to realize this life change: the possibility to live and work in the same place; and the possibility to live in a rural environment. Yet, he goes on to add:

> "If someone asks me what are the unofficial and deep reasons for which I've become a farmer, the answer is that I wanted to eat better. And if I want to eat better, biodiversity has to be my horizon, meaning I have to produce the greatest number of things. [...] Having the hen here scratching around and giving me eggs, or the bees giving

> me honey, are the things that have pushed me to make this kind of change". (ITA7, 50, male)

This line of reasoning isn't uncommon in my fieldwork. In addition, similar accounts were found in both countries. UK2, for instance, eventually specialized in goat farming for meat production, but she explains her first entrance into agriculture by reporting motivations that are comparable to ITA7's, even if with a slightly more accentuated slant regarding food safety:

> "We were looking for the things that we are now selling. So we were looking for food that had high animal welfare. We wanted to know where our food would come from, and that it hadn't got those antibiotics in it, it hadn't been too intensively produced, and we wanted high quality product, for a value-for-money-price, all those things. We looked for that and couldn't buy it, we couldn't buy what we wanted to be buying, and we realized the only way we could get food that we wanted to eat, was if we produced it ourselves" . (UK2, 40, female)

Parallel to their main goat meat production, which is obviously directed to the market, this woman keeps a few pigs and a small vegetable garden exclusively for the consumption of her family. Once a year, in the middle of the season, they cook a family meal using only self-produced ingredients, and they live it as a sort of celebration. Producing a wide range of food for self-consumption, in addition to the core agricultural activity, is a common feature among the small-holders realizing direct sales I met. This attitude, as per the words of these smallholders themselves, doesn't seem to be shared with the bigger or 'conventional' farmers, whose market-oriented mentality is apparently also reflected in the sphere of their personal consumption. UK2, in fact, raises the topic:

> "A friend of mine has parents who have three dairy farms around here, and I know she shops in Aldi[34], because the meat's cheap. So even within the farm community there's a lack of understanding, a lack of connection. [...] Lots of farmers don't eat what they produce, they think that where you sell your product is to a market, you sell your stuff to a market, and then you go buy stuff. Then you're losing on both sides, again you're losing your money: because you're not selling it for as much as you could, and you're paying more to get what could be your product back". (UK2, 40, female)

To delve into these small-scale farmers' mentality, it is also important to notice that sometimes the lifestyle and consumption paradigm which agriculture represents is so sought-after it enables them to endure not only economic hardships (as I have illustrated earlier in the text) but also personal life discomfort and inconvenience. UK11, for example, is a couple who, in order to set up their own market garden, lived for 15 years in a caravan[35]. And, mostly, they did it for the food. They were both working in unrelated sectors, and had no agricultural background. They were living in the south of England when they decided they wanted to change and

[34] A discount supermarket chain known for its low prices.

[35] And it is not even the only case that we met. Actually, in our English fieldwork, 3 out of 14 interviewees had lived or have been living in a caravan on their field for many years.

started looking for land, which in the south was too expensive. So they moved back to Lancashire and bought the land they're on now, in 1984. They say "it was just a field, with no building nor anything on it, not even any water" (UK11, 65, female). They had to wait 15 years to get the planning permission to build a house, which they built themselves and which is where they live now. And, as said, the position of food as a justification for these sacrifices is prominent:

> "To us it's not just about making money, I mean, a lot of it is because we like the food as well, you know, we feed ourselves very well, don't we? A lot of it is a part of it, anyone else probably wouldn't want to do the amount of hours we do for what we earn. But towards us it is a part of it, no? The food, isn't it?". (UK11, 65, female)

This attention towards food, in addition, is commonly poured in the offer of farmers' products to the customers. As I argued, the appreciation of products by the public is an element generating self-esteem and satisfaction for the farm owners. When paired with a personal predisposition regarding good food, it often translates in a basic principle that, simply put, postulates that 'if we eat well, our customers will eat well too'. I found variations of this principle several times during my fieldwork, as the following excerpts can testify. They come, in this order, from interviews with the pig farmer UK6, the wine-maker ITA14, and the vegetable grower ITA12:

> "Once I've been asked: how can you pet them [the pigs] and everything, and then eat them? And I replied: because I know they've had a good life, they've been bred for meat, and I know I'm eating meat I know exactly what's gone into it, I know exactly what it has eaten, I know exactly where it has lived, and what conditions it has lived in. If I don't know that, then I can't eat it". (UK6, 55, female)

> "If I like a wine I'll sell it to you, but if there's a wine I don't like I will never be able to sell it to you". (ITA14, 38, male)

> "We aim for 100% natural, because, in any case, what we produce, we ourselves have to eat it too. We set out from this assumption, that we have to eat it ourselves, and so if we eat well ourselves, we want to make the others eat well as well". (ITA12, 35, male)

4.2.5 *Farming as a new (and more satisfying) job*

The vegetable grower ITA12, cited at the end of the last section, lets us introduce the third and last category of my typology of entrance into farming, which regards those farmers who began an agricultural career *because unsatisfied with other jobs, or for the lack thereof* (category c). This is precisely what happened to ITA12. He graduated in architecture, but after some experiences realized the job wasn't suitable for him. His father wasn't a farmer, but used to grow vegetables on a small garden as a hobby, and ITA12 sometimes gave him a hand. This helped him to understand that he could work as a professional farmer:

> "When I was young I wasn't attracted to agriculture, I had never thought of it. I approached it later. After graduating I tried to work

> in a few [architectural] firms, but I realized it wasn't the job for me, I couldn't stand staying all day in front of a computer". (ITA12, 35, male)

So he started farming a hectare of land owned by his family, which he eventually expanded by renting more plots. He now produces vegetables, fruit and cereal, which he also processes internally. Interestingly to the topic of this work, from the very beginning he decided he wanted to produce everything organicly, and sell it only through direct channels. He affirms that the contacts his father had with various GAS groups (he was a member of one of them), and later the possibility of getting to know the people and the activities of DESR[36] , proved crucial in allowing the new-born business to have a commercial outlet and economic support from its initial phases. His story exemplifies the features of small-scale agriculture as a generator of jobs. Agriculture can be an employer, but two major shortcomings may hinder its potential: the difficulty of accessing land and the problem of establishing a set of sound and fair commercial relationships. In this scenario, social and personal networks appear to assume a primary importance. In my research, indeed, I found that people without a family farm to join came to possess their piece of land in a multiplicity of ways, most times relying on family connections or acquaintances of various forms. These 'newcomers' generally set their activity in accordance with the principles of environmental responsibility, high-quality production and proximity, and opted almost exclusively for methods of direct sales. On the commercial side, then, the role of AFNs is evident: by securing a commercial outlet integrated by a form of social comprehension/protection to sustainably-produced high-quality local products, they are able to sustain the entrance of new farmers and the development of new farms, from their initial steps to their successive consolidation.

Let's provide some evidence from my fieldwork to support these last few statements. ITA9 explains his decision to change jobs and dedicate himself to agriculture:

> "Mine has been a life choice, I had always been passionate about horticulture. Before doing this job I was doing something completely different, I used to run a quite successful event and advertisement company. [But] I fell out of love with that job, and I transformed this passion into a profession" (ITA9, 57, male).

The opportunity to transform his passion into a profession, though, came by way of his social circles. He knew the owner of an organic agro-touristic farm, which lacked vegetable production, who agreed to give ITA9 a piece of land for free, in exchange for a constant supply of fresh produce. To start his business, ITA9 involved his dearest friends, who partnered with him to finance the project. To get started commercially, he skipped all intermediaries and started selling straight to the final consumers, through a box delivery scheme in and around the city of Milan and bringing his products to various farmers' markets.

ITA16, instead, is a 34 year-old man who affirms he got into farming by chance.

[36] The *Distretto di Economia Solidale Rurale del Parco Agricolo Sud Milano* (DESR), or the district of economic solidarity of the South Agricultural Park of Milan, is an association that networks people and organizations active in the construction of an alternative food economy in the city of Milan.

He had long been a member of a GAS in his hometown in the hinterland northwest of Milan, and he's always been sensitive, as he says, to the topics of food and nutrition. Nevertheless, he used to work for a cooperative that managed two bookshops. In 2012 he lost this job and, while on unemployment benefits, started to work a few hours a week on a small organic vegetable farm, whose owner he already knew through his father. When the owner decided he wanted to retire, he had the opportunity to take over the farm, together with two other partners, all in their early thirties (one of which wanted to separate from his family's farm, while the other had a farming job in Ireland but wanted to come back to Italy). They now operate the farm and pay the owner a monthly rent. They sell all their produce to GAS groups and, especially, through their well-established farmshop.

ITA23 was also part of a GAS group and leveraged on the GAS world to become a farmer. She studied foreign languages and worked in an airport for many years. When she became a mother she eventually quit her job to take care of her daughter. In the meanwhile she increased her participation in the activities of her GAS. Around the age of 40, she decided she wanted to work again, and she made her way into agriculture:

> "Due to my daughter having grown up, more free time [available], and other necessities, I wanted to get back into the labour market. But for people of my age the labour market is blocked. So I invented my job myself. [...] Meeting and chatting with farmers, I had the possibility of leasing a small piece of land, together with another partner inside a bigger organic farm not far from here, and I started growing vegetables. [...] I could do it thanks to the contacts I had within the world of GAS, because all my production was sold through GAS groups". [ITA23, 45, female]

Through her GAS, she says, she had always been in contact with DESR, until she became an active member of it. In 2016, when DESR set up the second CSA of Italy, she was employed by the newborn association as a grower for the CSA.

As illustrated by these examples, the subjects of the alternative food economy facilitate the development of new farming initiatives and support the entrance of new forces into the local agricultural system. This effect is felt more strongly in Italy than in the UK, because in the former, the networks of solidarity built and sustained by alternative food actors have a clearer cut towards the construction of economic linkages than they do in the latter. Nonetheless, my English fieldwork provided evidence of agriculture as a resort for people looking for a (different) job, and highlighted the ways in which the realization of such an outcome is linked to the use of direct sales channels. For the sake of brevity, I will report just one case, that of UK6. She is a 55 year-old woman who used to work for her local city council as a community engagement officer. She grew unhappy with this job for, reportedly, political reasons, so she quit and bought a pub with her husband, which they ran for a couple of years. After that, since her husband already owned a plot of land on which he ran an agricultural machinery workshop, they decided to farm. They chose to farm pigs of a rare local breed, which they sell mainly at farmers' markets and at a local Food Assembly[37], which UK6 also manages.

[37] The Food Assembly is the British branch of the French company La Rouche Qui Dit Oui! (also present in Italy where it is known as L'Alveare Che Dice Sì!). This company manages a

4.3 Peasants *à la* Van Der Ploeg

My analytical excursus through the personal profiles and the socio-economic trajectories of the small-scale farmers I included in the fieldwork, and the typology I have suggested to clarify the commonalities of their pathways into the world of agriculture, thoroughly fit (and, to an extent, mirror) the work of Van Der Ploeg on 're-peasantization' (Van der Ploeg, 2008). His studies on rural development have an extremely ample reach while maintaining a very high level of detail, and the exercise of reading the data I gathered through his lenses will surely enrich the analytical scope of the present work. He postulates the existence of three types of agriculture:

> a *corporate agriculture*, which is made of a widely extended web of mobile farm enterprises characterized by large-scale operations and oriented towards an agro-export model, where labour force is constituted mainly of salaried workers and production is organized as a function of profit maximization;
>
> an *entrepreneurial agriculture*, which is built upon financial and industrial capital and whose production is specialized and completely oriented towards the market, while constantly aiming at the expansion of activities and scale enlargement. In this mode of farming, labour processes are partially industrialized and multiple types of market dependency are detectable, especially on the side of inputs;
>
> and a *peasant agriculture*, which is instead based on the sustained use of ecological capital and is geared towards the defense and improvement of the farming family's livelihood. Labour is generally provided by the family and resources can be mobilized through the market and/or through relations of reciprocity within the local community. The land is mainly family-owned and the production is both oriented towards the market and towards the reproduction of the farm unit and the family.

The current food regime (Friedmann, 1987; McMichael, 2009b) is described by Van Der Ploeg as "a mode of ordering that tends to become dominant [and is] embodied in a wide range of specific expressions: agribusiness groups, large retailers, state apparatuses, but also in laws, scientific models, technologies, etc." (2008, p. 4). He calls this regime 'Empire', and argues it is causing an unprecedented crisis (see also McMichael, 2009a) in the sector of food and farming because it produces "strong downward pressures on local and regional food systems [which in turn introduce] strong trends towards marginalization [of the agricultural operators] and new patterns of dependency" (Van der Ploeg, 2008, pp. 6,7). As a form of resistance, endogenous forces all over the world (both in the Global South and in the Global North) are triggering the phenomena of *re-peasantization*, i.e. the recalibration and rerouting of agricultural units and apparatuses towards forms of

web platform that allows for the creation of an 'online' local food purchasing group. They share many features with the Italian GAS groups, with the difference that they hardly take the form of a grassroots solidarity-based self-organized group, but rather of an instrument to buy local food and get in touch with local farmers, using a 'corporate-controlled' online infrastructure.

more peasant-like modes of production, through processes of de-industrialization, scale reduction and re-socialization of local food economies:

> "[r]epeasantization is, in essence, a modern expression of the *fight for autonomy and survival in a context of deprivation and dependency.* [...] Repeasantization implies a double movement. It entails a quantitative increase in numbers. Through an inflow from outside and/or through a reconversion of, for instance, entrepreneurial farmers into peasants, the ranks of the latter are enlarged. In addition, it entails a qualitative shift: autonomy is increased, while the logic that governs the organization and development of productive activities is further distanced from the markets". (Van der Ploeg, 2008, p. 7, original emphasis).

The ranks of the 'peasantry', then, are enlarged by two types of 'new entrants' that, drawing on Corrado (2013), can be labeled as 'new peasants' and 'converted agri-entrepreneurs'[38]. The first represent individuals with no farming background, who get into farming from different and often unrelated walks of life, and assume a peasant-like mindset and, as a consequence, farming style from the initial steps of their agricultural experience. The seconds are farmers flowing out of Van Der Ploeg's segment of *entrepreneurial agriculture* – mainly due to its supervening inability to secure the socio-economic reproduction of the farm business and the livelihood of the farming family – to re-channel their operations into a peasant-like framework, with effects on the style and scale of production, the quality of outputs, and the relationship with the market.

The correspondence between this theoretical framework and the analysis of my research's empirical findings seems evident. First of all, the small-scale farmers that I have been looking at during my fieldwork are all (at least to a varying degree) peasants *à la* Van Der Ploeg. As I have already stressed, all of them currently are or have been struggling against a hostile market environment, all of them privilege the employment of their own and their family's labor over mechanization, and all of them aim at and enjoy autonomy, and so have detached from or escaped the mainstream market and the predatory relations it is built upon, looking for social cooperation to ensure the reproduction of their livelihoods. Let's take a closer look at Van Der Ploeg's definition of the peasant *condition*, to clarify such similarities:

> "Central to the peasant condition, then, is the struggle for autonomy that takes place in a context characterized by dependency relations, marginalization and deprivation. It aims at and materializes as the creation and development of a self-controlled and self-managed resource base, which in turn allows for those forms of co-production of man and living nature that interact with the market, allow for survival and for further prospects and feed back into and strengthen the resource base,

[38] Actually Corrado describes them as *"repented* entrepreneurs, who converted after a crisis of identity and/or a crisis of the enterprise" (2013, p. 77, our emphasis), but we deem that the more neutral expression 'converted entrepreneurs' is better suited to deliver their condition, since we found out that the 'conversion' to a more peasant-like mode of farming is often more conditioned by external (economic) factors – thus readable as a form of opportunistic behavior – rather than the effect of an ideological repentance or of a deep identity reassessment.

> improve the process of co-production, enlarge autonomy and thus, reduce dependency. Depending upon the particularities of the prevailing socio-economic conjecture, both survival and the development of one's own resource base might be strengthened through engagement in other non-agrarian activities. Finally, patterns of cooperation are present which regulate and strengthen these interrelations" (2008, p. 23).

Whether Lombard vegetable growers or Yorkshire pig farmers, today's small-scale farmers share a series of common traits that can be filed under the rubric of 'peasant'. I have showed that for them farming is a life choice motivated by passion and inspired by the goal of maximizing satisfaction and freedom rather than profit, in line with Johnson (2004, p. 64), who states that "not aiming for an accumulation of profit, the peasant of today are instead in search of a sustainable livelihood that will ensure their survival [. . .] into the 21st century". The importance of self-consumption, the attention towards high-quality food, and the personal satisfaction deriving from the appreciation of the products by the customers are also elements that reinforce such evaluation. The attempt to re-connect with consumers and to engage in a direct relationship with the various actors of the short food chain, as well as the use of social circles and AFNs organizations as levers facilitating business operations (access to land, production orientation, sales, etc.) testify to the ongoing process of outdistancing markets, with farmers striving to insert themselves into a web of socially-imbued economic relationships rather than networks of sheer commodity exchange, in order to reduce dependency and increase autonomy.

Similarly, the dichotomy distinguishing 'new peasants' and 'converted agri- entrepreneurs' shows evident synergies with my three-fold typology of entrance into farming. Indeed, whether by joining an already established family farm or by starting a farm business ex novo, whatever the underlying motivation or trajectory, for my interviewees the choice to become farmers also implied a form of re-peasantization. This process entails a transformation of farming practices and a shifting of the producer's commercial strategy, both changes being strongly conditioned (and supported), as I will argue, by AFNs and direct chains. The principle guiding farmers' behaviors through this transformation results from an original mix of ideological adherence to the values put forward by the AFNs, underlying their operational logics, together with a form of economic opportunism imposed by the uncertainties of the overall market conditions and by long-standing experiences of market lock-in and path dependency, generating an interesting oscillation between trust and mistrust in the alternative supply schemes that I will analyze later in the text. I call this principle *value-inspired pragmatism*, and I will argue that it aids not only in understanding producers' attitudes and the strategies they put in place within this process of socio-economic innovation, but also in shedding light on how processes of de-commodification (of producers' lives, of land, and of products) unfold within and act to reshape a system of commodity-exchange.

These last statements, as well as the juxtaposition with Van Der Ploeg's analysis (and its value *tout court*), will become clearer in the next chapters, where I will scrutinize 'my' farmers' economic crises, the 'survival' strategies they employed to renew (or create) their businesses, and the role played by the AFNs in such developments.

Chapter 5

Farming crisis: from obstacles to strategies

In the introduction I depicted the current food system as being affected by a severe crisis, which reveals multiple shades of unsustainability threatening the environmental, social and economic integrity of the system itself. I highlighted how many analysts agree in attributing to the decades-long productivist orientation governing the system, which has been spurring progressive trade liberalization and market globalization, the responsibility of generating the crisis. The agricultural sector represents the weakest link of the chain, and therefore primary producers are left to bear the most negative consequences.

I have employed the image of the *hourglass* (Heffernan *et al.*, 1999) to describe the current status of the food production sector, in which a multitude of farmers on the one end provide food to a multitude of consumers on the other end, although the stream has always to pass through the neck of the hourglass, represented by a restricted and strongly interconnected web of corporate input suppliers, food processors, and retailers, which earn a profit from every transaction. Such uneven distribution of power exerts a downward pressure on food prices, thus obliging farmers to continuously increase yields and productivity to compete. This calls for a never-ending run of farmers on a *technological treadmill* (Cochrane, 1993), implying the incessant adoption of the latest (and most expensive) technique or technology to increase production and chase income, as well as a constant tension towards scale enlargement to retain profitability. But since others adopt these instruments too, the result is higher volumes of food being marketed and a subsequent reduction of prices. With higher investment and input costs and lower output prices, then primary producers have to face a *cost-price squeeze* (Moss, 1992) that erodes their profit margins, and either makes them dependent on public subsidies or forces them out of the market, especially in the case of small and medium-sized businesses.

The modern day agricultural scenario, as illustrated by Pimbert and his colleagues (Pimbert *et al.*, 2001), is thus composed of three worlds constantly increasing their relative distance: Rural World 1 is an agri-business minority competitively wired into the global agri-food economy and made of highly-industrialized and mechanized large-scale commodity production units; Rural World 2 is composed of a myriad of small-to-medium-sized family farms and landed peasantry currently

engaged in a harsh struggle against declining returns and economic unsustainability, and actively seeking new ways to oppose the forces that threaten to expel them from the market; Rural World 3 is the realm of subsistence farming, characterized by fragile entitlements, self-exploitation and unwaged family labor, made redundant by (and for) the global market.

Despite sharing some features with the third rural world (namely the peasant-like work orientation and mindsets, see section 4.3), I reckon the agricultural businesses on which my work focuses to belong to Pimbert *et al*'s Rural World 2. The empirical evidence I gathered confirms the literature's assessments about the compelling state of distress of today's agriculture, and allows for a further framing of the problematic conditions small and medium-scale farmers face in the two countries of the study, England and Italy. Drawing on the interviewees' accounts of the difficulties challenging the operation of their farms, and on their representations of the wider problematic circumstances by which the agricultural segment is afflicted, in the next section I will attempt to provide an overview of the critical situation they guided (or are guiding) their farms through *as portrayed by the farmers themselves*, in order to set the ground for the comprehension of the modalities of their reaction, i.e. their ways of affiliation with the alternative economy, the innovation paths they have decided to take, and the strategies associated.

5.1 Farm crises

The narratives about the socio-economic environment the farmers I interviewed are navigating, and about the critical issues, points, and moments they have to deal with (or have had to in the past) to manage their businesses, all share a large set of common features, also across the two countries I visited. These, as said, mirror the theoretical elaborations of food system scholars about the situation of distress that family and small-sized farms have been living for the last 20 to 30 years, throughout western countries. In addition, such a wide range of commonalities allows for the elaboration of the present work's own vision of the crisis of agriculture in the modern day. Rather than on external data, I would like to restate, the analysis I propose is based on endogenous evaluations furnished by those farmers who opted to reproduce their livelihood through (at least partial) participation in an alternative food economy, which are read by the researcher in the light of the available literature. My aim is not to offer a neutral description of the sufferance of the agricultural system substantiated by unequivocal data, but to provide the partial yet documented point of view of the actors who are working on the ground to build a response to the (in fact unequivocally documented) inequity-producing and de-humanizing effects of the current mainstream food system development. This depiction is synthetized in the following schematization:

> The farmers taking part in my study, in both countries, face, have faced, or at least acknowledge most other farmers face a a) *long-standing crisis of profitability* and act within a b) *hostile political/regulatory environment* which, together with what are perceived as the c) *negative effects of globalization*, produce adverse market conditions. Operating in this scenario is further aggravated by the difficulty of establishing a

> balanced d) *relationship with the conventional sales channels players*, while ways out of the crisis are hampered by what they report as the lack of a sufficiently large rank of e) *knowledgeable consumers.*

In the next sections I will analyze these key points and their implications for the functioning of the system, providing supportive empirical evidence of farmers' representations of the issues at stake.

5.1.1 *Crisis of profitability*

> "Costs are too high, and prices drop continuously. If you work with contractors, it bleeds you dry. If you buy machinery, it bleeds you dry. A new tractor costs 80 thousand euros. Either you work more, take more land and try to produce more, or you die" (ITA7, 50, male)

> "Somebody wanting to come into this business, and do what we've done, they would find it incredibly difficult. All of our costs have gone up, everything's gone up, except the prices we get for our vegetables" (UK3, 60, male)

These quotations from the two vegetable growers ITA7 and UK3 effectively summarize the view of my interviewees on the current economic condition of agriculture, which reveals no significant difference between the two countries of my study. The point most commonly raised is that while the expenditure on inputs and other investments required to run a farm has constantly increased, the market prices of agricultural production are at a historically-low level. Far from being a theoretical assumption, then, the cost-price squeeze is widely acknowledged as the most severe structural illness of the agricultural sector in the last decades. Moss's seminal analysis of time series illustrated how prices paid and prices received by farmers don't follow an equilibrium path with each other or the general price level, and that such divergence has to be explained as being conditioned by macroeconomic "forces outside of agriculture" (Moss, 1992, p. 205). Arguably, this external conditioning refers to the financialization of agricultural commodities markets and the consolidation of the non-agricultural players of the food system, that provokes a constant reduction of farmers' (already very limited) bargaining power in both the upstream and downstream segments of the chain. What results is that farmers in the conventional market are absolute price-takers, unable to pass the increase of their production costs onto consumers, and thus forced to endure a condition of economic unsustainability when the balance between costs and prices is unfavorable. My empirical enquiry not only suggests that this is what is happening in Italy and in England, but also that the situation has worsened in recent times, as the pig grower ITA15 explains in detail:

> "After the speculation of 2009[39], the price of raw materials exponentially grew, like for example the corn we used as pig feed, which got to 20 euros per quintal, whereas its price was usually around 12-14 euros per quintal. In the meanwhile, pork meat was worth slightly more than 1 euro per kilo, so it was like feeding truffles to pigs for then

[39] He refers to the 2008-2009 *food price spikes*, when the prices of agricultural commodities on the global markets abruptly escalated, causing a major shock on the food economy as a whole (see Sage, 2011)

> selling them at 1 euro per kilo, you can understand that the thing doesn't stand up" (ITA15, 32, male)

Besides input costs, in the conventional chain farmers hold no control over the prices they receive for their products. Up to 20 to 30 years ago, farm-gate prices were high enough to grant a profit margin, so it was just a matter of maximizing production (and crossing fingers for a good harvest) to enjoy the economic return of a years-worth of hard work. But since trade liberalization and market globalization kicked in, prices paid to farmers constantly decreased, and reached record-lows in the past few years. The image employed by my interviewees to depict the absurdity of such a decrease paints prices as 'stuck in the past'. Interestingly, the phenomenon seems to have unraveled in a similar fashion both in the faltering Italian economy and in the surely more thriving British one, as the following excerpts testify:

> "When I stopped producing milk[40] they were paying us 1100[41] lire per liter, now it's around 32 cents. We're stuck at 30 years ago" (ITA6, 50, male)

> "Agricultural prices in the 70s were almost the same as today. A liter of milk was paid 18p, whereas now it is 24p" (UK10, 59, male)

> "Wheat price is at an all-time low. I found some notebooks of my father-in-law and saw that in the 80s wheat was sold for 25-28 thousand lire[42] per quintal, while now it is sold for 18 euros" (ITA19, 50, female)

This represents a huge barrier to viability for most farms. The crisis of profitability is indeed not only universally acknowledged; it is a transversal problem also endangering the possibility of survival for large conventional farms:

> "For milk, supermarkets only pay the cost of production, which is around 30p a liter, when they buy directly from the producers, which happens for one third of the milk produced in the country, and even less when they buy from a cooperative, to which two thirds of the overall milk is supplied. Even the really big guys are losing money, unless they're on a good contract, because if you break even at 30 p, and you only get 26 p, you're not going to survive" (UK10, 59, male)

The only way to keep going, then, is to strive to constantly enlarge the production unit, meaning acquiring more land and new technology to further intensify production, in pursuit of higher productivity and larger yields in order to maintain (rather than expand) a narrow margin of profitability.

> "Animal farming has gone down a road of constantly pushing the animals to the limit, whether for milk or reproduction, to obtain the maximum income possible in the short period. Farmers are on a treadmill. [...] They spent the last two generations chasing the next

[40] At one point he converted to producing vegetables and cereals, precisely due to the supervening lack of profitability of dairy production.

[41] Equivalent to 55 eurocents.

[42] Equivalent to 13-14 euros.

> bit of money, and the next bit of money, and the next bit of money..." (UK2, 40, female)

Such a process is mandatory for those who farm conventionally, but despite their efforts, instead of opening up opportunities for growth or development, it produces an accumulation of debt and exposes farm businesses to the risk of bankruptcy:

> "The animal farmer is not greedy and doesn't want to have a hundred thousand livestock units for earning big money. He's come to this because with a thousand units he couldn't make a living anymore, and gradually he's been forced to increase the livestock. To increase it he went into debt and then to repay interests he was forced to further increase the units. Here dairy farms used to have thirty cows, the big ones fifty. Now we got to a thousand, like a guy I know who is also just breaking even, and he's standing up just because he owns a biogas digester connected to the net, and he says 'if milk was as worth as the crap I throw into the digester, I would have solved my problems'. We are at this point now, that the dairy cow's excrement is paid to the farmer more than the milk" (ITA15, 32, male)

This 'technological treadmill' farmers are obliged to run on seems to never slow down, and many of them are realizing it is not just undesirable, but concretely unfeasible to keep running *ad infinitum* (we will see later in the text that what AFNs provide to farmers is in fact an opportunity to step off the treadmill and start moving again at a slower, more human, pace). The reproduction of farm resources within the *status quo* is thus seriously precarious, and all the farmers making direct sales I have met question the very possibility of resisting in such a frame:

> "The only way to resist, for those who work conventionally, is to try to produce all the time more, and more, and more... but it's impossible! We've got to a point that it looks like a joke... even with cutting-edge techniques and chemical fertilizers – things which we've however always used, at least those like us who up until yesterday have grown cereals in a conventional way[43] – but even with pesticides, even with whatever you want, you can only get up to a certain point. This is a fact" (ITA3, 33, male)

The systemic effect is evidently deductible: the number of farms has been decreasing and will continue to decrease. This happens either because in their attempt to grow bigger farmers buy their neighbors' land, reducing the number of players, or because farms are deactivated and land is taken out of agricultural production (often irreversibly) and given a different – more profitable – use. I recorded similar storiesmultiple times. Here are two clear examples from the English fieldwork, illustrating how farming has become uneconomic and therefore is at risk to disappear:

> "The situation of farmers, especially in the conventional sector, is like this: they're all in their sixties, they have 3500 acres in Sussex, maybe they turnover 11.5 million pounds, maybe they have 5 houses on their

[43] ITA3 indeed recently converted his family farm from a conventional dairy and cereal production, to a smaller organic poultry and cereal production.

> land, maybe their business is worth 27 million on paper, and they make a loss. Or break even. When I first came there were eight dairy farms here, there is one left now. They just could not make a wage anymore, and yet 365 days a year they were milking their cattle twice a day" (UK3, 60, male)

> "In my parish, there were and still are 5 thousand hectares of farmland. There used to be 22 farms in 1977, now there are just six. The land is still the same, the farms have just got bigger. [...] If a farm has 2% return of the capital invested, it is doing really well. Other industries work for 10%, at least. Bank officials can't understand why you do it. 'If you've got a farm that is worth 1 million, and it's only doing 1 or 2%, sell it. And stick the money somewhere it's making more money', that's what they would say. But you still have got to live somewhere, and living out here is quite nice" (UK10, 59, male)

UK3's last sentence reminds us again that farming is lived by its operators as a life choice rather than an economically-determined one (see section 4.1). However, this doesn't change the fact that many farmers are on the verge of drowning. Their spaces of resistance are shrinking down and the paths towards the maintenance of their presence in the current economy are getting increasingly harder to follow. The alternative food economies are giving them the option to follow a different path, which is currently being constructed and is supposedly less steep. Nonetheless, the difficulties of farming remain, as still many are the cases of hardships and economic vulnerability I found among my group of 'alternative' farmers. Several interviewees affirm they're resisting only because they've paid out all of their investments, minimize all other expenses, and accept to live for less. Many others, however, report they're severely struggling to break even. Like the family of ITA22, who live on a lovely *cascina*, which has been, in time, surrounded by the buildings of Milan, where they raise chicken and keep horses. She tells us the difficulties they're facing:

> "We no longer know what to come up with for our business. We manage to stay afloat, to pay our providers and our bills. But if I tell you that at the end of the year we have saved 10 thousand euros, it would be a lie. And there are many who struggle to pay their bills, to pay their rent, many in Milan, colleagues of ours" (ITA22, 55, female)

Constraints, however, do not only derive from the imbalance between prices paid and prices received, i.e. not only from market conditions, but also from a whole set of regulatory, political and relational arrangements that appear to the farmer's eye just as hostile to their category. They feel their interests are never championed, that they are always forced to endure the worst conditions:

> "Farmers are wronged in many ways, but above all they have this original sin: they've always been considered the last ones. They've always been mistreated. Retailers have always taken advantage of them, politicians have been fooling them, and now there is global commerce that is dropping the final hammer" (ITA7, 50, male)

Farmers perceive this lack of political recognition, and the hostility of the socio-institutional and economic environment within which they act, in a multifaceted

way. In the next sections I will give them voice, to extrapolate their depiction of the shortcomings of the current socio-economic-institutional scenario and understand the ways in which it affects their activity.

5.1.2 *A hostile political/regulatory environment*

> "These are the current policies, unfortunately. We should start understanding that we need a change of direction, [...] but this is totally contrary to this model of development. So, there is no way we can make it, nothing will ever change, either revolution comes up, or nothing will change. We are firmly inside this economic organization, which is an organization that nowadays advantages only big groups, in every sector, from agriculture, to industry, to services. [...] You have to adapt to rules and to a system that doesn't protect anybody, doesn't protect labour, doesn't protect health, doesn't protect the environment, it's born out of wrong productive logics but especially power logics, lobbies. [...] We're slaves of this system, because buttons are being pushed by others" (ITA23, 45, female)

This strong assessment provided by the CSA grower ITA23 expresses a view on the system upon which, to a varying degree, most farmers I met agree. As would be obvious to expect, not all accounts I registered propose such a negative evaluation on the current institutional-economic framework, nor explicitly call upon the need for revolution to fix problems. Yet, despite different collocations along the positivity-negativity spectrum, their attitudes and representations draw a clear picture of how the political and regulatory environment in which they are embedded is perceived (and what they have to do in order to act and work inside it). What becomes apparent is that their lack of economic power (analyzed in the previous sub-section) is mirrored by a lack of political power, which translates into a perception of the socio-political unimportance of farming as a sector within the current institutional arrangement, concretized in a twofold way: absence of protection from external forces undermining economic viability and competitiveness on the one hand; and the imposition of a series of bureaucratic obstacles limiting the space for maneuver on the other hand.

The inappropriateness of legislation and the heaviness of red tape are indeed often conveyed through the concept of 'putting the brakes on', since they are reported to slow down development and limit the realization of new ideas and the introduction of innovations. Interestingly, these complaints are heard from across the board, i.e. not only in both the traditionally heavily bureaucratized Italian state and in the supposedly lighter system of the United Kingdom, but also from different agricultural production compartments. The following quotations, in fact, all mention bureaucracy as an obstacle to small-scale farming activity, and they come from farmers involved in five different types of production, namely dairy goat farming (ITA2), niche horticultural production (wellness-oriented special foods) and processing (ITA5), soft fruit and berries (UK13), poultry rearing (ITA3), and wine-making (ITA14):

> "Rearing livestock implies a series of bureaucratic requirements that discourage and prompt you to give it up" (ITA2, 50, male)

> "What would be necessary is a de-bureaucratization of the system. To make everything quicker. The State is fundamental, but it has to be a support, not an obstacle. I don't ask the State for help, I ask it to not put the brakes on" (ITA5, 32, male)

> "At our size, if you want to get any bigger you've got to employ people. And then you've got the additional problem you've got to deal with the government for tax and all the regulations about employing people. We used to employ people, and I used to do the tax forms and things. It got more and more difficult. And we just don't want to get involved in that sort of amount of regulation. There is a lot more red tape now" (UK13, 78, female)

> "Legislation is heavy, bureaucracy stops us, it slows us down, makes us waste time. Furthermore, the longer we go on, the heavier it seems. Even if they say they're doing something to make it lighter, it seems all the time heavier" (ITA3, 33, male)

> "Rules are very strict. Constraints are very strong. [...] Every leaf I move I have to register it on a bureaucratic level. In these times [of hardships], it undermines a lot the idea of producing something new, we have to think about it a lot and evaluate if it's worthwhile. Whereas in the 80s, people could blow hot and cold. Maybe then there was too much freedom, you could do whatever you wanted and nobody would say anything, but now every single thing has to be reported otherwise you get an inspection. We went from a super loose-weave to a too tight one. It makes you waste time and also lose your willingness to try something new" (ITA14, 38, male)

These last three interviewees (UK13, ITA3 and ITA14) also stress that, over the last decades, regulation has become tighter and more difficult to deal with, that for them it is more problematic now than it was in the past. European food production and processing standards are renowned for being very strict, and EU legislation, especially in what regards food hygiene and safety, is deemed one of the most articulate of the world (Trienekens and Beulens, 2001; Trienekens and Zuurbier, 2008). Even though some farmers in my study consider such high standards and all the red tape they entail, together with the meticulous controls and the frequent inspections, a positive feature – linked to the realization of a better outcome in terms of quality – most of them not only lament it being excessively burdensome, but also absolutely unsuitable for their (limited) size of operation, the normative requirements having been calibrated and reasonable only for big production units.

Those who see safety and hygiene regulation positively still acknowledge the bureaucratic overload imposed on them, but also make an argument about the usefulness of the sets of rules in the progress path towards higher quality standards, since they impose a constant control of the parameters of production which eventually lead to the generation of a better outcome. The two examples that follow come from two cheese makers, one in Yorkshire and one in Lombardy, and

clarify the point:

> "Hygiene and health regulations are also very strict, but I'm used to bureaucracy since when I worked in a bank, so I expected it to be exactly as it is, and it's not very difficult to comply. Also, then you realize essentially they're there for purpose, and it does help you make cheese better" (UK4, 40, male)

> "To those who say that the quality of food was better in the past I reply that they have forgotten reality. Because if I look at [the analyses of] my dad's milk in the 50s, that milk today wouldn't be collected, because the bacterial count is too high, too many somatic cells. They were working in a worse way, they [milk collectors/processors] would make you throw away that milk nowadays. What was quality in 2000, in 2010 has become the baseline level to sell milk to the big industries. The bar is raised, it keeps being raised. For the health and hygiene values it has been an advantage. But also for the taste, in my opinion. I remember when I was in the mountains, in the 50s, farmers would bring milk every day and there were days on which it was undrinkable. The taste of cheeses, instead, has flattened out, due to the sterilization of everything, and hygiene controls, and all cheeses now taste the same" (ITA24, 65, male)

Regarding other aspects of legislation, though, my interviewees propose a more critical view, centered on the inappropriateness of current regulation requirements for small-scale farms and food processing operations. What they perceive is that rule-makers don't understand (or worse, don't take into consideration) the needs of small producers and the characteristics of their operations, and, subsequently, limits that are impossible for them to overcome. The sets of norms they emanate seem to be designed for agri-business, since they impose requirements that can be reasonably fulfilled only by big players, implicitly expecting a small family farm to comply with the same regulations and follow the same procedures as an extensive agri-commodity production business or a large processing plant. To make the point, ITA15 makes reference to a renowned Italian pasta corporation:

> "For us it would be way easier to work relieved from the thousands of bureaucratic problems, from procedures. I'm in the countryside and I want to do something new, give me a chance to do it! Don't compare me to Barilla in the case I would want to make pasta." (ITA15, 32, male)

This one-size-fits-all attitude is thus interpreted not as an inability of the political/regulatory system to comprehend the specifics of small-scale food production, but rather as an umpteenth demonstration of the lack of interest of the regime in protecting and promoting the local sustainable food sector. This is the context in which, for example, ITA23 mentions the new regulation on labels, which was supposed to be introduced at the end of 2016 (Ministero dello Sviluppo Economico and Ministero della Salute, 2016):

> "All businesses with more than 8[44] employees will be required to indicate nutritional facts on their labels. For small producers this is

[44] Actually, the law sets the threshold at 10 employees.

> an obstacle, because every analysis costs 400 euros. Obviously big producers are not bothered at all; actually they already make all the analyses. So it just seems a norm made to cut small producers off at the knees" (ITA23, 45, female)

This perception of the system as prone to favor the big players of the chain is not limited to what concerns regulation about food standards, or requirements about processes and procedures. The over-representation of the interests of agri-business groups is indeed also evoked by farmers as the (unjust) principle guiding the policies about agricultural incentives, which, as commonly known, are a crucial point for the sustainment of the sector in all western countries. The Common Agricultural Policy expenditure of the European Union still accounts for 39% of the whole EU budget (European Commission, 2017a), and is de facto responsible for keeping an essentially hardly competitive sector on its feet, in the face of the external pressures exerted by the global market economy. CAP subsidies work on the basis of two pillars. The first, to which most of the budget is allocated, is concretized in the disbursement of single farm payments based exclusively on the extension of cultivated land. This translates into the fact that large-sized farms retain most of the public expenditure on agriculture, whereas, for the small-and-medium-sized producers, – which still represent the bulk of European agriculture – subsidies don't represent a sufficient measure of income protection (Schmid *et al.*, 2006; Corrado, 2008). In addition, very small farmers with limited land extension (in the range of a few hectares) are not considered eligible for receiving the public incentives, and often end up getting no subsidies at all.

The second pillar of the CAP is designed to spur rural development and, instead of being based on land extension, links payments to specific interventions realized by the farmer, in the realms of environmental stewardship, territorial development, increase in competitiveness, and sustainability. Although appearing more equitable than the single direct payments, there are two major shortcomings hindering the effectiveness of such a measure. In general, the reach of these instruments is limited by the fact that they are significantly less funded than the first pillar's: only 24% of the CAP budget is indeed allocated to these rural development incentives (European Parliamentary Research Service Blog, 2016). Secondly, farmers in my study state that it is very difficult to access these financial aids, either because they are poorly designed, or because they impose so many binding conditions that family farmers are not in the position to respect. In Italy, the European rural development funds are managed by the *regioni*, that every year publish a *Programma di Sviluppo Rurale* (rural development program) giving public notice of the various subsidies available and containing the instructions and requirements for the application. ITA15 tells that every year he reads this document, but ends up inevitably disappointed:

> "The biggest problem, however, is bureaucracy. If bureaucracy was thinner, many new initiatives would spring out. Every year the *PSR Lombardia* is published. I take a look into it to see if it gives some opportunity, to buy a piece of machinery, or to enlarge something... But there are so many constraints that my reflection is invariably concluded after five minutes, and I know that this year we'll have to fend for ourselves. PSR is made for big businesses, oriented towards agroindustry" (ITA15, 32, male)

At the same time, even the technical requirements for these measures don't fit smallholders' reality, and appear to be architected by the policy maker bearing in mind an intensive and highly-mechanized form of agriculture. In 2009, the organic vegetables grower ITA12's failed to obtain a support grant for the establishment of his farm. His story provides an example:

> "When I started they were giving a subsidy for the initial establishment [of new agricultural businesses], but I couldn't obtain it because I had too little land. With just one hectare you don't reach the minimum amount of working hours to be entitled to the grant. [...] The *regione* doesn't differentiate between organic and conventional agriculture, and between the various types of cultivation, [between] who does vegetables and who does corn weeding with herbicides. There are tables of yearly working hours you must reach, which they [the *regione*] determine based on the extension of the land. One hectare resulted to need less than 1800 working hours per year. But in reality one hectare, the two of us have to work it every day, way more than the 1800 hours per year of the table. All vegetable crops, organic, they have no clue what they're saying!" (ITA12, 35, male)

In addition to these problems, which we could define as technical or procedural, farmers communicate a sensation of disillusion and skepticism towards the real potentialities of the public sector to promote a rural-territorial development based on small and sustainable production. While rhetorical calls for the protection of the family farming sector and the recognition of its importance as a lever of sustainable development are present in the institutional discourse at many levels, some of which propositions are being concretely translated into actual projects, primary producers tend to consider them a mere façade, behind which stronger interests imposing an opposite trajectory are hidden. What they reckon is that the influence of corporate capitalism on agricultural-related regulation is so strong that they expect no significant benefits to the small primary producer to come from the current political/regulatory environment. This skepticism is rooted in the conviction that most attempts to realize an endogenous growth, from the ground up, or more generally to champion the interests of small-scale producers, are eventually hampered by some sort of power emanation deriving from the current economic-institutional regime. In short, they see the regulatory framework to be ultimately controlled by the players positioned at the neck of Heffernan's hourglass (1999), whose interest is to further concentrate and liberalize the market, and whose power games have the effect of streaming against sustainable rural development.

Interestingly, the most vivid examples I could register about this kind of interpretation of the behavior of institutions and industry players regard two affairs, one happened in the UK in the 1980s and the other occurred in Italy more recently, both revolving around milk. The first is the dismantling of the British Milk Marketing Board, an agency of the Ministry of Agriculture that used to set the price of milk and act as a buffer between producers and processors/retailers. Since its abolition supermarkets' power in the milk supply chain has enormously grown, and the price of milk has severely dropped. It is considered a disastrous decision by farmers, taken in the name of interests exogenous to the primary

production compartment, as the description provided by the former dairy farmer (now multifunctional, specialty lamb producer) UK12 exemplifies:

> "It worked as a giant cooperative, let's say. All milk was bought through the Marketing Board, but then it was dismissed in the 1980s because the government thought it was a manipulation of the market and considered self-regulated market forces to be more efficient. But basically supermarkets lobbied for its abolition, so that they could buy milk at the prices they wanted. So dairy coops were regionalized and started competing with each other for the big contracts with supermarkets, and that drove the price of milk down. [...] Until countries won't get desperate and start to impose these public monopolies back to regulate the prices, the situation can only get worse" (UK12, 56, male)

In recent years, instead, small high-quality-producing dairy farms in Italy started experimenting with selling raw (unpasteurized) milk on their premises through automatic vending machines. It was a form of direct selling through which they could get a fair price for their milk, usually around 1 euro per liter, significantly higher than the 30-to-40 cents they used to get when selling to a milk collector. It became rapidly popular, so many producers started investing in it and placing various machines (the cost of which is around 15-20 thousand euros) in their neighboring urban areas, to distribute fresh raw milk directly to citizens. It seemed like a good prospect for development up until when, following a news story focused on the dangers of consuming raw milk broadcast by a national television channel, a communication campaign centered on discrediting raw milk began. Sales went down abruptly, and in the opinion of the pig grower ITA15, behind this attempt to direct public opinion lied the lobbies of the milk industry:

> "The raw milk affair was scandalous. The vending machines had really caught on, and very quickly. Many producers had bet on them, even seriously, precisely to escape the system of underpaid milk. But the interests of industry are too strong. It only took a news story on TG5[45], which various media then went after, to discredit raw milk to a point where a few of my acquaintances saw a 50% reduction in sales from the vending machines from one day to the next. I also know about milk [processing] corporations that have obliged their suppliers to get rid of the vending machines on their own farms, threatening to stop collecting their milk, because 'it takes me five minutes to find someone else who sells me your five thousand liters of milk a day'. This is blackmail, and these are things that TG5 didn't say! It's an out-and-out sabotage. Even ASL[46] started hammering with inspections. A dairy farmer I know used to find the inspector every day at his machine, nit-picking. [...] These are the things that screw up the attempts to create a sustainable economy" (ITA15, 32, male)

In sum, the picture that emerges is one in which a *political* problem runs parallel to an *economic* problem. The farmers of my study – whether they employ harsh terms

[45] The news from a national broadcaster.

[46] The national health service branch in charge of supervising the hygiene of food production processes and realizing sanitary inspections.

like *sabotage* or maintain a milder tone – tend to agree on this vision and point the finger at the political irrelevance that has come to characterize agriculture in the last two decades. The loss of economic importance is reflected in the current lack of political representation which in turn, in the view of farmers, disables those mechanisms of protection that allowed for the resistance of agriculture in an industry-and-service-oriented economy, leaving what used to be a heavily-subsidized sector exposed to external pressures that are becoming all the time stronger due to globalization and eventually too hard to be coped with. The next section focuses on farmers' representation of these two, intertwined, problems.

5.1.3 *Lack of political recognition and a global market*

> "In the past years, agriculture was a huge catchment area for votes, and this was the only reason it was paid attention. [. . .] As a consequence, the agricultural world has always been granted very generous aid, and those who have been able to take advantage of it have become very well off. But with the reduction of the agricultural population, this prerogative got lost. There is not a mass anymore, and so neither a representative force. There is no power to change anything, the agricultural population doesn't count for shit anymore" (ITA2, 50, male)

ITA2's colorful statement embodies the generalized feeling farmers report that, on the governmental scene, agriculture always comes last. They blame politicians for their choices that invariably neglect the farming sector. In their representation, indeed, other industries or sectors are always favored over agriculture, both in the case of internal affairs and foreign relationships:

> "In Italy, we always sell off all agriculture and the food chain for other industries, for metallurgy, all things that to create temporary employment destroy the environment, provoke disasters, without applying the production processes that are more technological, less polluting" (ITA15, 32, male)

> "Renzi signed a commercial pact with Vietnam: import of enormous quantities of rice in exchange for export of technological material. Our industries are selling only Vietnamese rice. [. . .] And some of it comes out as made in Italy, and this pisses me off. It's clear that rice growers suffer from this" (ITA4, 62, male)

> "We cannot be under the illusion that someone will do for us what they have no interest in doing. The value of land is seen only from a commercial point of view. At a time when [land] as agriculture it is not worth a thing, they'll build a road on it, a building, Expo[47], nothing having anything to do with the agricultural. [. . .] As long as politics will be expressed by these politicians here, as long as people won't take matters into their own hands and take responsibility, and won't stop to delegate these people, how can we be positive? I can't" (ITA23, 45, female)

[47]She refers to Expo Milan 2015, an event that, despite being themed on food, was heavily criticized by many food producers and other food system stakeholders.

This last excerpt, from the interview to ITA23, illustrates the very low expectations that many farmers have. Without sufficient economic incentives and political recognition, farmers do not believe that any adequate policy for farming could possibly emanate from the current establishment. What for some of them is looming, rather, is the risk of dismissal of the entire national agricultural apparatus, which they envision by connecting the evidence of the constant reduction in the number of farm enterprises with the conversely growing detachment of the political/regulatory system from the demands of the farming sector. They deliver this idea by referring to the image of the 'State giving up on agriculture', implying that in the absence of an appropriate framework of intervention the destiny of agriculture will be to become economically unviable and absolutely unappealing to new generations. This is the sentiment in both Italy and the UK, as the following quotations give proof:

> "The only thing we can do is create a system at a higher level than that of the single producers. We need to build a countrywide system. We need regions and States to protect agriculture. With the complete opening of borders, if price is the only winner, we lose. We've got to be good then, with our professional associations, to knock on governments' doors to demand them to serve the interest of agriculture. [...] This is to allow competitiveness. Because currently it is like Italy was admitting it doesn't want an agricultural sector, that it foregoes it" (ITA5, 32, male)

> "None of [farmers'] children will go anywhere near that business: 'oh dad, you work far too hard! What? No, I'm not taking over that business! I can go and become this or that, and I'll work half the time for double the money'. And so, we're getting to the end of Britain being a farming nation" (UK3, 60, male)

These sets of problems are complemented by (and obviously interlinked with) the distortions provoked by the *globalization* of markets. Trade liberalization makes the conditions that farmers have to withstand more complex, and multiplies the variables that farmers are not able to control. The inability to predict, foresee and control phenomena that have a great impact on agricultural activities but happen on a level which is totally out of farmers' reach is nicely condensed in dairy farmer ITA24's suggestion to his colleagues to constantly monitor the weather in New Zealand:

> "It is really a global market. [...] With tariffs it was a bit controlled, but prices are made in Chicago, there's nothing we can do about it. If there is drought in New Zealand, cows have no pasture, the price of powdered milk rises, and so also the price of our milk grows. Between 2008 and 2009, the last increase in milk price was due to this. Indeed what the farmer should do is to check the weather in New Zealand every day, hoping there is drought" (ITA24, 65, male)

Globalization increases competition in a way that is deemed unjust by farmers. Different geographical, social and economic conditions among countries have a deep impact on the costs of the farming activity, which are then not reflected in the prices fixed at the global level. Countries in which land availability is

higher and, consequently, the average dimension of farms is larger, thus enjoy a competitive advantage. This is not the case for England and especially Italy, which are countries in which, for geographical, historical, and economic reasons, land is expensive and the backbone of the rural fabric is composed of small-to-medium holdings. In addition to this, another inequality-producing factor connected to globalization is, once again, regulation. It differs, and subsequently creates tensions, even within the European Union, as ITA15 tells us:

> "We're invaded by the German market, the Dutch, the Danish, where they have monster facilities, hyper-technological. Where the animals eat what they eat [i.e. *low-quality feed*], they see the light once a year when they load them on the truck, they can use antibiotics up until the day before they load them on the truck... All things that we cannot do here, the protection of consumers is way stricter. Therefore we have higher costs and we can't produce at those prices" (ITA15, 32, male)

The whole food chain is global. The food processing and retailing sectors are as embedded in global competition as primary production. With the difference being that downstream players do not have to rely on a non-mobile factor of production like land. Regardless of their size or economic power, then, to minimize costs and maximize profit, processing and retailing companies can more easily adjust to (or even take advantage of) global prices. For what concerns farmers, this results in the fact that local/national products often struggle to find their way into the conventional food chain, having been substituted by the industry with cheaper imports. This goes against the construction of a countrywide system, and is severely lamented by my interviewees:

> "The problem is that despite Italian food industry having a great name, it doesn't source from Italian farmers" (ITA10, 30, female)

> "There is so little British fruit and veg in supermarkets now. And you just think: why? [The price is] 49p for three whatever, and they have got to transport it across the world to get into the supermarket shelf, plus all the packaging that comes with it. And you think: how much is that farmer being given for that product? [...] It's awful! But people don't think about that" (UK5, 50, female)

In conclusion, the situation is problematic and charged with tensions. Farmers perceive they are fighting a battle that is greater than them. External forces are too powerful to be resisted, most variables are out of their control, their capacity for lobbying and association is limited, they feel their voice is not heard and no incisive support is expected from public policies. In addition, despite the system being strongly subsidized, family farmers, as we have seen, complain about the ineffectiveness of such measures and their poor design. ITA8 works on a multifunctional multi-product organic farm near the lake of Como, and his overview is a good sample of the representation of the current situation of the farmers I met. He considers the system to be *sick*:

> "There is a huge market problem. Agriculture has specialized in producing what is demanded by large-scale retailers, and everyone feeds this system, which is not remunerative and is held up on its feet

> by EU subsidies, otherwise it would slump down. It's a sick system" (ITA8, 36, male)

ITA8 mentions an element of crucial importance in today's food system arrangement: supermarkets, i.e. the most powerful actors of the chain. The aim of my research is to understand the forms of reaction of farmers to the generalized crisis of agriculture, and the modalities they employ to create or affiliate to an alternative food economy. To serve this purpose, it is indispensable to take into account what ITA8 says, i.e. that corporate retailers are ultimately molding the entire system, giving shape to its (mainstream) development pattern. The dimension of the relation between small-scale farmers and food processing corporations, wholesalers and, especially, supermarket chains is therefore essential to grasp in primis farmers' attitudes towards the players of the conventional market channels, and in secundis what the conventional economy represents for them in commercial terms. This is the topic of the next section, in which I will try to analyze the possibilities that derive for farmers from the conventional economy, and the constraints it imposes on them.

5.2 Relationship with the players of the conventional market channels

Supermarkets are the most powerful actors of the food chain. In the two countries of my study, as well as in every other part of the industrialized world, the majority of food for human consumption is sold in supermarkets. The power they have accumulated is enormous, even higher than that of the processing industry, which ultimately has to rely on supermarkets themselves to sell its products. Supermarkets are able to dictate the terms of the food market, and exert a great influence on it. As a consequence, primary producers who have a product to market to the final consumer – whether large-scale agribusiness-oriented or peasant-like family farms – still see them as the mainstream option to sell their goods.

My research focuses on the *alternative* food economy, and looks exclusively at producers who operate within its infrastructure, at least *partly.* The *alternativeness* of AFNs and direct chains is founded mainly on the contraposition to supermarkets, taken as the symbol of the current food economy. An 'alternative to supermarkets' is what both producers and consumers are looking for, so innovation in this realm is directed towards elaborating ways to exchange food while avoiding the mechanism of the conventional system and its severe limitations. Nevertheless, this doesn't mean that all 'alternative' producers are completely detached from the constellation of industrial processors, wholesalers and large-scale retailers that compose the conventional system. Actually, most of them are not. In fact, only a reduced number of farms in my study have never had any sort of relationship with the conventional markets, while most of them either used to sell to conventional outlets but then, as the food crisis unraveled, had to stop and develop novel forms to cater directly to the public in order to secure their survival, or they currently keep balancing between AFNs and conventional channels.

Many of my interviewees, as stated, have a story of collaboration with large retailers, and all of them have a rather neat opinion about supermarkets and the

world they represent. At the same time, they are striving to emancipate themselves from a system they consider oppressive and exploiting, one that threatens their possibility to make a living. This is where the interest of the researcher lies: in a frame of resistance, 'alternative' producers' evaluations and attitudes towards supermarkets, as well as the conflicts they live working with them and the *hybridity* shown by the peculiar alternative-conventional accommodations some of them realize, assume a great importance to understand the innovations that are occurring in the farming sector and the motivations behind producers' economic choices.

This section analyses the relationship between family farmers and the players of the conventional market channels, which is not univocally characterized, but assumes a variety of connotations. Even if generally considered problematic to deal with, supermarkets are indeed approached by farmers with a wide spectrum of attitudes, ranging from deep despise, to milder refusal, to forms of pragmatic acceptation born out of the need to sell, or even (in a limited number of cases, though) appreciation. This leads to different compromises and to a varying degree of inclusion of supermarkets into farmers' commercial strategies, this being an issue they also weigh and ponder in ethical-political terms.

In summarizing terms, the commercial relationship between family farmers and supermarkets as results from the empirical material I gathered can be described as one-sided, and is characterized by multiple problematic facets. There is an evident issue about prices: supermarkets exert complete control and producers have very narrow margins to negotiate. This is linked to what farmers perceive as supermarkets' excessive market power, generating an imbalance that causes producers to feel they are too weak to have a say and compete in the current system. Furthermore, difficulties arise on a pragmatic-technological level: supermarket demands are reported to be too hard to satisfy, and scale incompatibility often makes collaboration impossible. In addition, farmers are generally well aware of the riskiness of committing to large wholesalers or retailers, because they don't 'commit back', i.e. contracts (if existing) do not provide security to producers, who subsequently face the risk of losing a significant portion of their turnover if the other party decides, for whatever reason and without notice, to stop buying from them. In the following sub-sections I will look in greater detail at these critical elements, enriching the analysis with empirical evidence.

5.2.1 *Aggressive appropriation of value*

The first issue that emerges when delving into my interviewees' accounts about their relations with the players of the conventional food chain is (quite obviously) related to prices. Supermarkets' huge scales of operation and market power allow them to impose the price they want to their providers. Small producers' condition of market dependency (Fligstein and Dauter, 2007) hampers almost any possibility for negotiation, so that they have to accept the price they are offered if they want to sell the (large) quantities demanded by the conventional players. Also, even though large retail companies are now starting to deal directly with small producers (a thing that can interestingly be seen as a form of co-option of the modes of working of the alternative players by the conventional operators, as I will analyze later), most commonly producers have to pass through a middleman to sell to these large surfaces, because supermarkets tend to make contracts

only with large-scale farms. This adds an intermediate step and, consequently, reduces the portion of value-added that can be appropriated by producers. Often such reductions get so accentuated that it becomes unfeasible for producers, in strictly economic terms, to keep selling through conventional channels. It was not uncommon in my fieldwork, indeed, to register accounts of former commercial relationships between producers and corporate retailers that had to be interrupted precisely for these reasons, like the following from ITA3:

> "Yes, [in the very beginning] we were a cereal farm, but then we started farming gooses. [...] We started producing them for mass distribution, we did it for two or three years and then we saw that the thing wasn't working, so from one year to another we stopped. [...] The relationship with large distribution didn't work *only* for us, naturally. And only because since we were going through a wholesaler, he offered the price he wanted, meaning the price that was the most economically satisfying for him, so we were basically cut out. [...] We're not talking about people who don't want to settle for little, here we're speaking of people who are working for nothing, [...] here the problem is not being able to cover farming expenses" (ITA3, 33, male)

In addition, the farmers I interviewed report that in most instances the burden of supermarkets' commercial strategies is on their shoulders, because they pass onto their providers the discounts they offer to their customers. UK1, for example, is an egg producer. He sells his eggs at his street market stalls for a price that ranges from 1 to 1.50 pound a dozen (depending on the size of the eggs) and avoids selling to supermarkets and wholesalers exactly because there is no space for negotiation on prices:

> "Supermarkets pay ridiculously low prices for eggs, less than 50p a dozen. [And] they do silly deals like 18 eggs, and they only buy 15 eggs and expect the producer to put 3 free eggs in every pack [...] because they're doing an offer, so that producer will suffer. Crazy" (UK1, 20, male)

ITA 25, instead, sells her family's varied vegetables both to farmers' markets and to supermarkets. She deems the prices she receives from supermarkets to be fair, but she has to bear the cost of the supermarket's commercial strategy:

> "There are so many discounts at the end of the year, and promotions, reward programs, point collection schemes that are all paid by the suppliers. It is not shared, they impose it and period. You have no say in that. [...] The collection-points are split between the various suppliers, and it's us paying them all. They [the supermarkets] don't pay anything, everything is on the supplier" (ITA25, 40, female)

Supermarkets are thus blamed for driving the prices down, either directly through their decisional power or indirectly through discounting and other commercial practices, which many consider unfair[48]. In Italy, the national Antitrust Authority

[48] The fairness of corporate retailers' commercial behavior is indeed beginning to be questioned also in the institutional sphere. In 2013, in fact, the Italian Antitrust Authority promoted an investigation to verify the presence of vexatious and anti-competition behaviors adopted by supermarkets, concluding that in some instances the practices put in place by supermarkets could be considered as distortion of the competition (Ciconte and Liberti, 2017).

indeed estimates that discounts and contributions imposed by supermarkets have a cost for suppliers that, on average, sums up to 24.2% of their revenues from sales to supermarkets (Ciconte and Liberti, 2017). Basically, one fourth of what supermarkets pay to buy the products comes back to them in other forms.

Their detrimental effect on the whole system is acknowledged even by those producers who are trying to collaborate with them. ITA24, for example, is directly witnessing the great power accumulated by supermarkets. He is a member of the *DAM Distretto Agricolo Milanese*, an association of peri-urban farmers which has recently been created with the explicit purpose of engaging in a direct conversation with Milanese institutions in order to defend the interests of producers of the city. Thanks to its lobbying action, producers-members obtained the support of the municipal authorities in the definition of a project that involves the commercialization of DAM milk and *stracchino*[49] through a large retail company. This experience allowed ITA24 to refine his opinion about supermarkets:

> "Having entered into a relationship with the large distribution, we've understood a bit how it works. It works that distribution, even if not totally predatory[50], still covers 60-65% of the purchases of Italians. It's them who control the market. The producer is always the weak subject of the chain" (ITA24, 65, male)

This sensation of 'aggressive appropriation of value' is felt by producers across the board of my study, with no significant differences being detectable between Italy and England. Cheshire-based UK9 comes to define this dynamic as a situation in which supermarkets 'virtually own' their suppliers. Interestingly, this framing comes from a young married couple who set up a vegetable farm from nothing, taking a small plot of land and starting retailing all their produce directly to customers through a box subscription scheme. They report their business to be thriving: they leased another piece of land (which now mounts up to slightly more than 3 hectares), they could build a shed on their premises, and they refined their growing schedules by implementing a specifically-tailored software they themselves created, which helps them to manage agricultural activities, customers database and deliveries. The husband is convinced that this is the best way to make agriculture viable, precisely because:

> "Control equals income. Most farmers I know don't control the products to the end user. They're selling, you know, a lorry load and have no control on it. Even the big guy supporting the supermarket hasn't got the control. In fact, what I see is that the supermarket owns them, they virtually own them, and they see them as workers for them. If you read these contracts from the supermarkets, you're owned by them, you're not allowed to sell to anyone else" (UK9, 35, male)

The forms of innovation like UK9's have the evident purpose of reducing the dependency on other players of the chain, by detaching producers' activities (from sourcing to marketing) from the conventional food system. Clearly UK9's business decisions are just one example of the strategies that are currently being put in

[49] A Lombard typical fresh soft cheese.

[50] For precision's sake, he employs the word *piratesca*, meaning pirate-like or piratical.

place by farmers to achieve this goal. It's an aim of this work to understand and systematize these strategies to provide an interpretation of what's going on in agriculture in the modern day. Nevertheless, before analyzing the relevant data with this objective in mind, it is necessary to posit the question of what makes it so difficult for small producers to work with supermarkets. After all, supermarkets have enormous buying power, so that they can buy very large quantities of products from small farmers (or even their entire production) and retail them through their widely disseminated networks of points of sales. Thus they could potentially relieve farmers from the burden of marketing, promotion and logistics. Surely the prices they pay are lower than those producers would get by selling through AFNs or directly to customers, but isn't the convenience of selling to a large collector a sufficient counter-weight to the reduced prices? In other terms, are there other elements apart from the price level that are perceived by farmers as barriers hindering their collaboration with the operators of the conventional food chain? Apparently yes, as I will comment in the following sub-section.

5.2.2 *A one-sided relationship*

In addition to price issues, what results from my empirical research is that there also are various types of incompatibility, simultaneously practical and ideological, obstructing the functioning of the commercial relationship between primary producers and supermarkets. First, there is a mismatch of size-related prerogatives. Supermarkets are not suitable for small farmers, at least this is what small farmers themselves tend to think:

> "In my opinion large distribution brings no advantages to small producers. To go after supermarkets you've got to be a big producer, you can't do it if you're small" (ITA11, 36, male)

Simply put, supermarkets' demands are too great to be satisfied by small farmers, either because they are incommensurate with respect to such farms' productive capacity, or because they would require a thorough restructuring of the farming activity with the explicit purpose of adapting to supermarkets' needs: an operation that most farmers are reluctant to realize, perceiving it as risky and ultimately unprotected since supermarkets are not willing to give sufficient guarantees.

The quantity mismatch between supermarkets' demands and producers' possibilities is effectively reported by UK2, a 40-year-old woman who raises goats for meat consumption on a small, sustainable scale:

> "A big supermarket chain once rang me to ask me if I could supply them. And I said, 'do you have any concept of the scale of production of goat meat in the UK?' And I started the sentence with 'I produce approximately 150 carcasses in a year' and I was about to say 'and you would want them every week', but he anticipated me with 'oh, heck we'd need that every day'. The only way to meet their requirements, in my opinion, is to reduce quality and to produce rubbish" (UK2, 40, female)

The demand for large quantities is, in addition, hardly compatible with small producers' orientation towards a diversified sustainable production. To meet

supermarkets' requirements producers are called to specialize on the production of certain crops, a thing that often clashes not only with their ethical mindset, but also with their technical way of maintaining and nurturing the 'health' (i.e. the long-term sustainability) of their patches of land, which is obtained through crop rotation and maximum diversification. Basically, it clashes with what Van Der Ploeg (2008) calls the 'reproduction of the resource base', which is a distinctive feature of peasant farming. The creation and development of a self-controlled and self-managed resource base is indeed considered by the Dutch scholar a strategic feature of peasant *resistance*, since it "allows for those forms of co-production of man and living nature that interact with the market, allow for survival and for further prospects and feed back into and strengthen the resource base, improve the process of co-production, enlarge autonomy and, thus, reduce dependency" (*ibid.*, 2008, p. 23), ultimately translating into a mechanism of emancipation for farmers. Adapting production to the logics imposed by supermarkets goes in an opposite direction: it limits the possibilities for an autonomous process of resource management, resulting in an erosion of the ecological capital possessed by farmers and, thus, increased dependency, as the vegetable grower UK3 illustrates in the following excerpt:

> "We used to supply local supermarkets 25 years ago, but we soon gave up because the demands on us were too great, they wanted to get me to grow less and less crops, that pushed my risk up but they were not willing to pay for it. [...]Their buying power, the way they rotate their buyers so no farmer can get friendly with them... It's a horrible, horrible way to work. All old market gardeners – if there are any left – now to supply to supermarkets have to have more land, and specialize in one or two crops for supermarkets. That means you've really got to grow lettuce all of the time on your land, which is not good because it goes down with more and more pests and diseases, or you've got to rent fresh land every year, and the whole logistics of it is an absolute nightmare" (UK3, 60, male)

Aside from the technical-ecological incompatibility, UK3 also conveys an interesting message: it is impossible to *get friendly* with supermarket people. I deem this human note far from irrelevant. In fact, most farmers I met seek commercial relationships that are built upon more human and rewarding social interaction, reciprocal in their aspects of mutual comprehension and trust, while they lament the harsh treatment they receive from many operators of the conventional chain. The weight that is given by farmers to the social component of their economic relations has not to be ascribed to the sphere of a negligible romanticism, but has to be read as a direct expression of the polanyian dis-embeddedness characterizing the current food system. In parallel, farmers' economic strategies *coincide* with their attempts to re-embed their operations into a social structure. In their struggle for survival, economic (value-added-related) processes exist alongside endeavors to re-establish social links, showing that the crisis of family farming cannot be solved by intervening exclusively in market mechanisms or rules. A correction of the whole system in a re-socialization sense is therefore indispensable, which is where the main strength of AFNs lie: their explicit aim to create a net of social bonds upon which new economic patterns can be installed is a crucial element for the affirmation (both personal and economic, as we have seen) of family farmers. This is recognized by farmers themselves, emerging in my interviews

especially when the topic of supermarkets is addressed, like in the case of the market gardener UK5, who connects a failed experiment to supply a supermarket with a preference for 'dealing with' a Manchester-based food coop (Unicorn), not primarily because they grant a higher price (which they do), but for reasons that belong more to the human-relational than to the economic:

> "There was one year when [...] we were just experimenting whether I could grow early crops, for instance celery, and supply [a supermarket chain]. [...] But it didn't work out, and they're quite difficult to deal with. They phone you at about 5 in the morning on the day they want the stuff, and you've got to pick it and get it to them for delivery by something like 9.30 in the morning. It's quite stressful, really, [...] it's quite difficult to deal with supermarkets really, isn't it? You have to come up to these very strict standards. It's better to deal with people like Unicorn's, because they're more sympathetic and understanding". (UK5, 50, female)

Farmers look for sympathy and understanding, which they can't find in the conventional players. What they feel, on the contrary, is a sensation that, despite a renewed interest in local production, supermarkets and other big operators have no real intention to support small producers. They feel their needs are not understood, or taken into account, and that attempts to find a common ground are often made in vain. Let's provide two examples. ITA13 owns a 24-hectares-large fruit orchard, most of which is dedicated to the production of apples. Despite being smaller than the average apple farm in the country, his production is large enough to sell to the conventional markets, which he used to do until the conventional players he supplied started to delay payments so long that it became economically unfeasible for him to continue working with them. Severe liquidity problems thus forced him to 'go alternative', i.e. find direct market outlets. Thanks to this conversion he saved his business:

> "I've always produced a ton of apples, so I started doing both supermarkets [...] and the general wholesale market in Milan. With only these channels I would have had to stop. Mainly for a matter of liquidity. You never get the money. With [the supermarkets] we went from 60-days payments, to 90 and then to 120. In a reality like mine, you have big expenses from June to October, [...] so when it comes mid-October you need money, because you have to pay people. [...] But when you sell in the conventional channels, in that moment you don't have the money. Beginning to deliver the royal gala, the summer apple, in mid-August, I remember not being able to have any revenue until January. Five months go by, this means shutting down a business" (ITA13, 45, male)

The second example relates to the topic of urban food policies, and shows that the participation of corporate players in the construction of a local food system is difficult to obtain. ITA15's family farm produces cereal flours and pork meat. He was part of a group of farmers that, in accordance with the municipality of Milan, was trying to set up a project to supply local food to the private company (a multinational) that manages public canteens in the city. Public procurement is considered a crucial area of intervention in the local/sustainable food discourse,

since it affects both the spheres of public health and public finance, and it could represent an important incentive in the construction of a localized system of food provision (Sonnino, 2009b). In this case though, despite its societal relevance, the project couldn't be carried on, reportedly due to the demands of the food service corporation, which were too binding for farmers to be satisfied:

> "We went to the town hall to have this meeting with local producers and [a canteen-management corporation], for this project to try to supply them. But [the canteen corporation] imposed a series of restrictions, in terms of quantities, deliveries to be realized by producers, and payments delayed by 120 days. So it all came to nothing. We just asked to have 30-days payments, as regulation states, and the product to be picked up. But when there is not goodwill from every one of the parties, there is nowhere to go" (ITA15, 32, male)

It is important to notice, though, that I didn't record *only* stories of failed or tense relationships between small producers and large retailers. Earlier in this chapter I quoted ITA25 who, despite having to bear the cost of supermarkets promotions, has no intention to stop selling to them because, given the structure of her family's farm, the balance between farmers' markets and large retailers she's relying on is proving effective in providing viability to her business. But more precisely on the topic of the intersection between the economic and the human in the producer-supermarket relation, it's interesting to report the analysis of ITA24. In this chapter, I already quoted an excerpt from his interview in which he, having started a commercial relationship with a large retailing firm together with the colleagues of his association of producers, acknowledged the weak position of producers in such a venture. Nevertheless, as he follows in his account, his evaluation of the supermarket way of doing things is not negative, and actually believes that there are spaces for a fruitful collaboration, despite an unquestioned imbalance fundamentally governing it. His depiction brings about some considerations:

> "[The supermarket company] receives everybody. Everyone who proposes a product, they taste it and if they like it they try to reason on the feasibility. You can also tell them the price, because they have no problems with price if the product is good. Because these are situations in which there is no advertisement, you are nobody, and anyway they will add the mark-up they want, and then if the product doesn't sell sufficiently they'll just stop buying it. Eventually, if you can find a balance, there's a certain margin, because you're selling a product that is not a commodity after all. This is to say that up to 10-15 years ago these dynamics weren't existing. It was necessary to go through a bigger company: wholesalers, collectors, consortia. The dynamic that is being established regarding organic, quality, territory, provenance, producers' identity, these kind of things, they [supermarkets] are kind of buying them too" (ITA24, 65, male)

What can be inferred from this? First of all, that supermarkets dealing directly with local producers is a novelty in the sector, which mirrors the growing interest among the public in a specific type of food production (which is, as ITA24 says, local, high-quality, environmentally-friendly, and traceable). Secondly, and

subsequently, that this consumer-driven renewed attention can open up spaces for a better collaboration between small producers and corporate retailers. What would this collaboration be based on, though? ITA24 makes it clear: agreements can be made but with an awareness that even if you are producing what is a) *not a commodity*, you (the producer) b) *are nobody* and that they (the supermarkets) can c)*add the mark-up they want*, and if the product doesn't give them sufficient returns they can suddenly cut the collaboration by d) *stopping to buy it.*

This set of features of this new direct relationship between supermarkets and small producers has an interesting double effect: it resembles the typical commercial approach of AFNs, but at the same time reveals a neat differentiation – sometimes figuring as opposition – from the ways they operate. There are three elements, indeed, that seem to be borrowed from the *modus operandi* of the organizations of the alternative food economy. The first one is sourcing directly from small local producers, giving them the opportunity to sell directly to retailers and skip the usual intermediate steps of the chain. A short and localized food chain is the foundation stone of every organization or sales channel aimed at the construction of an alternative food economy, both philosophically and concretely. Supermarkets' interest in local food has significantly grown over the last decade, as the expansion of aisles dedicated to local produce and the proliferation of national flags on the shelves of both Italian and British large distributors can attest. After decades in which anonymous highly-processed food was the dominant offer in supermarkets, now corporate retailers are clearly riding the wave of consumers' demand for 'food from somewhere' (McMichael, 2002), thus adapting both their sourcing methods and their narrative to the changed expectations expressed by their customer base.

A second point of contact with AFNs is inherent in ITA24's statement that the product supermarkets are directly sourcing from small producers 'is not a commodity after all', meaning it has to have peculiar, distinctive qualities. One of the characteristics of AFNs, especially in Italy, is that aside from objectives of economic solidarity and justice, they stimulate the circulation of 'gastronomically-superior' foods, i.e. products with deeper socio-cultural meaning and higher organoleptic properties than those usually found in the dominant market structures. Part of AFNs proposal is, as Martindale and his colleagues put it, "a 'culinary adventure', the option of purchasing something that cannot be found at a supermarket" (Martindale *et al.*, 2018, p. 31). Supermarkets' buying officers are well aware of this, and their direct approach to local producers can be thus read as part of a strategy to fill a niche, to align their offer to satisfy a market segment other operators are currently covering.

A third and last element regards pricing. Like when selling through AFNs, in this novel space of relations with supermarkets there are possibilities for farmers to set the prices of their products – this is not to say it happens all the time, as we have seen earlier, but surely within this type of interaction they are given a higher negotiation capacity than before. There are two conditions that allow this happen, though. Supermarkets add a discretional margin to the price they pay, and they have no binding obligations to keep sourcing the product if the sales performance is not up to their standards. The former condition results in local products often being sold at an expensive price to consumers and thus targeted

at well-off individuals while, on the farmer's side, suffering the competition of cheaper imports or industrially-processed foods (which are concurrently available at supermarkets). The latter condition can translate into a form of excessive uncertainty for farmers, whose products' performance in supermarkets is highly exposed both to consumer trends and to the quirks of supermarkets' commercial strategy. The risk for producers is therefore to lose the investments they realize to adapt (their productive capacity, or their farming practices) to supermarkets if the supermarkets unilaterally interrupt the collaboration because products no longer fit their strategies, in addition to having to bear the consequences of losing an important customer. This is what happened to ITA4, a small organic wine-maker in the Milan area. He used to sell through a supermarket chain, and was very happy with the experience. Unfortunately, he reports, it was ceased by a unilateral decision:

> "With [the supermarket chain] we worked very well. Fair treatment, right price, reasonable promotions. With wine, supermarkets basically work through promotions. [...] With us, even if we were 'on promotion' they always bought at the same price, which was honest: just 15% less of our list price. And so they were bearing the cost of promotion, so basically they were working below-cost. Very serious people. When a promotion was ongoing they used to ask us to go and spend two days there, doing tastings. We used to sell a lot, you could see the whole pallet rapidly emptying. You could have maximum two promotions per year. [...] The relationship then got interrupted because of a unilateral decision by them, when the buyer [buying officer] changed. He reckoned that organic wine didn't sell enough. [...] Losing a customer like that hit us hard, but not super hard, because we also used to sell a lot at the winery gate, which has always been our stronghold" (ITA4, 62, male).

Back to ITA24's experience, then, and to the similarities with the ways of operating of AFNs shown by his account of the direct producer-supermarket relationship, what can be envisaged here is a manifestation of the much-theorized process of *co-option* of alternative practices by mainstream food players (see, for example: Marsden and Franklin, 2013). Whether this attempt to incorporate innovative practices into the circuits of mass distribution will contribute to stepping up the sustainability of the food system at large or will help, on a more circumscribed note, to mitigate the state of distress of family farmers in the years to come, is still a debated issue (Goodman *et al.*, 2012). However, rather than an appropriation of counter-cultural values expressed by alternative forces and assimilated into regime infrastructures, supermarkets' interest in local food and their subsequent direct approach to small producers seems to be definable as a form of niche management, motivated by a willingness to cater to a growing rank of consumers who evaluate sustainability and locality as an important element guiding their food purchasing habits. This is in line with Morley *et al.*'s (2014) interpretation of the corporate-governance modes of managing the food crisis, which tends to compartmentalize sustainability (writ large) into a revised form of category management, ultimately maintaining operations within corporate logics instead of challenging them.

In simple words, despite conventional players' intention to get closer to small

producers, the relationships they build are always one-sided and lack that reciprocity which is needed to provide rewarding social recognition to farmers and to establish a fairer economic apparatus. This is the most striking difference between mainstream channels and those operated by alternative food organizations, and it is all condensed in ITA24's awareness that even though a direct contact with supermarkets is realized, still 'you are nobody'. What this means is that no matter how close supermarkets get to producers, the elements that are appreciated the most by the latter, i.e. trust and commitment, are rarely detectable in the former's practices. As opposed to AFNs – the activities of which are specifically designed to build up a relationship of mutual trust and long-term commitment with producers (this is where they derive their ideological thrust from) – large distribution seems to offer no certainty as a commercial partner, because it demands commitment but doesn't 'commit back'. In this sense, ITA16's account of how his market garden's relationship with the conventional players used to work is explanatory:

> "Nothing was ever written down. At the beginning of the year we used to call them [the buyers] to ask what they thought they would need during the year. Based on these indications we would plant huge quantities of the products they required, hoping that once ready they would have bought them. However, they didn't have any obligation: at their own discretion they could decide whether to come and collect or not, or how much to collect, so there came the risk. [...] So [what used to happen] is that they would come and collect the stuff when they were in extreme need, while when they had a bigger load coming in [from somewhere cheaper] they would reject our stuff making excuses. It is difficult to work with them. It happened to us that they rejected 200 kilos of courgettes without giving us absolutely any communication. The week before, without a truckload just about to come from Sicily, they would have taken them" (ITA16, 34, male)

This is why he, like many other 'repented' conventional agri-food producers, is now trying to focus exclusively on short chains, moving away from the mainstream markets and the risky relationships with its players:

> Selling directly surely requires a bigger effort but it doesn't impose strict rules like large distribution does. With large distribution, [...] if cabbages come out pointy instead of rounded they don't collect them and maybe you have to throw away a 700-metres field" (ITA16, 34, male)

Risk and uncertainty seem to be the keywords here. Small producers can't withstand these conditions, which are in addition hardly compatible with diversified farming and its field-sensitive agricultural planning. What they look for instead is protection from the natural variability of farming (from crop failures to unexpectedly abundant harvests), and the reassurance that their production will be sold at a fair price. What they find in supermarkets is, conversely, expressively conveyed by the vegetable grower ITA7 with the word 'improvisation':

> "Unfortunately, the policy of large distribution would get us nowhere. Because contracts aren't secured, they don't give contractual certainty, so we are at the level of improvisation, and I can't work like this" (ITA7, 50, male).

The main disincentive to working with supermarkets is linked to the state of dependency farmers would find themselves in if selling to one single (or few) large customer(s). More specifically, it relates to the risk of losing the one (or few) source(s) that accounts for the majority of their turnover – an event which, given the 'improvisation' i.e. the unreliable/unforeseeable commercial behavior of conventional operators, is not unlikely to occur. The diversification of the customer base is, in effect, a crucial objective of family farming, precisely because farmers strive to avoid dependencies and generally acknowledge the fragility of a situation in which the product is sold mainly to one or two subjects, regardless of how convenient and undemanding that can be with respect to maintaining a multiplicity of customers. Interestingly, distrust in this sort of commercial configuration and suspicion towards supermarkets is found among both farmers who actually cater to the large distribution and those who are extraneous to the conventional chain. Let's take the example of the following two quotes from my interviews. UK7 and ITA15 are similar producers. They both raise pigs on a small scale and sell fresh and processed pork meat. Beside the geographical difference (one is located in Yorkshire and the other in Lombardy), they also differ because UK7 sells to both supermarkets and AFNs, whereas ITA15 does not provide neither supermarkets nor wholesalers. Nevertheless, they come to the same point when reflecting on having supermarkets as customers:

> "I'm aware that if you commit to them [supermarkets] you can be lost if they decide all of a sudden that they don't want your product anymore or that they want to pay less for it" (UK7, 44, female) "Getting close to the large distribution makes me kind of disgusted, so to speak. I'm always a bit afraid, a bit hesitant, because they are companies that decide the price, and have the power to change it whenever they want. If 50% of your turnover is with them, then you're constantly crushed by who decides the price for you, and this is something I don't want to be" (ITA15, 32, male)

These elements of distrust and suspicion towards economic operators that I detected during my fieldwork are, once again, not unexpected outcomes. Van Der Ploeg (2008) had already analyzed the hesitant attitude of family farmers towards the markets, and the mistrustful ways with which they tend to approach the big firms of the chain. He considers distrust and suspicion as fundamental modes of the peasantry to pattern its relations with the markets, whereby:

> "External relations are ordered in order to allow for contraction or expansion at moments deemed appropriate: becoming entrapped will be avoided as much as is possible. [...] [D]istrust is clearly a reflection of, as well as a response to, hostile environments. Entering dependency relations, even if this might help to construct something that looks impressive, *macho* and powerful, is deeply distrusted" (Van der Ploeg, 2008, p. 27, original italics)

As the next interview quote will show, it is basically this mindset illustrated by Van Der Ploeg that inspires winemaker ITA14's refusal to sell his bottles to supermarkets, all contained in the concern he expresses about a colleague of him who actually is in a commercial relationship with a big supermarket chain:

> "They gave him a 4+4 [years] contract, which will expire this year. It was very challenging *[for him to work with them]*. Then he understood the mechanisms and he's now doing better. They buy his whole production, or almost all of it. [...] The real problem, now, is next year. He doesn't have a customer portfolio, if [the supermarket] doesn't renew, what is he going to do?" (ITA14, 38, male)

Does this imply that all farmers in my study are completely opposed to supermarkets and avoid them like the plague? Not exactly, as the following sub-section will illustrate.

5.2.3 *Demonization, refusal or hybridity?*

The picture that emerges from my fieldwork is one in which the evaluation that farmers make of the conventional players is generally negative, albeit variable in its grade of intensity. The scale goes from expressions of harsh demonization – like ITA8 who believes that supermarkets are a "disaster" and "those who go to buy there make an error, a huge error" (ITA8, 36, male) or UK8[51] who deems supermarket managers very good businessmen who "don't give a toss about the customers or the suppliers" (UK8 (interviewee 1), 60, male) – to forms of milder refusal accompanied by a sort of awareness of the pragmatic usefulness of supermarkets to consumers, examples of which can be ITA5 who avoids selling to supermarkets because he thinks it would be a "dead end" for his business, but generally believes that "it is important that the supermarket exists and that it will always exist, because it gives a range of choice" (ITA5, 32, male), or the quite materialistic view of UK8, which is worth quoting extensively for its clarity:

> "Supermarkets are detrimental to a lot of thousands of small business in this country, but probably are beneficial to the country in general. I wouldn't not want to have Tesco, because it's convenient. [...] Some of them might like to do it [care about customers and suppliers], and some of them do it more than others, but at the end of the day it's a business. Which is understandable. You've got to think if you're in that situation, you're a big CEO at Sainsbury's or Tesco or whatever, why would you think any differently? You know, it's nice and easy to say from our point of view, of course, to give back as much as you can, but when you're in that situation, most people don't" (UK8 (interviewee 2), 30, male)[52]

How does this translate into reality, then? What's the current state of collaboration between small producers and conventional food system players, in concrete terms? In my sample of farmers I basically witnessed three types of cases. One has already been analyzed in this chapter, and regards those farmers who used to supply supermarkets until the relationship was interrupted, and now rely only on alternative channels. Besides that, without any particular differentiation between the two countries, I could find a segment of producers who have avoided the

[51] For the UK8 case, I jointly interviewed two people, a stepdad and a stepson, who collaborate to manage their grain-milling business. Interestingly, they had divergent views regarding supermarkets, both of which are reported in this page. The first quote comes from the stepdad, who at the moment of the interview was 60, and the second comes from the stepson, who was 30.

[52] See previous footnote.

conventional channels from the beginning, designing their businesses to cater directly to the public, and operate fully within the alternative economy, as well as a set of producers who, instead, parallel to the alternative channels used to also supply supermarkets and wholesalers, but never without hesitation or perplexity.

> "Since when I started I chose to not sell anything to the large distribution, nor wholesalers, only directly. Not even wheat, I mill it and bake bread" (ITA18, 58, female)

> "We started since the very beginning with a post-supermarket philosophy, because we realized immediately that many supermarkets are sharks" (ITA14, 38, male)

> "If we'd put our cheeses at a supermarket, we would just not sell them at all. [...] It's not really suitable. And we've heard from other small cheese-makers that they don't make any money out of it, the supermarket makes all the money, and you don't make anything" (UK4, 40, male)

> "[A supermarket chain] tried to contact me. I didn't accept [their offer]. [...] I prefer giving value to the product rather than to the packaging, which instead is fundamental in supermarkets. So I prefer selling to restaurants, that don't care about appearance but celebrate the taste of the product, and communicate it in their menus. Paradoxically, in restaurants you get more visibility than in supermarkets" (ITA11, 35, male)

These are some of the voices of the 'integral alternative' farmers I met. As we can see, their reasons feed on a blend of ethical-political concerns and the aforementioned sense of distrust towards corporate retailers. The first is more evident in the words of ITA18, who owns and runs a multifunctional and highly-diversified farm, whereas the second is well conveyed by the 'post-supermarket philosophy' of winemaker ITA14. In addition to this, farmers who are completely detached from the conventional channels sometimes perceive them as totally unsuitable for their products, as incompatible marketplaces which are not worth taking into account, like the quotes from UK4 and ITA11, both small-scale cheese-makers, illustrate.

The other segment of producers, composed of those who are *hybrid*, i.e. market their products through both alternative and conventional channels, tend to explain their reasons through the lens of pragmatism, explaining the choice of keeping a collaboration with supermarkets and wholesalers by referring to specific economic objectives. In other words, I could not find enthusiastic nor satisfied accounts of such commercial relationships, but almost exclusively a goal-oriented attitude often constrained by economic imperatives. To provide an empirical example, pig grower UK7 and dairy farmer ITA10 both recognize that selling in the conventional market is economically unviable for them, because for both it doesn't allow for a sufficient margin, yet they maintain such channels in order to, respectively, secure a constant cash-flow and for having a sort of 'parachute', meaning keeping a market outlet open to sell that part of the production that they couldn't sell at better prices elsewhere:

> "They hang all your prices down. They don't pay a fair price. I don't lose money but I don't make a lot of money. But I know that every week from them there will be so much coming in, so I can buy feed to keep them [the pigs] going" (UK7, 44, female) "What we can't process we sell it to [an industrial milk collector]. [...] We keep a channel of this kind to make sure we are able to sell also when we cannot process, for example if we take a vacation. It is just a way to facilitate the times of work, because from an economic point of view it would be better if we transformed all [the milk]" (ITA10, 30, female)

In general, then, for hybrid producers the idea of selling to corporate retailers doesn't thoroughly fit their ideology, which tends to lean instead towards the fundamental set of values upon which AFNs are built, which are consistent with their interpretation of the problems affecting the food system and their way of doing agriculture. On top of that, AFNs and direct sales embody better economic conditions for small farmers, therefore being their preference in most cases. Nevertheless, AFNs' capacity to absorb farmers' production is often limited, and at the same time the logistical effort to reach a higher number of alternative organizations is frequently beyond producers' possibilities. For these reasons, hybrid producers have to accept what organic cereals farmer ITA19 in the following quotation calls a 'compromise', a choice to sell to mainstream players that is not favored but must be taken:

> "I'd like to be able to work only with [GAS groups], because it's very nice since they are people who share many of my ideas, and so they don't create many problems. But they [GAS groups] are not sufficient [in number, so] [...] eventually I had to make a choice I don't like that much, which is to get into large distribution" (ITA19, 50, female)

In sum, the corporations of the conventional food chain, among which supermarkets occupy a prominent position, currently lead the food system. Their relationship with family farmers is shaped by the great power imbalance they enjoy, and translates into opportunistic and often predatory attitudes which are, on a general level, aggravating the state of crisis of small-scale farming. Concurrently, though, the consolidation of consumer trends towards sustainable and local food is increasing large operators' interest in family farmers and their high-quality production, multiplying the possibilities for a direct contact and collaboration. In many instances, supermarkets are also adopting some of the operational modes of alternative food schemes and co-opting part of their philosophical-narrative basis.

This photograph of the state of interaction between small-scale farmers and conventional operators in the two regions I have studied has had the objective of laying the ground for the analysis of the innovations occurring in the sustainable food and farming economy, which – in addition to producers and final consumers – are and will continue to be influenced by both alternative food organizations and mainstream food businesses. Farmers will have to deal with both, and successes as well as failures of these two types of relationships have to be addressed by research, if the ultimate aim is to suggest solutions for improving the health of the food system.

Thus far, in my opinion, AFNs are demonstrating to be a more promising response to the agri-food crisis, because their social-justice-related fundamental inspiration is able to grant better support to the sustainability, quality, and producer-consumer re-socialization innovations that are happening on the side of agriculture. Supermarkets, on the contrary, despite having an enormous penetration into the daily life of individuals, and thus a huge scope for fostering change, pursue interests that are essentially incompatible with the socio-economic transition of the food and farming sector towards higher welfare and sustainability.

I will entrust the conclusive evaluation on supermarkets to the voice of an Italian producer I haven't recorded personally, but which I consider to have summarizing power, in light of the reflection on the differences between the conventional and the alternative channels. He has been supplying large distribution for 25 years, and is quoted in Ciconte and Liberti's (2017) journalistic investigation of the large distribution in Italy, published by *Internazionale*. This farmer wanted to stay anonymous, and he affirms that:

> "The point is that supplies are managed by buyers who don't know the industry nor the products, but only have to respect the so-called growth goals. Every year they have to take home a few percentage points increase of the profit margins. So, what they only care about is that digit there in the bottom box of the contract. All the issues about raw materials, the state of agriculture, industrial costs couldn't bother them less. When you talk to them is like you were speaking in Sanskrit" (Anonymous producer, quoted in Ciconte and Liberti (2017, 'Una bolla estranea all'economia reale' section), own translation)

On the contrary, what can surely be inferred from the data gathered from the producers of my study is that AFNs speak the same language as farmers. This does not mean there is no divergence of interests nor other forms of incompatibility between these organizations and small-scale producers, as well as tensions and obstacles. Arguably, however, AFNs are more prone to comprehend producers' needs and design their chains accordingly to achieve a balance between consumers and producers' prerogatives, thus proving able to provide a stronger support to those attempts of rural development of which farmers are protagonists. The modes of this set of interactions will be addressed in the next chapter, which will focus on the innovative strategies implemented by the farmers of my study and the ways they are facilitated by AFNs.

Chapter 6

Innovative strategies to cope with the crisis

The illustration of family farmers' personal profiles and the analysis of the conditions in which they are currently acting, which I outlined in the previous chapter, make it clear that farmers are seeking solutions to ensure the reproduction of their livelihoods in a context characterized by uncertainty, struggle and dependency. Being increasingly excluded by the dominant circuits of capitalism, small-scale farming has become a sector whose chances to resist the overarching food crisis appear to be relying all the time more on its ability to develop innovative ideas and practices outside of the mainstream market mechanisms, and thus explores the possibilities offered by alternative production and marketing combinations. When the business-as-usual model reveals itself to no longer be an option, novel strategies are put in place, in sync with the transformations occurring in the socio-economic environment of our post-industrial and highly urbanized societies. The patterns of resistance, then, are shaped by forms of innovation (or sometimes *retro-innovation*) that invest both the spheres of farmers' subjectivity and their farming and marketing practices. This resistance to the predatory forces of the current global economic regime – which has lost its humane dimension and prompts the marginalization of an inefficiency-accused sector such as family farming – follows the lines of Negri's analysis of resistant practices in post-modernity. The political philosopher indeed suggests that:

> "Resistance is no longer a form of reaction but a form of production and action. [...] Resistance is no longer one of factory workers; it is a completely new resistance based on innovativeness [...] and on autonomous co-operation between producing [and consuming] subjects. It is the capacity to develop new, constitutive potentialities that go beyond reigning forms of domination" (Negri, 2006)

Innovativeness and autonomous co-operation are indeed the two main axes on which the 'alternative' farmers I met during my fieldwork are building their strategies. These principles are conjugated in multiple forms, and in a way that transversally affects the many variables involved in operating an agricultural business: from farming techniques to market outlets management and even to the very personal set of values and skills that farmers have to possess. An aim of my research is to scrutinize and systematize the innovative strategies put in place by farmers as they emerge from the empirical evidence I collected, and to put them

in relation with the alternative networks of food provisioning, in order to offer a description of the socio-economic reality of small scale primary producers and their position within the alternative food economy. Between Italy and England, I selected and visited 39 farms selling (at least part of) their products through direct and alternative chains, and interviewed their owners-managers to understand where their innovativeness lies and how their 'alternativeness' concretely translates into reality. In other words, what practices and strategies are designed and implemented by alternative farmers, what is new in them, and how they relate to the (self-perceived rather than theoretically-defined) concept of 'alternativeness'.

I obviously found a high degree of variability, given the different types of production, context and other conditions, both internally and externally. By internal differences I refer here to worldviews, ideological references, personal attitudes and beliefs; while external variability regards, for instance, the use of AFNs, conventional channels and other organizations as business partners, or the way producers look for, deal with and manage customers. Subsequently, I have been able to observe that, in concrete terms, a wide range of different strategic initiatives are put in place. Nevertheless, I reckon farmers' *excursus* to possess some general characteristics, a set of common patterns that enables the scholar to grasp the essence of the phenomenon and, consequently, classify and cluster the array of experiences that are currently describing the alternative-sustainable-local farming world.

To summarize the common features of this novel development model, rather than provide a depiction myself, I'll employ the words of my interviewee ITA3, whose story is not distant from the archetypal *excursus* of the alternative farmers in my fieldwork. He represents the new generation taking over the management of long-established classic/conventional small-sized family farms, called to face and overcome problems of declining returns and the backwardness of the consolidated production-management model. In the following quotation he succinctly reports how he was forced to transform his cereal-producing farm (which is located in the immediate countryside off of the periphery of Milan, only 24 km from the city center) in several of its components, and gives the sense of the temporal sequencing of the innovations introduced:

> "We stopped one day and said something has to change, in fact we have to change everything, [...] make completely different decisions because we can't go on anymore. [...] We were a cereal farm, and we've come to produce, to raise, gooses. Ten years ago, when I started farming gooses, I was seen as that one who... they thought of me and laughed, smiled, so to speak. [...] But now, absurdly, we have more revenue than before. [...] We started producing [the gooses] for mass distribution, we did it for two or three years and then we saw that it wasn't working, so from one year to another we stopped. The following year we restarted with a few animals, 80 percent less, with those three or four restaurants that used to follow us, which were here in the area and wanted quality, without looking too much at the price, and so we started with them. Slowly we went from [only] gooses to [also] ducks, because we saw that there was demand, and later we went on to chicken and capons as well. [...] Then in 2009

> we opened a farm shop here on our premises, and we also started – in those years – to go to farmers' markets, so we put ourselves out there, first-hand, in the farmers' markets. And then one thing led to another, because at farmers' markets many customers are members of purchasing groups or something similar. So we started to provide to them, because beyond selling there's a relationship between who produces and who buys, isn't there? And we've had these channels for several years already. Then recently these online sales channels have come up – direct sales – and we've started to get involved in them too. So far we've come to this... but we're always in the making, you never get to the end of the process" (ITA3, 33, male)

ITA3's testimony gives the sense of a gradual yet radical change: it involves production choices (from a 'commodity' product – cereals – to a 'specialty' product – gooses), a re-thinking of operational dimensions (80 percent less animals), a re-definition of commercial practices (from selling to a wholesaler that then re-sells to supermarkets, to directly providing small local restaurants), a novel way to 'read' the market and constantly re-calibrate production accordingly (from only gooses to ducks, and chickens, and capons), a transformation of the classic role of the farmer from sheer producer of food to frontline actor on the food scene ("we put ourselves out there, first-hand, in the farmers' markets"), the renovated social connections as sources of economic opportunity (from farmers' markets to GAS groups as a consequence of social relations), the evolution of technology (the new online direct sales platforms are approached), and the awareness of the procedural nature of this innovative path of development ("you never get to the end of the process").

Two principal elements can be highlighted, useful to define the strategic direction taken by alternative farmers' innovativeness: one is the *dynamism* of the process of transformation, which is indeed a process of adaptation to a rapidly changing environment built upon a sequence of loops of cautious introductions of novel elements followed by scrupulous analyses of the feedbacks from the external world; the other is that the introduction of novelties does not innovate the operation of the farm in just one (or few) of its components, but it concurrently affects most of the dimensions of farming, from the technical practices (types of products, techniques of production), to business practices (marketing) and also 'soft' practices such as self-presentation and the management of relationships.

This last element represents a crucial distinction between the transformation processes happening within the realm of the alternative food economy and the attempts of mainstream sustainability transition of agriculture, whereby innovations often remain confined within a narrow (economic-dominated) notion of 'sustainibilization' of processes, inspired by principles of sustainable intensification and focused on single aspects of the agricultural activity (Flynn and Bailey, 2014). An example of this approach is the consolidated phenomenon of 'industrial organic', i.e. the large-scale production of organic foodstuffs in a productivist, yield-maximizing and global-market-oriented fashion. Rather than proposing a holistic transformation of the food system paradigm, this introduction acts exclusively on a defined set of technical variables (types and quantities of chemicals employed in farming, specifically) without challenging the logics that lay

at the root of the unfairness of the system, therefore being deemed able only to produce a slight 'greening' of the existing industrial regime (DeLind, 2000) rather than addressing the causes of the food crisis. The innovations brought about by the family farmers of my study, instead, are place-based and people-oriented, and convey a sense of thorough restructuring of the agricultural activity. They appear as attempts to re-build the mechanism of food production and marketing, subtracting operations from the conventions of the mainstream food system to try to re-embed practices into a pool of local resources, relying on place-specific social, human and ecological capital.

The aim of this chapter is to further detail the nature of this innovative path which, as said, does not leave untouched almost any of the parts into which the agricultural business can be divided. For the sake of exposition, then, I will conceptually separate the presentation of these new sets of practices into three groups, reflecting the mode of transformation of the various spheres that compose the farming activity: the *mode of production*, the *mode of commercialization* of products, the *mode of relation* with external agents, such as colleagues, customers and other operators. This division, I repeat, is purely instrumental, because the changes happening at the farm level cannot be compartmentalized assuming that the different activities (production, commercialization and relation, in the case of my grouping) are realized independently from each other. In fact, conversely, they are intimately connected and feed back into each other, since a transformation in one sphere suggests or calls for a transformation in another and vice versa, thus constituting a circular process of innovation and adaptation which seeks new resources to challenge existing constraints in order to gradually construct a different development model. The next three sections will then respectively address the innovations happening in the mode of production, the mode of commercialization and the mode of relation separately, albeit trying to give account of the complex dynamic interaction of the elements that are the object of analysis.

6.1 Mode of production

Around 1997, ITA2 took what could have already been considered the remnants of his family's conventional-intensive dairy farm in the Lombard plains – which was about to be shut down forever – and transformed it into a smaller-sized slower-paced goat farm, with the purpose of producing goat milk and (from 2007 onwards) goat cheese. He now sells his cheeses only through short chains, such as farmers' markets and online purchasing groups.

> "All those who have been capable have 'de-industrialized'. It will be the way of the future only if there will be a response from the consumer. I think my price is competitive, but I don't have the absolute lowest price. If we put it on the level of the absolute lowest price, I end up being defeated" (ITA2, 50, male)

He speaks of *de-industrialization* as a common and 'desirable' process for family farmers, to the point that having undertaken such path denotes, in his mind, a certain ability. This ability is not sufficient to solve the criticalities of small-scale farming, since the last word is the preserve of consumers and their willingness to spend their money on quality food, but suggests that the subtraction from

the conventional-industrial regime is prioritized by farmers as a necessity. Such a subtraction is realized in many concurrent ways, but *de-industrialization* and the intimately connected and often overlapping concept of *downshifting* are to be considered the core principles inspiring the necessary innovations to the production model of family farming, emerging as fundamental strategies of emancipation from the mainstream food system.

The word 'de-industrialization' defines a process that reduces the intensity of production and its orientation towards providing the largest possible quantities of anonymous commodities to standardized markets, whereas the term 'downshifting' more generally refers to the slowing down of activities with the aim of creating a smaller and more human technical-professional farm environment in order to give more value to the products as well as to the means of production (animals and land) and to the operators of production (farmers and their collaborators).

The reformation of the farm productive system inspired by these principles not only entails a re-calibration of production techniques and methods – which translates into lesser mechanization and standardization of procedures, and the dismissal of the yield-maximization mindset in favor of the valorization of other types of outcomes – but often also involves a deep re-thinking of the original choices about what to produce and how to organize the farm, therefore causing profound transformations in both the patterns and the substance of farm production. To cite common examples, indeed, de-industrialization/downshifting can mean organic conversion, reduction in the number of livestock, or higher crop diversification and rotation (all modifications of farming techniques), combined with shifts in the very focus, i.e. core agricultural business, of the farm units, such as a switch from low to higher value-added types of production (dairy cows versus beef cows, for instance), from industrially-selected high-yielding breeds and varieties to more resistant and quality-oriented traditional/ancient breeds and varieties (from Frisian cows to Jersey cows), from common products to specialty/niche/rare products to facilitate competition in the market (goat meat instead of beef; or a wide variety of peculiar salads such as mustard leaves instead of simple lettuce), and so on. A thorough restructuring then, both practical and conceptual, of the farming activity.

Before further delving into the concept and the implications of downshifting, it is important to notice that despite it being an enlightening principle to analyze the characteristics of farms in the alternative economy, not all producers in my study have undergone such processes of down-sizing and de-industrialization. Trivially enough, to de-industrialize you first need to be 'industrial'. For reasons of research design, all the producers I met are small-sized[53] and, to a varying degree, 'alternative' with respect to their productive or business practices. Nevertheless, only a part of them were initially in the conventional economy and, at a later mo-

[53]With the exception of two cases, one in Italy and one in England. Nevertheless, both of them were interesting and relevant to the topic of my study. The Italian producer, indeed, has a large scale of operations but focuses exclusively on organic and biodynamics, and partners with a large distribution chain specialized in organics. The English case presented itself as a local dairy farm, whereas what I found was a relatively large-scale industrially-oriented production unit. Interestingly enough, though, beside local sales this producer's innovative strategy was the development of a niche expensive product (milk specifically designed for being mixed with coffee) targeted to London's high-end coffee shops.

ment, shifted to the 'alternative side'. Others instead, especially among the most recently established farms, set off their businesses within an already alternative paradigm, i.e. avoiding mainstream agricultural conventions and dominant market channels. In any case, whether farm businesses are started already with a peasant-like habitus or they are 're-peasantized' after concretely undertaking a re-sizing process (in other words, whether they are 'born alternative' or have become such at a certain point), the conceptual value of de-industrialization and downshifting is the same: it represents first and foremost a transformation in the mentality of the farmer, entailing new forms of subjectivization and self-representation and novel sets of practices. This is even more powerfully underscored by those who don't actually need to de-industrialize, because from the beginning they proposed themselves as new peasants ushering in an alternative course of action for agriculture. This new course of action, as several times affirmed throughout this work, is produced by the confluence of many factors: economic constraints, pragmatism, a value transition at the level of society, new consumption patterns, and a specific sensitivity of farmers towards ethical and environmental concerns. Re-adapting activities to a non-industrial level appears to be the first step of this new path. Let's hear how this is concretely realized and what it implies from the voice of the farmers ITA10 and ITA12, both dairy farmers and now also cheese-makers, and ITA15, who instead raises pigs:

> "With 60-70-80 livestock units we used to produce a lot of milk, not really high-quality, because that's how people used to do things back then. We reached a maximum of 130 lactating units, and 300-400 units in total. [...] Later, though, we started to understand that it wasn't the right way. So we decided together [*the daughter, who is speaking, and the father*] to reduce the number of livestock and the production, in order to have higher-quality and more controllable milk. So we decided to spin everything around, we sold almost a hundred cows – which was dramatic – and started making cheese. In 2012 there was a revolution, both on an existential level and as an agricultural business. It's been very hard to put them [the cows] on the truck, even though they were not going to slaughter, because our mind went to my grandparents who worked hard for this, to my dad who for many years believed in it. But it's not the right way, it is important to realize it and accept it. And many farmers are not doing it" (ITA10, 30, female).

> "My grandparents had bought the land, and started raising dairy cattle for the production of milk. At the peak moment, in the barn there were 100 cows in production, producing 24-25 quintals of milk a day. Now there are 40 lactating cows, [and] 10 quintals of milk a day of which 2-3 quintals are processed into cheese. Cows fare way better and the milk is a lot tastier. [...] We were suppliers for Parmalat, and in the period of the 'crack' we didn't get our wage for 3-4 months. [...] So in that period we had to figure out what to do, and among all possible ideas, the most immediately realizable was to open an agritourism center. So we renovated the old barn and understood that our milk didn't have any value when sold to the cooperative, whereas it would have had added value if we had processed it internally" (ITA11, 36, male)

> "Up until 2009, our pig farm was intensive. We used to raise around three thousand units and sell them to the super huge abattoirs which all breeders supply, [...] abattoirs that make meat for supermarkets or re-sell to industries to make *salami and prosciutti.* [...] [But then] we decided to disengage from the industrial-level sales, so we stopped selling to abattoirs and started processing our meat, with a brand of our own, through a contractor that produces for us. We reduced the number of units from 3 thousand to a maximum of 660. We also have the certification of ethical breeding now" (ITA15, 32, male)

As we can see from these examples, downshifting means reducing the scale and the pace of production, while introducing new operations in an attempt to diversify the streams of revenue and create (and retain) more added-value. The rationale is to step off that 'treadmill' that imposes continuous technological investments and scale enlargement to maintain farm profits, which ultimately threatens farms' viability due to constant cost increase. In the context of the food and farming crisis (which I have already illustrated in chapter 1 and in chapter 5), for conventional family farmers the choice to re-size and diversify is often an obligation if they want to continue to pursue their career in agriculture, as ITA11 – who, as we have just seen, cut the number of cows, started producing cheese, and opened an agritourism-restaurant facility on his farm's premises – continues to explain:

> "The decision to downsize, to process and [to open] the agritourism has been a choice made out of necessity. Nowadays, matter of fact, small farms are dead. In the past there used to be the small, the medium and the large. The small is gone, the large has resisted, and the medium either has become large or has diversified. [...] Those who have the possibility to choose can decide where to go. [...] If a channel doesn't work, it's useless to take productive forces outside, it is better to bring them back in, to do something different, such as thematic promotional events, contacting magazines to promote your cheeses, finding restaurants to sell your product, and so on." (ITA11, 36, male)

Here, an interesting difference between Italy and England emerges. If, indeed, 'conceptual' de-industrialization – i.e. the development of a new productive attitude that dissociates itself from the industrial mode and sets the basis for a new peasant agriculture – is an incorporated characteristic of innovative farmers in both countries, 'actual' de-industrialization, that is a completed process of transition from industrial-intensive methods to 'alternative' low-intensity practices, is more frequently observable in the Italian setting. In my English field, in other words, most alternative farmers have never been 'industrial': in most instances their farms are not inter-generational but more recently established already with a post-industrial orientation.

This can be explained as relating to the different conditions of the farming sector in the two countries. The assessment of the last quoted interviewee ITA11 that "small farms are dead" reflects a generalized outcome of the capitalistic development of agriculture, which is global in reach and tends to outcompete

small productive units almost everywhere, at least in the Northern world. Nevertheless, the Italian agricultural and geographical structure, together with a complex interaction of climactic, economic and political factors, has allowed for a better resistance of small farmers. In the Mediterranean country, in fact, despite growing threats of expulsion from the market, small-and-medium-holders still represent the bulk of the agricultural economy, even though they mostly lost their peasant characteristics following the green-revolution-led development process from the 60s onwards. The inhabitants of the United Kingdom, instead, not only witnessed the almost complete disappearance of peasants, but also of small farms in general. Due to commercialization and land concentration processes, on the British island the average dimension of farms is indeed among the largest in Europe, while the population employed in agriculture ranks among the lowest. Eurostat data clarifies this picture: in 2013 the average area of holdings in the UK was 95 hectares and the total number of farms summed up to 183 thousands, whereas in Italy there were more than a million farms and the average dimension was only 12 hectares; in addition, the British agricultural workforce is less than one fifth of the Italian (817 thousands of annual workers vs. 170 thousands) while the standard output in value for the whole farming sector in Britain is just about half that of Italy (22 billion euros vs. 43 billion), thus indicating a very high degree of mechanization (source: Eurostat).

The data speak for themselves: it is much easier to find family farms in Italy than in England, where they, together with the peasant culture, have almost completely disappeared. Given two very different starting points, though, my research shows that the innovations which have become necessary to build a new paradigm for the food economy, and which are being implemented by farm operators as strategies to step out of the crisis, have a similar nature in both countries of my study, even if they assume different forms. In Italy the phenomenon of the alternative farmers can be interpreted as an attempt to re-take possession of the peasant tradition, which is still alive albeit suffering, and employ the spaces created by the social and cultural innovations currently happening in the society to make it an asset for the future food production system. Whereas in England, where no pool of traditional peasant resources appear to be available anymore, the very same conceptual innovations are adopted, but they are more directed towards 're-inventing' the peasantry, re-creating a segment of family farmers who propose a coherent vision of sustainability and good food production, anchored to a renewed socio-political value attributed to locality and food. This post-modern importance attached to the food world is coming to be diffused among a growing stratum of the British population, after decades in which food and farming were considered negligible objects, and interest in cuisine and the taste for good food were regarded as a hedonist hobby of refined privileged elites. On the opposite, from a cultural point of view the Italian situation is clearly different, because the importance of food and the value of proximity have been questioned to a much lower extent.

The fact that, in the world I'm studying, different conditions are addressed with similar strategies explains how the return to the 'local', wherever geographically situated, is a global response to a global trend: globalized is indeed the food system, with its powerful operators, its physical features and its problems, and equally globalized are the movements of opinion and the circulation of innovative

ideas regarding the sphere of food. This symmetrically translates into the fact that AFNs (and the new model of food economy they represent) have been created and rapidly diffused in all Western countries (and also now are starting to spread in emerging countries, like China), and even that if they are concretely articulated in different forms responding to place-specific necessities (Martindale *et al.*, 2018), their main purpose and ideological basis is the same everywhere. This allows us to interpret AFNs more as an *urban* rather than a *rural* phenomenon, since the city appears to be the place of the cross-cultural and often cross-national contamination of ideas that are the provider of their main thrust, rather than processes of endogenous rural development.

6.1.1 *Quality and value-added*

Whether 'conceptual' or 'actual', then, de-industrialized agriculture follows a common innovation path wherein, as we have seen, innovation is often framed as a necessity, a form of peasant resistance and/or a device to re-invent the peasantry. On a cultural level, the innovations at stake represent a way to reaffirm the worth of the peasant culture in today's society. On a pragmatic level, instead, they are primarily directed to cut costs or, better put, to break the chain of the cost-price squeeze, i.e. the combined effect of the stagnation (if not erosion) of the prices received and the continuous growth of the prices paid. But what other actions are required to compensate for the reduced output quantities? What strategies accompany the decision to dismiss or refuse industrial orientation? The empirical evidence emerging from my fieldwork suggests that the first complement to the various attempts to disengage from the mainstream modes of farming is an enhancement in the *quality* of products.

Quality and small scale, in the words of my farmers, go hand in hand, and they both relate to an improved capacity to take care of the health of the environment, the soil, and the animals. I am perfectly aware that stating that 'small is good' could appear as a commonplace, and thus an ideology-imbued wrong assumption. And in fact, in speculative terms, I tend to think that it is indeed a wrong assumption. Empirical reality, however, shows evidence that a direct relationship between non-intensive farming methods and better food quality does exist, and is admitted by the same producers who guided their farm through a process of de-intensification. The knot is not difficult to untangle: quality is linked to scale only indirectly, because it is the *maximization mentality* that tends to produce a lower quality, and not the dimension *per se*. All other conditions being equal, if the purpose of the farming activity is to push productive resources to the limit in order to obtain the highest yields, it is inevitable that other outputs such as animal well-being, environment protection, soil health and food quality have to be sacrificed on the altar of quantity.

Quality does not directly depend on the number of livestock or hectares of land, it directly depends on two factors: one is the final aim of the producer, whether it is to obtain the maximum possible quantity of food or to create and maintain optimal conditions for food production; the other is the capacity to take scrupulous care of the means of production (once again: soil, plants, animals, people), which is related to the availability of human resources. In theoretical terms, a huge farm if highly staffed could produce an excellent quality with

the same care and ecological awareness as a single biodynamic grower working a half-hectare patch of land. In practical terms, though, family farms possess limited acreages and, almost by definition, are understaffed, because they rely on family work, the possibility to employ workers being almost always out of their reach. In the realm of family farming, we can consider land and labor as fixed variables, so it appears evident that in order to produce quality there is no choice but to embrace a different mentality and reduce output quantity.

There goes the relation between quality and scale, which is why I prefer the term downshifting, as it conveys a sense of 'slowing down to improve all other conditions', over other expressions such as down-sizing or simply 'getting smaller'. The sense of this correlation is briefly conveyed by goat grower UK2 and explained in greater detail by ITA15, when he talks about how their pig breeding methods have changed:

> "We check everything's health every day, individually, because we are small enough still to be able to check each individual animal every day" (UK2, 40, female)

> "When we were intensive the piglets were weaned after 21 days, whereas now we leave them with the mom up to a month and a half. It's fairer for the mom, in addition to being ethical. The sows stay in a cage only for a month, during lactation, because otherwise they kill the piglets by crushing them. [My dad] tells me that when he was young, in the period after the birth there was an employee who was paid to spend the night with the sows, to make sure that when they laid down they didn't crush the piglets. Back then, in fact, a sow was able to wean 6-7 piglets, while now thanks to this cage we can wean 11 piglets on average. [...] Furthermore, we don't cut the tail anymore, nor the teeth. When they hadn't sufficient space, the piglets used to get nervous and started biting each other's tails, causing wounds that could then translate into aggressions, because if the pig smells blood it gets aggressive, and sometimes also cannibalism. Now instead they have more space and we've also given them some games, like ropes for example, to let off steam without hurting each other. Clearly they grow less, because they move more and sleep less. But the taste is way better" (ITA15, 32, male)

For these farmers, quality is not only the expression of personal commitment; it also embodies a fundamental strategic asset. Quality constitutes the backbone of the alternative mode of farming, not simply because it enables small farmers to signal their distinctiveness from mass production and thus obtain a better price in the market, but also because it facilitates a series of operations: a high-quality raw material is easier to process in an artisanal way, so the huge investments to buy industrial machinery that otherwise would be required can be avoided; a high-quality product helps connect with local consumers, i.e. the target audience of small producers, thus facilitating promotion and commercialization and eliminating the need to rely on middlemen whose job is to 'push' commodity foodstuffs through mainstream markets; it figures as an investment inasmuch as quality farming avoids the degradation of resources and therefore improves the resilience of farms and their long-term viability; and lastly, quality represents

farmers' vocation to pursue their research of the best food, which ultimately provides them with pride and social recognition (Mzoughi, 2011; Dupré *et al.*, 2017).

> "This choice [*to downshift*] brought us to produce less milk but of a better quality. The production of the single cow has decreased but that's physiologic, if they are fed mown grass instead of concentrated feed. But the quality improved: more fat, more protein, and a better suitability for processing. This way we can sell the product better" (ITA10, 30, female)

> "Raising pigs free-range is an investment, because you could use that land to produce hay, or alfalfa, or crops, whereas you use it as pasture for the pigs. It could look like a loss, but in reality it is the added value of our product, because the taste of our pigs has no equals" (ITA8, 36, male)

> "The only thing that matters is the quality of wine. You've got to make a good wine. And when you present it you have to transmit a message, and the less direct the relationship with the consumer, the more difficult it is to do it" (ITA4, 62, male)

So quality can be interpreted as the foundational stone of a wider project, the aim of which is to combine ethics, environment and profit. It is an outright *conditio sine qua non*: quality lies at the basis and paves the way for the achievement of various objectives altogether. It becomes the main requirement, then, for those who want to obtain sustainability, in both its environmental and economic senses. This is clear in goat-grower UK2's mind, who directly relates quality to animals' life conditions, and says:

> "I think that letting animals live a better life is not only environmentally sound, but also provides more income in the long run. Because this way animals live longer, and you can split the cost of raising them from zero to two years on more years. So animal welfare, environmental soundness, and profitability can be achieved altogether" (UK2, 40, female)

Animal welfare, environmental soundness, and profitability can be achieved altogether. But how, concretely? If quality represents the premise of the project of alternative farmers, then *added-value* is its executive arm. The attempt to expand the added-value of products and to retain it within the business, i.e. to avoid external operators' appropriation of such value, is the true *trait d'union* of the innovative strategies implemented by the family farmers I met in the two countries. It is often framed as a necessity that directly addresses the shortcomings of the conventional agri-food system. Take for example the words of the dairy farmer UK4, which are mirrored by many other similar accounts I could register during my fieldwork:

> "This process of trying to add more value to the product – from conventional to organic and then from just milk to cheese – was a necessity. Without doing it, the farm would probably have had to stop" (UK4, 40, male)

For what concerns the production phase, evidence suggests that there are three common innovations that are adopted to increase the added-value: production shifts towards *specialty or niche foods; diversification of production*, i.e. the expansion of product range in order to gain advantage in the marketplace; and *internal processing* of primary production into final foods. Let's take a closer look at these three patterns of innovation.

Developing a product with unique organoleptic properties, or produced employing peculiar techniques that rely on craftsmanship and tradition, linked to a specific region or, more generally, rare to find, entails two types of advantages: on the one hand it helps to distinguish family farmers' production from the 'food from supermarket', justifying its higher price; on the other hand it allows farmers to specifically address a growing market niche, composed of knowledgeable consumers who are interested in the gastronomic value of food and thus are more prone to pay a bit more money to buy specialties. In the world of 'alternative' family farmers the strategy of producing a niche food is well diffused: in my group of 39 farms, 14 produce foodstuffs that can be considered niche.

At times the decision to begin producing specialties corresponds with the re-foundation of the farm, a re-start with a completely different model, like in the cases of ITA3, who switched from dairy and cereals to raising gooses, or ITA2, who transformed his parents' dairy farm into a goat farm for cheese production. In other instances, niche products are added to the main production for the sake of experimenting or diversifying, with the effect that, if such innovations are successful, the core business slowly drifts towards reducing or even dismissing the original production in favor of the innovative niche products. This is the case for ITA19, who used to grow cereals sold as animal feed, and slowly started introducing crops of ancient varieties for human consumption, and eventually focused exclusively on those. A similar story regards UK12, whose farm is located on the Lancastrian shores of the Sea of Ireland, where lambs can graze on the salt marsh. His core business was to raise dairy cows, which he complemented with a just few lambs for his family's consumption. When he realized that the salt marsh lambs were highly demanded, he focused on the production of this specialty and eventually dismissed the dairy production. In other cases, lastly, the niche-orientation is instead central to the original idea with which the farm is set up in the beginning. To this category belong examples such as UK2, who specialized in goat rearing for meat production, in a land where goat meat is still relatively unknown, and UK6 and UK7, who both decided to grow only autochthonous rare British pig breeds[54].

Another frequent strategic practice put in place by farmers to move to the 'alternative side' is to increase the diversity of production, meaning producing smaller quantities of a wider range of products. In the mainstream-farming segment it is not uncommon to find producers who specialize in one or two crops, and strive for the largest output to satisfy the demands of supermarkets and

[54]The other specialty-niche products of the farmers in my study are: exotic berries and other superfoods (ITA5), an artisanal award-winning stock cube (from the horticulture grower ITA12), organic seedlings and nursery plants sold to other growers alongside vegetables sold to consumers (ITA16), grass-fed free-pasture eggs (ITA18), high-end organic rice (ITA20), foreign-style cheeses (UK4).

wholesalers. This form of specialization is not only ecologically unviable, because it limits the possibilities for crop rotation and impoverishes the soil, but also keeps producers locked in an often one-sided relationship with the players of mass distribution, exposing them to a series of risks – from crop failures to adverse unilateral decisions taken by the other party – that can seriously threaten their profitability. In addition, a specialization of this kind feeds on the yield-maximization mentality, and this distinguishes it from the specialization of family farmers in specialty products (e.g. the aforementioned British small-scale goat meat producer), which is based on low-intensity and is intended to provide a value-added product to a niche market segment. Contrary to what is required by the conventional channels, diversification of production becomes a valuable option when approaching the alternative market, for it increases the appeal of the farmer in his or her capacity as marketer precisely because such diversification better fits the necessities of the conscious consumer who favors buying from local producers over the anonymity of a supermarket, but still demands a whole range of products. For certain types of foods then, especially basic products such as vegetables, poultry, etc., the opportunity to develop a diverse range of products is intimately linked to the short chain and the direct relationship with the public. Therefore, it is often included among the innovations brought about to 'go alternative'.

An explanatory example of the present case comes from my interviewee ITA13. His inter-generational business was specialized in apple growing, and was suffocated by liquidity problems deriving from the commercial conditions of the conventional channels. He had to look for an alternative to supermarkets and wholesalers, and found it in farmers' markets. After a time spent in direct contact with the public, he followed the feedbacks of his customers and started planting other fruit trees while reducing the production of apples, to furnish his stall with a wider variety and attract more shoppers. Then his customers began to demand vegetables, so he decided to further diversify his production and started to grow vegetables to complement his fruit offer. He would have never seen himself as a horticultural gardener, given his specialization in fruit, but the diversification strategy (combined with the commercial strategy of selling through an AFN and a renovated pattern of relations with the public – but this is material for the following sections) proved successful and lifted his business, as he himself comments:

> "If I had told my uncle even just a few years ago, he would have said 'you are dumb'. [But] as long as I have the vegetables, there is a line in front of my stall" (ITA13, 45, male)

Aside from incrementing commercial attractiveness, the diversification of production contributes to reducing risks and to offsetting the effect of unforeseeable negative events. For a specialized farm that produces a restricted number of products, a crop failure caused by adverse weather can result in a serious loss, especially if the farm is engaged in selling to the conventional system, in which even esthetic imperfection can lead to rejection of the product. A diversified farm, instead, is more in line with the rhythms of nature, and better adapts to its variability: a good harvest of one crop will compensate for a less abundant one of another, or even for a crop failure. This is clearly mirrored by the fact that when realizing direct sales the revenue from the more abundant harvest will compensate for the failed one, thus maintaining profit, whereas this is not possible

when working on the basis of a fixed contract with the mass distribution. The organic market gardener ITA16 makes the point:

> "When you retail you have a lot more flexibility, not because you can offer an ugly product, but because it fits the very concept of diversification that one summer a crop does poorly and another one grows very well, and this is way easier to explain to a private than to a platform, which in turn has big supply contracts to respect. Also, if a hailstorm comes maybe it damages your chards but not your courgettes, and if you have a contract with a wholesaler for the chards then you must sell chards. Diversification reduces risk and the impact of human error. And allows you to manage commercial relationships with more flexibility" (ITA16, 34, male).

As a last note about diversification, the advantages deriving from approaching the market with an ample range to offer are sometimes so significant that many producers find it economically effective to buy other small farmers' products and re-sell them through their own direct channels. This practice isn't welcomed by everybody: some producers, in fact, see it favorably, while others deem it sketchy and reckon it represents an unfair means to compete.

A third and last major innovation to the productive features of family farming regards the internalization of a step of the food chain that is traditionally beyond the competence of farmers: processing. Farmers, indeed, are canonically conceived as producers of raw materials, and the further step of manufacturing food or feed is the preserve of other categories of professionals, namely artisanal professionals (such as the miller, the baker, the butcher, and so on) in the traditional society and, later, the factories of the industrial era. As sheer producers of low value-added raw materials, though, farms are not viable anymore, unless very large. Thus, the internalization of the step of processing becomes an option to increase margins and, again, is attached to the commercial transformation towards catering directly to the public. Epitomic is the story of ITA19, a cereal-grower who used to sell her production as raw livestock feed, until she carried out a double switch: she replaced her crops with ancient grain varieties and legumes and started to process them through a contractor into flours, baked goods, pasta and beer. That's how she explains the process:

> "For the first 6-7 years I've produced cereals and supplied them to a friend who had a zootechnical production. But then he passed away, the farm was closed, and I found myself lacking a commercial outlet for my production, which was alfalfa, barley and corn. Even [when working] with him my accounts were swinging between gain and loss, so when I had no other zootechnical business to supply, I realized that either I would have had to give [the farm] a total makeover, or it would have been better to give up. So I thought that the only thing to do was to process. In the meanwhile times were changing, the sensitivity of people towards products of a certain type was increasing, all the problems about gluten and intolerances were starting to be heard. And all things that regard health have always been interesting to me, because I used to be a nurse before. Plus, I think that everybody has the right to have healthy food. [...] It took me a while to understand

> that I needed to process the product, because I have no entrepreneur mentality or business sense. But then I realized that the only way to earn an income and therefore be able to stand as a business was processing, because the added-value lies in the further manufacturing. So I thought I could start to produce for human consumption and no longer for animals" (ITA19, 50, female)

I'd like to underline one of ITA19's sentences, which highlights the role of consumption in shaping the innovation path of agriculture. She says that "times were changing [and] the sensitivity of people towards products of a certain type was increasing". In fact, it becomes advantageous for farmers to process their production and propose themselves on the market with their own 'brand' precisely because consumers are becoming more and more receptive to small farmers' image. In recent years, the concept of local food and the names, stories and philosophy of small farmers have become interesting material for an increasingly broad audience, as they convey a sense of health, quality and sustainability. And the lesser the mediation between the source (producers) and the recipient (consumers), the more easily the message is carried.

For these reasons, in the world of alternative farmers the strategy to process and put a 'label' on farm products – which facilitates the engagement of consumers in a direct conversation – is widespread. Out of the 39 farms I visited for this study, 23 were indeed processing their products, either internally (first-hand in their own labs) or through a contractor. From cheeses to bread, from sausages to lamb burgers or even cooked dishes served in cafés and restaurants on the same premises of the farms: in both Italy and the UK, many small producers have started to market processed food alongside the raw form of what they grow or raise. And for this count I didn't take into consideration the box schemes – i.e. growers who sell directly to consumers by periodically delivering a box or crate full of products to their doorsteps – but they should be included, because even if in these cases the food is not processed, the 'labeling' principle holds valid. The type of product, indeed, doesn't require processing (it's mainly fresh vegetables and fruit) but the branding is in the service: the brand is the producer's overall image and narration, which is what is portrayed and promoted on the boxes, in the informative material and on the website; and this is what the consumer ultimately chooses. To juxtapose the anonymity of supermarket's 'food from nowhere', then, many small farms have transformed into artisanal food companies, covering the areas of production and processing, thus attributing 'a name and a face' to their products, which in turn translate into a precious asset within the alternative economy of food exchange.

In sum, within a frame of quality-orientation and environmental-sensitiveness, small scale agricultural production is innovated following three main directions: producing specialties for niche food markets, diversifying production, and processing raw foods internally. As appears implicitly clear from the examples I provided, such 'guidelines' are not mutually exclusive, rather they can be complementary and jointly implemented. Depending on individual conditions and types of agricultural production, obviously, the concurrent renovation of different aspects of the productive system can generate a synergic effect and increase the value of the farm by both building image and reputation and multiplying commercial potential.

At the same time, though, such transformations of the productive model generate an interesting change in the very deep substance of the farming job, in a way that is both material and intangible: the farmer stops being exclusively a producer of raw materials, and he or she becomes also a *manufacturer and a retailer.* The scope and implications of such transformations and the new value assumed by farmers in the alternative food economy will be clearer after a discussion of the patterns of innovation at the levels of commercialization and social relations. These topics will be addressed in the following sections, but first, it is important, in completing the reflection on the modifications which are occurring in the sphere of production, to highlight that nowadays food or feed are no longer exclusively what farmers are expected to produce. Parallel to the core agricultural production, indeed, an increasing relevance is being attributed to the *provision of services*, namely environmental and multifunctional service (mainly of a social, leisure and touristic nature). As a consequence, organic and multifunctional farming are becoming central elements of the activity of producers, especially for small-scale businesses. The next sub-sections will deal with these subjects, presenting the evidence I found in my fieldwork about the ways in which issues revolving around organics and multifunctionality are lived, represented and converted into actual application by farmers.

6.1.2 *Ecology and organic farming*

Environmental sustainability, in its broader sense, is an inherent feature of the type of agriculture I'm studying. As said, the peasant-like mode of farming performed by family farmers leverages on the protection of ecological capital, for it is seen as a fundamental productive resource whose upkeep delivers resilience and autonomy to the farm business. Nowadays, when environmental issues around food production are raised, the reference immediately goes to organic farming, having penetrated the domain of public opinion and, as a reflection, the discourse of public-political institutions.

Farming organically means adopting a technique that follows official specifications limiting or forbidding the use of chemicals and that, if respected, allows farmers to obtain a certification, released by state-accredited monitoring bodies. It doesn't embrace a holistic vision of environmental protection, it simply regulates the nature and quantity of agricultural inputs, aiming to reduce soil contamination and agriculture-related pollution. Nevertheless, the organic certification signals an environmentally friendly food production and acts to reassure conscious consumers about how their food is grown.

The organic food market, as it is commonly known, has literally boomed over the last 20 years, and continues to expand. Begun as a niche pioneering innovation conceptually opposed to the industrial development of agriculture brought about by the 'green revolution', organic farming has now entered the mainstream food economy, though it maintains a secondary role to its conventional counterpart. It is no longer the preserve of small farmers who take meticulous care of their patches of land; it is also produced on a very large scale with highly-mechanized methods, and paradoxically organic food travels very long distances across the globe to satisfy the demand of a growing number of consumers interested in the

environmental and health value of the products they purchase.

In the world of alternative farmers, despite ecological sensitivity being a fundamental component of my interviewees' life and work project as food producers, organic farming, its meaning and its bureaucracy are questioned objects. I detected widespread ideological adherence with respect to environmental protection in general, but not to organic farming, which is instead an issue characterized by a certain tension, with positions ranging from warm celebration to skepticism or even criticism. All of the 39 producers I interviewed considered their farms ecological, and reported taking protection of the environment into high consideration and implementing farming methods respectful of nature, but only 21 were certified organic, with signs of a larger diffusion of this type of farming in Italy (16 out of 29) than in England (5 out of 14). Generally speaking, producers' representation of the problems affecting the environment and the ways these are related to agricultural activity reveals a widespread *ethical environmentalism* that informs their farming choices:

> "I see modern day farming is all about food production and economics, there is no room for nature, and this frightens me, because it means all our children will grow in an urbanized environment" (UK3, 60, male)

> "To me, thinking that I can stretch an animal that I have in my barn for two years and then send it to the slaughter is not ok. I don't like it, it grosses me out, I don't do it. What for, then? To have a watered-down milk that I can't even process in the *caseificio* because it is too diluted" (ITA10, 30, female)

> "I worked in a hospital and I saw professional diseases, and I understood that conventional agriculture was not something I wanted to do. [...] I got into it [*organic agriculture*] for a health motivation at the beginning, but then I realized that there cannot be an agriculture different from this one for the future. Exactly because other than human health this is about animal health and, above all, the health of the environment. And the environment is one and belongs to everyone" (ITA19, 50, female)

Indeed, most farmers I met proposed a vision in line with the views of these three last-quoted interviewees. A certain ethical environmentalism is then a pivotal characteristic of the alternative family farming category, even if it is conjugated into concrete action in varied ways. Generally, the primary concern is to perform a non-aggressive agriculture, compatible with respect for the land and welfare of animals, and to champion and defend the role of agriculture as the main instrument of land stewardship, protection of the countryside, and counteraction to urbanization and land appropriation. On top of this common assumption, for what regards organic farming farmers provide diverging interpretations of its meaning and its purpose. Some of them, in fact, see organic farming as a natural complement to their environmental sensitivity, or even a *conditio sine qua non* of their operations as farmers. This is the case for the last-cited interviewee, the cereal grower ITA19, who extended her initial concerns about human health to include that of animals

and the environment, and sees organic farming as the prerequisite for a health-promoting agriculture. Conversely for some producers, like the young dairy farmer and cheese-maker ITA10 quoted immediately before ITA19, who doesn't provide organic feed to her cows and so her production cannot be considered as such, the environmentalist attitude is not coupled by a certified organic farming method.

The non-certified producers bear a significantly different vision of organic, denoting a variable degree of skepticism. They usually reduce the worth of organic farming principles to their capacity as technical guidelines, and refuse to accept them as the synonym of ecological farming. The goat milk and cheese producer ITA2, for instance, reckons organic is a productive criterion which should be pursued where applicable, and adds that he is "strongly critical towards those who associate organic agriculture with a quality agriculture" (ITA2, 50, male). On a harsher note, some producers question the very same ecological value of organic farming and, concurrently, its usefulness as a business tool. Let's take for example the words of the Lancashire goat meat producer UK2 replying to the question about what she thinks of organic:

> "Can't be bothered, waste of time. Certainly not in the goat industry, but I'm not convinced it works in any industry. There's not enough organic feed in the UK, so it needs to be imported, and this makes no sense to me. Also, I don't think consumers are seeking organic enough to make it work. [...] My animals are "humanly reared", but not organic. I could pay for a membership of an association to put such sticker on my product, I'm probably high above the standards for it, but it would mean to just add a sticker, and not to do anything extra, and the cost of that sticker would build in my price, and that wouldn't be value for money anymore" (UK2, 40, female)

Being certified organic is costly, both because producers have to pay an annual fee to the certifying body and because organic inputs that farmers have to purchase tend to be more expensive. And when managing a complicated cost-price balance, even a slight increase in costs can seriously affect the economic performance of the farm. For its societal-desirability, organic farming is subsidized by the CAP of the European Union, but payments are commensurate to the size of the cultivated area and are generally deemed not sufficiently effective (Stolze *et al.*, 2016). As a consequence, small producers often have very limited possibilities to benefit from them. The vegetable grower ITA7 bears the cost of his organic certification, but underlines the absurdity of having to pay for practicing a more sustainable agriculture:

> "Organic producers find themselves in a paradoxical situation: 'I, the one doing organic, I pay for doing organic'. I mean, it should be the opposite: 'you poison the soil, you pay!'. Instead I have to pay, the one who doesn't poison it, I wanna do organic and I have to pay. It's an upside-down world, it totally works the opposite way it should" (ITA7, 50, male)

In addition I could also detect, albeit in a limited number of instances, criticisms towards the technical feasibility of organic farming. They either relate to an excessive requirement of manual work, too onerous to be met given the scarce

labour availability of family-sized farms, or to the fact that the final output is often below commercial standards, hence difficult to market. The clearest case is the (obviously not organic) fruit grower ITA13, who bluntly expresses his deep doubts about the very existence of organic in the segment of fruit farming:

> "You've found someone you can't talk of organic to. In the sense that organic doesn't exist, in my personal experience. [...] Every season I leave seven or eight sample plants for every orchard which I don't treat [*with chemicals*]. Most times the apples from those trees are all on the ground, and even if I can collect some they're only good for the pigs. It's not true that there are organic apples around, it's a lie. Then, sure, someone is more careful than others, we don't do calendar treatments[55] anymore, regardless of the climactic conditions [...] There is much more knowledge about these things nowadays, but anyway, organic fruit: no way" (ITA13, 45, male)

What results from this tension between environmentalist values, economic or technical feasibility of organic practices, and usefulness of the organic certification is that producers tend to deploy their ecological farming strategies according to pragmatic evaluations of their economic convenience. As a consequence, the decision to convert to and/or maintain organic farming methods is pondered in utilitarian terms. Family farmers' ecology and position towards organic is another aspect that can be interpreted by referring to the concept of *value-inspired pragmatism*: on top of an ideological basis suggesting preoccupations for the current state of the environment and the need to implement an agriculture that is able to protect it instead or eroding its resources, the pragmatics of marketing is nestled. Producers thus propose their environmental views and practices to the market in creative ways, justifying them through specific concrete motivations.

Under this light being organic becomes a strategic tool to satisfy market requirements. It is often seen as an attempt to be market-responsive, i.e. to follow consumer trends expecting the demand for organic goods to continue to expand, or to fill a commercial niche and therefore gain visibility outside the circuits dominated by the conventional operators. The following excerpts deliver the sense of this utilitarian approach:

> "We started the conversion a year ago, so in a couple of years we will be organic. [...] We've been a bit doubtful about this transition, because we've never been too convinced about organics... Probably we were wrong because the only open market with a certain future is the organic one, even on the shelves of the large distribution. [...] The only market that will grow in the future years, in my opinion, is the organic one, because there is a consumer trend" (ITA3, 33, male)

> "To get into a farmers' market and have a stall there is not easy. You've got to be into the network, you need to know the right people, and so on. Being organic, however, is helpful because getting into organic farmers' markets is easier than getting into conventional ones"

[55] He refers to chemical treatments that were realized periodically during the season, regardless of the actual needs and conditions of the plants.

> (ITA9, 57, male)

> "Certifications give a lot of visibility on the internet, and help you to stand out in the markets" (ITA8, 36, male)

In addition, producers become certified organic in order to be eligible for public subsidies and, ultimately, to build a trustful and reassuring image, by giving their audience account of their farming practices:

> "Our practices are almost biodynamic[56], but we are certified for organic and not for biodynamic because that has even higher costs and it is not officially recognized at the national level. With organic, instead, the State grants you a subsidy, whereas with biodynamic it still doesn't" (ITA12, 35, male)

> "All my production is certified organic. I think the certification is needed. Some people are very dubious, so if you say you're organic you need to show them that you are meeting the standards" (UK5, 50, female)

A counter to this last point, i.e. to the assumption that the organic certification is a transparency requirement to foster consumer trust, is the main argument of those farmers who decide not to be certified organic. It relates to the direct commercial chains employed by these farmers. Since products are not impersonally sold among many others on a shelf of a shop or a supermarket, they argue, the direct contact with consumers and the mutual knowledge it produces overcome the need for a reassuring third-party seal on one farm's work, therefore rendering organic certification a useless expenditure. This attitude is exhaustively illustrated by UK9's position about organics. She manages, together with her husband, a successful box scheme in Cheshire, not far from Manchester. They grow (and sometimes buy and re-sell) vegetables and deliver them to their customers' doorstep in boxes carrying the brand of their farm-company. They aren't currently farming organically, but they are reflecting on making the conversion. They are still very doubtful:

> "We don't know if we want to convert. Maybe, maybe not, maybe a bit, we don't know. Yes, for clarity, but no, for the bureaucracy that's involved, and the cost of it. It's an interesting one [issue] for us, because we've got three and a half years without being organic and our customers don't seem to mind. What they want is not conventional veg which is sprayed [with chemicals] every single week. Most of our veg isn't sprayed at all, with the exception of carrots and potatoes, [which] do get sprayed but half as much as conventional. And our customers used to be happy for that, because we're not just spraying for no reason, we're just trying to minimize the risk" (UK9, 32, female)

This passage underscores the effect of what, in the literature on AFNs and local food systems, is frequently called *participatory certifications or participatory guarantee systems*. In short chains, the food exchange being based on interpersonal

[56]Biodynamic farming follows stricter rules than organic, with a stronger orientation towards farming in accordance with nature's necessities and rhythms.

relations, the trustworthiness of products, in terms of their gastronomic as well as socio-environmental quality, can be constructed through the exchange between producers and consumers, a process among peers rather than one relying on third-party actors. Participatory methods are often celebrated for their ability to increase the accessibility of certifications for both small-scale producers and lower income consumers (Sacchi, 2016). They are considered expressions of movements that aim to go 'beyond organic' and focus on re-constructing the local and re-embedding food economies into their socio-ecological contexts (Nelson *et al.*, 2010), while helping to develop bonds of belonging and identity among the actors participating in the socio-technical networks that sustain such alternative infrastructures (Radomsky *et al.*, 2014).

Can the empirical evidence I gathered confirm the positive effects for producers and consumers attached to these peer-based quality-reassurance systems? The contradictory opinions regarding organic that I have described in this section implicitly answer the question: no generalized evaluation is possible, as the effectiveness of both farming following organic requirements and having the official organic certification are case-specific and depend on many factors, among which the producers' personal beliefs, market arrangements, and target audience. Indeed, even if for the customers of the box scheme of aforementioned UK9 the organic certification doesn't add any value, for those of the cereal and vegetables producer ITA6 it apparently does, since he has a rather neat opinion on the topic:

> "For me, this [*of the official certifications*] is a method that works, that of mutual trust is total bullshit. Applying for the certification is a matter of transparency" (ITA6, 50, male)

In the realm of innovative agriculture, in sum, as far as ecology is concerned (and organic as the most common specific concretization of ecology in farming) evident tensions between ethics, market requirements, opportunism and trust emerge. These tensions are all condensed in the case-story of the dairy farmer UK14. It's not about the organic certification, but about a different animal-welfare-oriented certification, that of 'free range milk'. This mode of farming, that pledges that cows graze outdoors for at least 180 days a year, has gained momentum in Britain in recent years, and 'free range milk' has been attracting increasing consumer demand. At the same time, labeling one's production as 'free range' allows one to obtain a higher price in the market, where, especially in the milk segment, even a slight increase in market prices can literally lift up the destiny of entire farms.

UK14 is the youngest son of a family that has been managing a dairy farm since the 70s. Their farm is middle-sized and has always been conventional. When my interviewee finished his agricultural business university studies and started working on the farm, they were raising around 400 Frisian cows (the black and white breed, selected for maximizing milk quantity rather than quality), all indoors, and selling their milk locally, partly bottled by themselves and partly as a commodity to larger processors. When he got into the business he addressed the serious profitability crisis that affects the whole milk sector by specializing in a higher value-added niche product: he outsourced the low value-added milk bottling to a third party bottling plant, and started producing a high-quality milk specifically targeted for mixing with coffee. To produce what he calls 'barista coffee', which is sold almost exclusively to high-end London specialty coffee shops,

he bought 67 Jersey cows from Denmark. These cows are less productive but their milk has a higher fat content and a richer taste. The barista milk requires a specific content of fat and protein, so it results from a blend of the production from the Jerseys and the Frisians. The sales of this specialty milk are very successful: in just six months from the introduction of this innovation, this Lancashire farm was already selling as much premium-priced milk in London as regular milk in the local area.

UK14's cows were all kept indoors, but at a certain moment he had to confront the momentum gained by the 'free-range milk', an issue that had to be addressed in order not to be discredited by customers.

> "In order to make the milk perfect for the barista, it's better to keep the cows inside, so you can manage the diet. You can manage the diet better and keep consistency. Because for cows that graze outside, the seasonality causes a change in the composition of the milk. Also there are higher rates of infections, and it affects the milk quality. However, in the dairy industry in the last 2 or 3 years, somebody loves something called 'free range milk', [...] [so] now our customers are saying 'do the cows go outside?', but it's crazy conflict with the milk for coffee because if you put the cows outside in this Lancashire weather the quality of the milk is going to be lower" (UK14, 27, male)

Not only does his personal representation of quality suggest keeping the cows inside, but also from an animal-welfare perspective he argues that, given the territorial conditions, outside grazing does not entail a higher well-being. Nevertheless 'free-range' is rapidly becoming a societal expectation, so he implemented a technical-promotional initiative that he calls 'freedom to choose':

> "You know what the weather's like in Lancashire. The cows don't want to be out in the pissing down rain. [...]But we had a conflict because the consumer thinks the cows are happier when they are outside, [even if] there is no science necessarily supporting that. It's the instinct of the consumer. So we launched something called 'freedom to choose', which basically means that on sunny days we open the door to a green field and the Jerseys can choose whether to go outside or not" (UK14, 27, male)

Only the Jersey cows are given the opportunity to pasture on grassland, while the Frisians are kept inside the barn all-year-round. He continues to argue that cow welfare depends on the breed and that he is sure that the Frisians wouldn't happily go outside even if left free to choose, because they have been selected to produce more at the expense of hardiness. Also the 'freedom to choose' of the Jerseys is limited, as their gate to the pasture is only opened when the weather is sunny – not a very frequent phenomenon in that part of the world – and the field is dry. An ethical-ecological dilemma opens up for UK14: a *real* freedom to choose for both breeds is what consumers ask for, and meeting their expectations would provide a competitive advantage, but matters of technical feasibility and personal beliefs suggest a different way. This dilemma is the result of two concurrent clashes, one between societal values (and knowledge) and farmers' values (and knowledge), and the other between promotional rhetoric and actual practices:

> "Since this is what customers look for, it's gonna be important, in the long term, to give black and white cows freedom to choose as well. And this will be a problem that will be difficult to overcome, because we tell people about this freedom to choose initiative we came up with, but we can't allow cows to be free when the field is not dry, they get muddy and covered in shit and destroy the field. So actually they're not always free to choose" (UK14, 27, male)

Two conclusive considerations can be drawn from the study of this case. The first refers to the functioning of direct commercial chains and AFNs. UK14's 'alternativeness' resides in the fact that his innovative strategy to cope with the decline of his farm has been to develop a non-mainstream specialty product. The form of de-industrialization his farm undertook is a mild one, since he didn't reduce the scale of operations but simply redirected some productive energies towards a less intensive type of production. He doesn't perform direct sales (even his coffee milk is sold through a large wholesaler) and he doesn't take part in a local system of provision, since he targets a national market with a specific focus on urban well-off consumers. As a consequence, he doesn't enjoy the socio-territorial re-embeddedness brought about by AFNs, in which the social negotiation between consumers and other actors of the local food system has the effect of creating mutual knowledge and common understanding, thus working to solve ethical-technical conundrums of the likes of the 'free range' and 'freedom to choose' issue on a collective basis. In other words, one advantage of the alternative networks of food provisioning is that the classic commodity-exchange dynamic tension involving one business *versus* its competitors *versus* the market (writ large) is re-internalized within a system of social relations, so that critical points are addressed and negotiated multi-laterally, and common solutions are actively sought after.

Secondly, UK14's story highlights how society is exerting an increasing pressure on agriculture, expecting it to produce services other than that of growing food. So far I have focused on the provision of ecological services, symptomatic of society's interest in protecting the environment, the welfare of animals and human health. But the demand put on agriculture also regards other types of services, most commonly of a social, educational and leisure nature. Innovative agriculture hence becomes *multifunctional*: numerous side-businesses are created and sometimes become an integral part of family farmers' strategies to resist the harsh conditions they have to face. The next section will focus on the attitudes and practical expressions regarding *multifunctionality* presented by the farmers in my fieldwork.

6.1.3 *Multifunctionality*

Despite the innovations in the modes and techniques of food production that I have been discussing in this chapter, frequently for small farmers agriculture *stricto sensu* is not enough to resist in the market, and the production of complementary services becomes a necessity. The provision of services other than food growing defines agriculture as a *multifunctional* activity.

Historically, agriculture has always had a multifunctional vocation, linked to

the production of non-market and immaterial goods such as nature and landscape management, protection of traditional cultural heritage, social cohesion in rural communities, regional identity building, and other benefits improving the vitality and viability of rural areas which are therefore socially-desirable (Maier and Shobayashi, 2001; Renting *et al.*, 2009). In the last years, food-and-sustainability-related social transitions increased the importance attributed to the multifunctional capacity of agriculture and accelerated the process which is transforming it into a provider of "material and immaterial goods and services that satisfy social expectations, meeting societal demands/needs through the structure of the agricultural sector, agricultural production processes and the spatial extent of agriculture" (Casini *et al.*, 2004, p. 12).

In addition, for family farmers, multifunctionality represents a source of income increase and diversification. As a consequence it comes under the umbrella of the strategic innovations occurring in the alternative and re-territorialized agriculture, being part of the same project of value-added expansion that is made possible by the renewal of societal aspirations for the farming sector. Indeed, as noted by Knickel *et al.* (2004, p. 88, my emphasis), "agricultural activities are transformed, expanded and/or reconnected to other sectors (actors, agencies, markets) in order to deliver products that entail more value-added per unit *precisely because* they fit better with the demands in society at large". In my fieldwork, in fact, I witnessed many different examples of multifunctional service provisioning.

Van Huylenbroek and his colleagues (2007) warn not to conflate multifunctionality – which they define as one activity with different outputs – with *diversification and/or pluriactivity* , to which they respectively refer to as "different economic activities (e.g. food production and tourism) [...] combined within the same management unit" (*ibid.*, p. 8) and "one person or group of persons (farmers or rural entrepreneurs) [...] involved in different activities (e.g. farming and non-farming)" (ivi). In essence, the scholars advise to keep separated the commodity and non-commodity aspect of the goods and services produced by the farm units, circumscribing the notion of multifunctionality to the socially-desirable non-tradable goods furnished by the agricultural process alone (such as biodiversity protection, for example), hence excluding 'sellable' goods such as tourism and recreational services for they are considered the outcome of activities that are parallel to the agricultural one but are not agricultural.

Even if aware of this sound admonition, for the scope of this work I employ the concept of multifunctionality in its broadest sense, referring to every type of good or service produced by the farmers in my study in their capacity as agricultural entrepreneurs which does not relate to food growing or processing. Whether tradable and thus susceptible to commodification or not, these goods and services are strictly connected to agricultural production, which is the source of their *raison d'être*, and I reckon useful to jointly evaluate them in terms of the opportunities they represent for farmers. For the construction of an alternative food system, indeed, multifunctionality becomes a strategic tool to valorize some under-exploited potentialities of small farms, while at the same time increasing their social presence and making them more economically viable. Put in other words, if "multifunctionality can be a unifying principle to bring the productive

and non-productive functions [of farms] into harmony", as stated in the same article from Van Huylenbroeck and his colleagues (2007, p. 1), it can also be an instrument to create and retain value from the 'non-productive', i.e. to 'make' it productive, not only through a process of marketization but also through an attempt of re-socialization.

In my fieldwork, many of the farmers I selected provide additional services, the nature of which is varied. Moreover, a striking difference emerges between the Italian and the English contexts. In the Lombardy field, 14 of the 25 farms I visited provide multifunctional services. The most common of these services is the management of farmshops to give visitors the possibility to buy the farm's products (and often other products from nearby small producers) and farm restaurants where farm products are cooked and served. Hospitality services are also offered, in the form of B&Bs or rural hotels. Also referring to a leisure-recreational function, some farms organize events and open days targeted towards families and children. Other types of services have an educational purpose: didactic farms organize educational programs and events for school children, while adults are offered technical courses and workshops on various farming methods (organic, biodynamic, permaculture) and on socio-environmental responsibility. There is also a quite diffused social orientation: I came across social cooperatives which are incorporated into the farm and managed by the farming family, and witnessed the provision of various socially-relevant services, often realized in collaboration with social institutions and/or financed by public funds. These refer to: stage opportunities for students, working and re-integration opportunities for disadvantaged people, hosting *wwoofers*[57] , therapies for disabled children. I also met a farmer engaged in a years-long battle against land consumption, a farm providing forestry and maintenance services in a nearby public park, a farm running a horse pension and providing horse therapy, and a farm with a convention with a local school to host suspended students during the day.

In the northwest of England the situation appears quite different. Among the 14 farms I included in my study, only 4 are multifunctional. The types of services they offer include: two farmshops, two restaurant-cafés, a tearoom, hospitality in the form of a cottage lease, a camping site, and an artificial lake.

Having approached a smaller number of producers in England than in Italy surely constitutes an evident bias, nevertheless it seems possible to conclude that the state of the art of the Italian multifunctional farming is characterized by a higher level of development, especially in terms of the range of activities performed by farmers. A different level of dissemination of these practices in the two countries is also supported by official statistics. Data for 2017 show Italy as the European leader in terms of production of multifunctional services, for it contributes to 28% of the EU28 production of agricultural 'secondary' activities (RRN-ISMEA-MIIPAF, 2017). The United Kingdom accounts for 11% (*ibid.*) and, as noted by Van der Ploeg and Roep (2003), in general its farmers exhibit a lesser degree of involvement in rural development practices.

[57]People supported by the *Wwoof* organization who travel the world working on farms in exchange for food and accommodation.

Beside aggregated data, what is worth analyzing is that Italian farmers become first-hand social operators and demonstrate a higher propensity to engage in a dialogue with associations and local public powers, which act as partners or financers of their multifunctional projects. Their English counterparts, instead, maintain a more accentuated entrepreneurial profile. In both countries, indeed, opening farms to the public has come to represent an asset and concurrently a requirement for the transition of agriculture towards a re-socialized and re-embedded form. In Britain, though, the farm boundary seems to be crossed by the public mainly for consumption-related motivations, i.e. to purchase some food and a countryside experience, and then get back to everyday urban life. In Italy, the diffused social and educational use of the farm unit, which employs its spatial extent as well as its productive system, suggests a multifaceted phenomenon of re-appropriation of the rural fabric as a valuable component of the social fabric.

One motivation behind the dissimilar interpretation of the multifunctional role of farms in the two countries could be linked to the different composition I detected in the alternative food economies of the two areas I studied. A 'community' role is played by farmers in the Lombard region, since they address socio-educational collective needs by leveraging on food and other agricultural resources, and partly act as 'extra-economic' operators providing services with a certain degree of public utility. In the north-western regions of England, the same food-centered community role is instead played by food sovereignty and sustainability movements, the concretization of which are associations and AFNs. The networks that are active in the alternative food economy in England, whether local-based or operating at a national scale, have a stronger social focus than their Italian counterparts, and promote the use of food as a socio-educational instrument of community welfare. As a result, these organizations (and not farmers) become the providers of certain 'multifunctional services', employing food-related resources to educate individuals and improve their skills, foster social cohesion and build social relations. Farmers are involved in their activities and constantly referred to, but their participation in social and environmental programs is less intense. In Italy, on the contrary, AFNs are more centered on the exchange of food and on the conservation of small-scale agriculture, seen as an indispensable sector since it grants the production of good fair food and the protection of the environment. Subsequently, their main aim is to support the resistance of farmers as producers of food *and* as a desired presence in the socio-economic landscape. Therefore their commitment is more 'economic': inspired by notions of economic and environmental justice, Italian AFNs pledge to sustain small farmers by improving their economic conditions, who in turn play a more complex societal role than their British colleagues, carrying on a wider array of tasks and activities.

This distinction can also be read as a different formulation of the neo-liberalist regime in the two countries. The need to grant State-support to multifunctional farming, in fact, is often emphasized by advocates as a counter-narrative to the neoliberal vision for European agriculture (Potter and Tilzey, 2005). The social and educational projects of the farmers in my study are frequently funded by public institutions, especially local government bodies such as Italian *Province* and *Regioni*. The Italian state and its local ramifications have a long-standing tradition of supporting the agricultural sector, which instead appears to be less pronounced

in England, where self-regulating markets are often privileged. This analytical perspective could be explanatory of the different patterns of multifunctionality empirically detected in the two countries, yet for pursuing such a perspective, a study of the behavior of institutions in the two contexts should be carried out, which exceeds the scope of this research.

Lastly, the unequal level of multifunctional development of the farms in the two regions might also reflect a different incidence of the 'urban effect' on the phenomena I'm scrutinizing. In the family farming world in the Milanese area, indeed, the presence of the city is more 'felt' then in the northwest of England, although the area is significantly urbanized, with Manchester and Liverpool playing the role of major centers together with several middle-sized towns scattered throughout the territory. As I will analyze later (see section 7.2.1), Milan's urban resources appear more influential on the transformations happening at the farm level in its surroundings, both from a market and a relational point of view. Multifunctional farming services, directed to satisfying new needs, are heavily affected by consumption demands coming from the city. In general, indeed, peri-urban farmers show a higher intensity of multifunctionality (Zasada, 2011), and a higher institutional interest of municipalities towards local agriculture tends to correspond to a higher uptake of multifunctional measures. This not only underlines the concentration in the city of the energies of societal transformation and emphasizes the tight linkages between urban and rural, but also redirects us once again to the issue of public policies, reminding us of the nascent role of cities as political-institutional actors in the food and farming economy, responsible for the promotion of food security and sovereignty and socio-environmental sustainability at the local level.

Whether multifunctionality includes an endeavor to provide social and educational as well as environmental and cultural services, or is limited to expand market opportunities by offering market-oriented tourism and leisure services, it is a welcomed innovation for the farmers of my study. It is seen as an accepted evolution because it fits the project of relational openness family farmers are undergoing to resist in the market, and because it concurrently promises new income opportunities. Multiplying contacts and increasing income go hand in hand, but the latter is obviously the main concern for farmers. The rationale backing the introduction of this innovation, as almost every other innovation in the realm of alternative agriculture, is primarily economic, as shown by the following excerpts:

> "Those farmers who haven't diversified, I think in five-seven years' time will be struggling. And they'll probably end up doing part-time farming and part-time doing something else. [...] We started with farmers markets, but since we had to pay the business rates, we looked for other streams of revenue. So we opened the farm shop, then we built the tearoom, and in 2011 we built the lake. Next step will be setting up a caravan park" (UK10, 59, male)

> "We do many things. Maybe too many. But the problem is that a single channel is not enough" (ITA10, 30, female)

> "We have eight thousand subscriptions to our newsletter, with which

> we keep customers updated on our many activities. [...] Having a lot of different things going on allows us to always have a way to cash in" (ITA18, 58, female)

Despite the contingent necessities, however, broadening the productive scope of farming to embrace pluriactivity is commonly interpreted by farmers as a desirable evolution, able to empower smallholders by increasing their social recognition and strengthening their position within society. The peri-urban dairy farmer ITA24 illustrates how the consolidation of the multifunctional capacity of farms has become a conscious objective. He substantially contributed to the creation of *DAM Distretto Agricolo Milanese*, a district whose membership is composed of peri-urban Milanese farmers, recently set up with the purpose of lobbying the municipal institutions to defend the interests of local farms. He recognizes that multifunctionality represents a new era for farmers, an upgrade of their social role, which could lead to beneficial effects. For this reason, his district explicitly pursues the goal of building the capacity of its members to be providers of various useful services to the collectivity:

> "It's over with the concept of the farmer as [only] a producer of commodities, come in and take away. We are producers (or try to be) of products but also of services, various types of services. It's a process that we started unconsciously 35 years ago, to save ourselves. Then we slowly systematized it a bit, and with the possibility of the district we made it become a concrete objective, and we started to pursue it even restructuring [our farm models]" (ITA24, 65, male)

Nonetheless, some farmers are convinced that an excessive departure from the canons of farming and its primary function of producing food may, if integrated to become a system component, lead to a distortion of the very nature of farming. In the same fashion that they judge the multiplication of activities they are called to perform to sell through short chains and AFNs, farmers see this new productive part as an indispensable extension of farms' reach spurred by constraining circumstances, which is synergic with their core activity but whose time and effort requirements divert energies from their principal aspiration, i.e. taking care of their land and producing good food. Interestingly, the clearest formulation of this type of concern in my fieldwork comes from ITA22, a woman whose family manages a *deeply* multifunctional farm in the urban fringe of Milan. Their core activity is the production of chicken and beef, but they also own a horse pension and provide a series of educational, therapeutic and socially-relevant services to both children and adults. Pushing multifunctionality too far, she argues, is needed but is 'culturally strenuous':

> "Believe me, this conversion, a farmer that converts to do these things – which in the end are those that give profit, because agriculture doesn't give profit – in my opinion these things penalize farmers' culture. My son, even for the sole fact that he has to take care of other people's horses, which are animals but they're used for leisure, culturally my son suffers. Whereas when he takes care of cattle he's happy. So the true farmer follows this one road, the farmer that follows the other road [*pluriactivity*] does it out of obligation, because it's neither the culture nor the mentality of the true farmer" (ITA22, 55, female)

In fact, in my fieldwork I discovered cases in which the higher profitability of additional services causes a shift in the core-production of the farm, which moves the focus of the business into the new activity and reduces the importance of the strictly agricultural part, by for example dismissing portions of agricultural production and sourcing food and other formerly internally-produced resources from outside. I could only witness this phenomenon in the English field; nevertheless it is possible to conclude that certain developments of multifunctionality envisage a risk for agriculture to become ancillary to other more profitable consumption-oriented activities. Here, Van Huylenbroeck *et al.*'s (2007) theoretical distinction between a narrow conception of multifunctionality, diversification and pluriactivity re-gains its full analytical value, demonstrating its usefulness for future research in the field.

Overall, however, multifunctionality incorporates an important potential to re-launch small-scale agriculture because, as argued by Knickel *et al.* (2004), multifunctional activities reflect a new set of relations between agriculture and society, city and countryside, constituting a response to new societal needs. By mobilizing new revenues and finding new forms of organization, the authors continue, these activities represent new answers to the cost-price-squeeze and bring about a reconfiguration of farm resources and their relation with rural areas, food chains, and the institutional environment. In addition they are highly synergic with other types of introductions that have come to define family farmers' transition towards the 'alternative side'. As the evidence from my fieldwork suggests, multifunctionality facilitates experiments and the development of new products (that can be served at the farm restaurant if commercially unsuccessful), gives a larger freedom to set the price of the products (because they are served internally or because they acquire a deeper meaning in the consumer's mind), helps to attract the interest of a larger number of consumers and thus multiplies contacts and sales potential (as exemplified by the aforementioned newsletter with eight thousand subscribers through which ITA18 informs her customers about their various activities: the higher the number of reasons for customers to get in contact with the farm, the greater the possibility for the farm to find commercial outlets for its products).

In sum, multifunctionality represents a new form of integration of agriculture into society, by which on the one hand agriculture is required to implement new (sometimes onerous) activities, whereas on the other hand it is furnished with new opportunities to gain a foothold in the current socio-economic fabric. To take these chances, though, producers not only have to embark on a multitude of ventures that sometimes require a thorough restructuring of their systems, but are also called to develop new personal skills and attitudes, signaling a rupture with the previous models of farming. The development of these new abilities not only requires a higher overall level of education, but also an increased relational capacity, a more refined sensitivity to market dynamics and consumer trends, a knowledge of the online communication technologies and of their value as promotional-relational instruments, and an increased inclination to cooperate with a varied set of actors and to 'open the gates' of the farm to the general audience. To 'go alternative', then, a personal evolution process is needed:

> "Surely, farmers are not well-prepared on the most modern dynamics, like marketing for example, because they were not part of this world and they're knowing it only now" (ITA24, 65, male)

> "You can't be a farmer like fifty years ago, sourpuss, hardly speaking, because now you have to get along with people. People notice that. You can't be mute as a codfish, not even at farmers' markets" (ITA3, 33, male)

The downshifting and de-industrialization process that I have been discussing throughout this chapter, in conclusion, albeit implying a reduction of the intensity of production, doesn't have the effect of simplifying the farm, which instead becomes a more complex rural enterprise engaged in the production of new products and services, a multi-product firm operating within different socio-economic spaces and markets. Van der Ploeg's paradigm of rural development is empirically realized: through a three-fold process that *deepens, broadens and re-grounds* (Van der Ploeg and Roep, 2003) the agricultural activity, farms become multi-layered units oriented to find new spaces of consolidation. The *deepening* process refers to increasing the value-added of products by transforming, expanding and/or re-linking activities to social actors' aspirations, examples of which are the production of high quality and specialty products and organic farming. *Broadening* entails a reorganization and amplification of the structure of the farm, which leverages on its 'ruralness' to offer new diversified multifunctional on-farm activities. Lastly, *re-grounding* embeds the farm into a new or different set of resources and/or involves it in new patterns of resource use, resulting in novel forms of input management and off-farm activities (*ibid.*).

AFNs and the other methods of direct sales, together with the relational 'revolution' associated with them, nurture and sustain the development of this new paradigm, as I will discuss in the next section.

6.2 Mode of commercialization

> "Shall I sum it up in a single word? *Salvation.* Because I wouldn't be here doing this job anymore if I didn't start doing direct sales. [...] Before I had to seek an outlet for my stuff, now I do the opposite: I see what people want from me and I grow it" (ITA13, 45, male)

This was the response of ITA13 to my question about what the meaning for him of selling directly to the public at a farmers' market is. I have already reported the story of this fruit grower (in sections 5.2 and 6.1.1), who found his way out of the suffocating economic conditions he had to withstand in the conventional system by taking a market stall in Milan. For this producer, direct commercialization does not represent just a way to obtain higher prices, but a complex transformation of the operational mechanisms of his farm, and of the logics and approaches adopted so far in the management of his business. ITA13 didn't become 'alternative' due to an ideological push, but because he had liquidity problems caused by the deferred payments that are a characteristic of the conventional food channel. He was neither theoretically nor practically well equipped to cater directly to the public. Nevertheless, he soon learned that a process of constant exchange with the public, the outcome of which allows for an adjustment of farm operations accordingly, was needed to succeed. He found out that the best way to sell his apples was in 2 kg bags rather than loose, and that having various types of fruit and, especially,

vegetables on his stall attracted many more customers. He then decided to reduce his apple production in favor of other fruit, and started a vegetable garden to grow the produce his Milan customers were demanding.

As shown by this example, selling directly means questioning production modalities and adjusting to a new set of relational processes-requirements. This transformation is strenuous and is able to strongly modify the times and rhythms of farmers' work, who are now called to perform a wider array of tasks, the realization of which requires skills that are not traditionally a feature of the peasant world. These developments add up to and are deeply intertwined with the modifications in the sphere of production I discussed in the previous section. The renewals of productive and commercial strategies are thus strongly interdependent, and an effective management of the two sides results in a reinforcement of the positive effects of the innovation process. This also implies that the re-peasantization of agriculture is not an operation of simplification, but rather an ambitious project that attributes several new layers to an activity that can no longer be considered basic.

Farmers perceive that their whole working world is different now: different from the classic vision and practice of agriculture, as reported by those who set up their businesses in an 'alternative' way at the beginning; different from the way their own working world used to be, as felt by those who became 'alternative' after a 'conventional' past. And in their representation, their own 'alternativeness' is enrooted and becomes manifest more in the way they sell their products than in the high quality, environmental friendliness or traditional technique of their production. In other words, the commercialization mode and the nets of social relationships upon which its functioning rests are credited with a stronger innovative power, defining a rupture from the past and inaugurating a new course for their lives as farmers:

> "Sure, once that you get yourself into this channel you want to avoid going back to sell to the industry. In the past you had to, because there were few alternatives. Now an alternative idea exists, it's more tiresome but it's more inspiring. I think this road is the right one" (ITA17, 60, female)

> "[The turning point was] when we decided to get into the world of GAS [*purchasing groups*] and [farmers'] markets, so you have to make yourself known by participating in conferences and meetings with the various groups, or participating in the meetings of DESR[58], receiving people here on the farm and other things" (ITA6, 50, male)

> "The breakthrough meant a completely new working mode. Raising animals has become almost a marginal thing, whereas before it was almost the only occupation. The work has gotten way more complicated, and the hours of commitment have multiplied. Even on a mental level the required effort is much bigger. We can't afford any more workforce, though" (ITA15, 32, male)

[58] District of Rural Economic Solidarity of the South Agricultural Park of Milan, an association of local food activists/advocates operating in the city and managing several food-related projects.

In concrete terms, the main feature of this new marketing orientation of family farming regards the abandonment of intermediated (multi-step) commercial chains and the adoption of direct methods of sales, which are realized either catering directly to the public, i.e. without any form of mediation, or through the solidarity-oriented mediation operated by AFNs such as purchasing groups, food assemblies and other organizations of consumers. As said several times already, in some instances the long (conventional) chains are not dismissed entirely, rather they are kept alongside the alternative channels as an expression of producers' hybridity (Le Velly and Dufeu, 2016), which concretizes in a pragmatic *bricolage* (Di Domenico *et al.*, 2010; Feyereisen *et al.*, 2017; Grivins *et al.*, 2017) of means to adapt to difficult market circumstances. The concept of *bricolage* refers to "the free use of any material at hand. Bricoleurs accept that these materials might not be ideal, but nevertheless use them as long as they offer characteristics that help to reach their goals" (Grivins *et al.*, 2017, p. 340). Indeed, in most cases the producers of my study express a desire to sell exclusively through direct chains – because deemed more profitable and more personally satisfying – but, as *bricoleurs*, maintain a hybrid commercial arrangement out of necessity: to try to make do within the current critical situation they can't afford the risk of fully abandoning a consolidated (yet problematic) path to exclusively pursue a new (yet promising) avenue.

In my study, anyway, this condition regards a minority of producers, in fact only 17 out of 39 producers I met were still engaged in conventional sales patterns, and many of them were planning to expand direct sales in order to slowly reduce the portion of conventional sales. Nonetheless, whether producers are engaged in a relationship with the mainstream players or not, the concept of *bricolage* also applies to the selection and upkeep of the different alternative outlets they choose to serve. The commercial strategies of the producers I interviewed vary significantly, as they usually cater their products through a mixed combination of channels (various AFNs such as purchasing groups, or farmers' markets, or food coops, etc.) and practical arrangements (delivering to the customers, delivering to a collection point, having the individual customers or the organization of customers coming to the farm to pick products up, and so on). They develop these different forms according to their farms' specific conditions (type of product, location), their other strategies (multifunctionality, branding, global attractiveness of the farm) and their personal beliefs regarding the market and marketing. Some producers, for example, privilege farmers' markets over purchasing groups because of the difficulty of dealing with the latter, while others, contrarily, dislike being in the street and better enjoy the interpersonal relations with purchasing group members. Their turnover, as a result, is usually split among many sources, which they accurately manage in an attempt to diversify the commercial base as much as possible (see section 5.2.2, pp. 100-101).

The purpose of this behavior is to reduce the negative potential of market uncertainty: on the one hand, indeed, to prevent the detrimental effect of losing a customer and, on the other, to monitor the market and understand which outlet is more reliable and best fits their practices, and thus worth investing in the future. These combinations are unique since they depend on the conditions of the singular farm and on their socio-geo-political context, which creates different alternative

economies inevitably affecting farm operations in distinct ways. Furthermore, they are based on a series of personal features of producers, such as their representation and their understanding of the external world, their beliefs and convictions, their skills and their background, their relations and their networks.

To clarify the commercial orientation of the producers in my study, let's provide a few examples, from both countries, which can be considered typical. ITA8's farm is located about 40 km north of Milan, not far from the lake of Como. They have a diversified production ranging from cereals and vegetables to milk and meat in addition to processed goods like bread, and they also organize various multifunctional activities. Their commercial base is equally diversified: the bulk of their turnover (60%) comes from selling products at their farmshop, the second biggest portion (25%) derives from the about 40 GAS groups they provide, while the remaining (15%) is obtained by selling to four restaurants in Milan, an ice-cream parlor that buys goat milk, four small independent retailers and one farmers' market.

In Lancashire, UK5 owns and runs, with the help of her husband, a small market garden producing vegetables. She reports that 60% of her sales go to a food coop in Manchester, 15% to a wholesaler of organic products in Manchester, 15% to a purchasing group also based in Manchester, and the remaining 10% is sold to another vegetable producer in her area, who runs a box scheme and buy her vegetables to complement his production. Many other combinations exist. UK7 for example sells most of her Yorkshire free-range pork meat to pubs and restaurants, and only a small portion of her production is channeled through AFNs such as Food Assemblies, which she employs more as a promotional than a commercial tool. She thus privileges 'classic' forms of direct sales to leveraging on the organizations of the alternative economy.

However, the common feature of these commercial arrangements is that they rely on a multiplicity of outlets that require a strong relational and logistical effort to be built and maintained. If, on the one hand, this effort is needed because it is an essential part of the aforementioned project of value-added expansion (see section 6.1.1), which has become mandatory to resist in the market, on the other hand it is synergic with the same transformations occurring in the sphere of production, both of goods and services. Approaching the consumers and their organizations, putting a face and a story behind a food product are the best ways to sell farm products and collateral farm services which are produced following a new, distinct, productive logic. As part of the innovative project, family farmers' products – to use the words of ITA8 – have "to be sold differently":

> "I hope that the world of the alternative networks will develop further. Our product, if sold to the retailer, to the intermediary, makes little sense. Our product has higher costs, and it has to be sold differently, it has to be explained" (ITA8, 36, male)

Built into the product is the reality of the farm, its many functions, and the stories and characters of the people who devote their lives to this type of societally appreciated agriculture. Only through contact with customers, though, can these features translate into economic advantage, and mutually reinforce the aspects of sustainability and resilience of the small-scale farming sector. It is a process that

aims to produce mutual *trust*, which spurs from the direct exchange and is based on the several factors that revolve around the production of food within the farm unit:

> "Trust is created on the basis of many components, some of them are also the price and the quality of the product, but several others are behind the product itself: how it's made, who you are, how you make it, how able you are to narrate it, how inserted you are into the territory, how inserted you are into society. Because [for example] a business that employs a migrant person, and pays them a fair amount, represents a positive contribution for society itself. [...] This doesn't mean that I can set the price I want, or that I can foist rubbish to GAS people, but that I have to try to put all these things together, and this is the most difficult entrepreneurial effort" (ITA16, 34, male)

As we have seen, in the market gardener ITA16's mind there is an awareness of the thicker value that agriculture can assume nowadays, an awareness that this value has to be negotiated directly to the public in order to be recognized. This process constitutes a strenuous effort, but if it manages to create trust, it is repaid in the form of a higher level of support coming directly from the people who purchase and appreciate farmers' products and their work. The beekeeper ITA21, for example, recognizes that GAS groups significantly support his business, by pre-purchasing (at a discounted price) and paying for the honey at the beginning of the season (March), then receiving the product once it is ready (September). Even if volumes aren't large, he comments, this is a concrete help in facilitating the management of liquidity:

> "For the producer it is ideal to have this trust relationship with those who then consume your product, and to have economic stability and also a certain tranquility to carry on with your life. We're at the mercy of the market, of the season, and so we have moments of huge difficulty. I have my debts and my mortgages with the banks too" (ITA21, 40, male)

For producers who meet societal expectations, then, direct sales represent a tool to manifest their presence and become social actors. This participation enables them to receive forms of support that are innovative in the sense that they are not based on market mechanisms but conversely act as correctors of market distortions and inequalities, thanks to the compensation effort of the operators of the alternative economy. These forms of support can act directly on economic conditions (paying a higher price), or indirectly to protect farmers from market adversities, by reducing their business risk or buffering them in order to facilitate the development of innovations.

Furthermore, in contrast to the modes of commercialization in the conventional food economy, the diversification of market outlets allowed by direct sales is also directed towards multiplying the chances of receiving social support. Indeed, the wider the social base a farm can enjoy, i.e. the group of people and/or organizations that have knowledge of the farm and a certain interest in its products and operations, the more likely are opportunities for support and, as a consequence, resilience. A high number of customers and (more generally) stakeholders, in

fact, increase a farm's ability to cope with shocks (if one market channel drops, for instance, there are several others on which to rely and eventually work on to compensate) and enhance the likelihood of being involved in new projects and initiatives:

> "I know many big growers, and they're under a lot of stress. They have three market outlets and if one drops all their profits of that year are gone. Whereas I have 150-160 customers, and if one drops, it's likely that in a couple of days a new one calls to subscribe" (UK3, 60, male)

> "We managed to diversify the clientele too, which is an important thing especially nowadays. Because if the activity is not going well, with direct customers you can juggle the work a bit" (ITA15, 32, male)

> "Our various activities compensate each other, [every year] the one that doesn't go well is compensated by the one that goes better. Even a garden is like this, some years some products make a good harvest, some others don't grow at all. It's like this, it's not an automatic thing, we don't produce screws" (ITA18, 58, female)

Clearly these benefits are not obtained without contrasts and tensions. The price to pay to reach these objectives is indeed an increase in the complexity of activities and tasks farmers are called to perform to 'follow' this multiplicity of market channels and negotiate their positions with their stakeholders. The number of activities gets larger, and many of them regard areas that do not traditionally belong to the agricultural capacity, thus requiring new and varied capabilities. Some producers welcome these changes; others lament their heaviness, especially the fact that they impose a distraction from the strictly agricultural work, which is their main aspiration. To the former type belong producers like ITA9, while farmers like ITA6 represent the latter type, both quoted in the following:

> "You've got to be a bit peasant, a bit seller, a bit cook, if you want to make a difference. These are the things that make a difference, not the price" (ITA9, 57, male)

> "They are transforming farmers into waiters, merchants and restaurateurs. This is the flipside of the coin: farmers that found themselves being merchants. [...] I stopped doing [farmers'] markets because I want to be a farmer, and between the organic bureaucracy, the GAS groups and the markets, I wasn't able to follow my farm anymore" (ITA6, 50, male)

The overload is also motivated by the fact that if direct channels, on the one hand, are able to furnish farmers with support and consideration, on the other hand they demand from producers a high level of sensitivity toward the needs and desires of individuals and their organizations. To provide GAS groups, for example, producers have to single-handedly prepare individual packs for every GAS member, often customized to their specific preferences. Interestingly, in the UK the GAS system is not diffused, and British producers could almost not believe that such a meticulous job was carried out on a regular basis by their

Italian colleagues. Even in Italy, however, some producers avoid catering to GAS precisely because of the excessive labor they require, or anyway express a certain perplexity about the neediness of some of their customers:

> "It's not easy to follow all these channels, but I got used to it. And by now I even remember if the customer X prefers his fennels small, and I try to satisfy his expectations. The level of detail is high. Nevertheless sometimes somebody complains. And I can't understand why somebody complains whereas others happily buy every week" (ITA12, 35, male)

Postponing deeper considerations about the benefits and shortcomings of GAS and other community-based AFNs to section 6.2.2, here I would like to highlight what is instead the main obstacle to farmers' activity in the alternative commercial world: logistics. Transversally, the small farmers I met are ill equipped to extend the logistical effort that is required to provide to their several direct channels, most commonly due to a shortage of workforce. A more complex logistics is a characteristic outcome of the alternative food economy: the social re-connection of the food system inevitably entails a physical re-connection between producers and consumers, between the countryside and the city. In the conventional food system, logistical operations are generally simpler for farmers. Large collectors (in the case of milk and other staples) or mass distribution operators usually collect products at the farm, and when farmers are called to deliver their products (to a wholesale market, for example) they do it on a less frequent basis than in the short chain system, they bring larger quantities, and once delivered they are free to go back to their farm, having no need to interact with customers or be physically present to sell the products. When selling directly, instead, producers have to juggle between different places, different schedules and different roles, constantly embedded in a complex relational environment. Logistics is a critical area, and a higher logistical capacity would, subsequently, offer farmers more opportunities to profit (both in an economic and social sense) from the alternative urban food economy:

> "Yes, for me it is super important that people come here. I find it very hard to go around now. Between production and infinite bureaucracy, I can't take on more deliveries" (ITA10, 30, female)

> "I used to supply the Stretford Food Assembly, but I dropped because getting into Manchester at 5 pm was too lengthy and expensive" (UK6, 55, female)

> "We would need a person that goes around, maybe paid by all of us, as if a common employee, to collect the various products from farmers and deliver them" (ITA12, 35, male)

The commercial transformation of 'alternative' farmers, in sum, is based on a fairer economic balance between the actors of the chain and holds the promise for a more satisfactory and profitable marketing of farm products and services. At the same time, it requires a restructuring of the mentality and attitude of farmers and the possession of new skills, and demands the development of a capacity to process varied and more complex activities. The AFNs, in this sense, provide

new opportunities to farmers and open up new avenues for a different agriculture to resist and lift its fortune in the face of the global system and its predatory patterns, but concurrently come short in identifying and addressing key issues hindering farmers' operations. The quite pessimistic view of the vegetable grower ITA7 makes the point:

> "These alternative networks would be very welcome, but often they are born and then they quickly fade, they are not effective. Because our problem [as small producers] is that we cannot do everything on our own. I mean, we are here hoeing the soil, then we change clothes, we jump on the van and become drivers, then we get to the place and become traders. I don't even know how many hats we have to wear over the week. And then if we are a family business – which is the only way to stand up – we lack the time to cultivate our field. So there is a need for these figures. The chain is short but it can't be super short, we need intermediate figures. I haven't seen them, though" (ITA7, 50, male)

Actually, in my two fieldworks the short and the super short chains coexist, and both fall under the umbrella of my definition of alternative food economy. For the sake of analysis, though, at this point it is convenient to treat them separately, to underscore the lights and shadows of both. The super short chain is structured by farmers who sell directly to the public, with little or no mediation operated by organizations of consumers and/or organizations of farmers (such as unions or cooperatives, for example). In the short chain, instead, sales are still direct to the end consumers, but they are mediated/supported/organized by AFNs, whether community- or business-oriented. To these two different expressions of the alternative economy I will dedicate, respectively, the following two sub-sections.

6.2.1 *Selling directly to the consumers*

As underlined several times already, the processes of commercial reformation I am analyzing – which in turn are crucial to the comprehension of the broader phenomenon of 'alternative' small-scale farming – require a transformation in the mentality of farmers and in their approach to the market. This new mentality embraces an awareness that new practices are needed in order to resist in the market, and such practices have to be adapted to a changed (and continuously changing) socio-economic environment. Selling directly to the public through super short chains, i.e. with no or very little intermediation operated by third actors, is the most evident manifestation of this new mental-aptitude paradigm, since it requires the focus of the agricultural activity to be shifted from production to commercialization. An increased relevance of social and commercial relations, as we have seen, regards the whole sector of family farmers who aspire to find their space within the agriculture of the post-modern era; yet for those who choose to approach their public directly, by 'going out to the street' to propose themselves and their business to the people who consume their products, commercialization assumes an even greater importance and such commercial orientation signals a rift between what is to be done today to be successful and how things were once done in the past. 'New peasants' are aware of this, especially those who sell through super short chains, and tend to frame the mentality shift as one of the major differences from the agricultural world of the past, while deeming it necessary in

order to achieve sustainability and viability. About this, the clearest example from my fieldwork comes from UK9, a young married couple managing a successful box scheme farm in Cheshire. The husband explains that what differentiates them from the classic (no longer viable) farmer is that for them getting customers comes before growing food:

> "We're different farmers in the way we're prepared to be. Most farmers are moaning they want somebody else to create the market for them. But we're going out like a normal business, [which] has to get new customers. New customers is first, growing is second. Number one is getting customers, number two is 'ok, we've got some customers, we'd better grow some products', whereas most are in reverse: 'I have 200 hectares, I grow crops on 200 hectares, I have to sell crops for 200 hectares'. Whereas we are not thinking like this, we're thinking: 'we get customers, we grow products, and if we rent more land, fine, we can'. So it's a different approach, it's a change in the mentality" (UK9, 35, male)

This approach reveals an understanding of the current (local-sustainable-organic-etc.) food market as dynamic and quickly transforming. For this reason, the construction of a social base becomes the pivotal element of farm businesses, and this directly relates more to the ways the connection with the public is established than to the intrinsic characteristics of the food that is produced. In addition, UK9's attitude reflects an approach that is more characteristic of the British farmers of my study than their Italian colleagues. In fact, although the emphasis on the patterns of producer-consumer re-connection and the modalities through which this is realized is a common feature of all producers I met, in Britain elements such as autonomy and room for maneuver are more strongly sought after by farmers. In the UK, the 'ourselves alone *versus* the market' mindset is well diffused, so that the primary preoccupation for farmers is to develop a business model that is able to attract customers. In Italy this is also felt, but to a lesser degree, for two reasons: one is that more value (and therefore attention) is given to the intrinsic qualities of food, most likely due to a stronger culinary culture and knowledge enabling people to distinguish, appreciate, and thus look for specific characteristics of the food they consume, resulting in the fact that it is sufficient for farmers to produce a product with high or distinctive qualities to have a certain commercial advantage; and secondly, Italian farmers have a stronger tendency to address issues of resistance and seek support for their innovations through *cooperation*, i.e. getting involved in nets of stakeholders collaborating towards a common goal. This collaborative orientation draws upon the long-established tradition of Italian agricultural cooperatives (Agostini and Saccomandi, 1970; Salvatori, 2011; Borzaga and Fontanari, 2014) and translates into the fact that, among the various alternative channels, Italian farmers privilege those that have a more marked social component, i.e. those AFNs that are operated by social or community groups, whereas in England producers tend to prefer those channels that grant a higher degree of autonomy and require less interpersonal negotiation.

This is why, in the realm of super short chains, in Italy the most diffused tool is to sell through farmers' markets, whereas in England farmshops, box schemes and other forms of delivery (to shops and restaurants, for example) are proliferating. For what regards the AFN-mediated sales, instead, the same principle helps in

understanding why in Italy the most diffused AFN model is GAS (solidarity-oriented purchasing) groups while these are almost absent in England, where the food coop model (solidarity-based grocery shops, in essence) is the most successful.

Consideration about the AFN-mediated types of direct sales will be postponed to the following section. Here I would like to introduce some of the most common examples of super short chains that I found during my fieldwork, and analyze their characteristics as resulting from producers' own representations.

There are four main types of super-short-chain sales: farmshops, farmers' markets, sales to order, and box schemes. If a farm has a farmshop it means that it is possible for customers to physically go to the farm and buy its products. I came across different types of farmshops: some are organized as actual shops where, often, products from other producers can also be found and, sometimes, restaurant/cafeteria services (multifunctional services based on farm products) are annexed; others are more informal non-structured shops where people who come to the farm can purchase its products. Furthermore, some farms work as a pick-your-own farm, where individuals can pick the desired quantity of fruits and vegetables directly from the plants and pay a lower-than-market-average price at the farm gate. During my fieldwork I gathered that pick-your-own farms have had a period of fame in the UK, nevertheless I could only visit one whose sales dramatically dropped in the last decade precisely due to a lack of interest from consumers. The insufficiency of data at my disposal prevents me from drawing valid conclusions, though it is possible to presume that the economic impact of this model is on a downward trajectory.

Farmers' markets are open-air or indoor markets where every stall is managed directly by farmers. Different from traditional street markets, where traders are usually professionals who buy and re-sell food products, being an actual producer is a requirement to get into a farmers' market. Nonetheless, re-selling other producers' products is usually allowed, up to a certain percentage of overall sales. These markets are normally organized and managed by associations, either civic associations of neighbors or citizens, food-related associations (local or national), or agriculture-related associations (such as farmers' unions). Farmers' markets are diffused in both countries of my study, but a striking difference exists: in Italy they are usually held once a week, whereas in England they take place no more frequently than once a month (a Lancaster-based food advocacy association, for example, organizes a farmers' market in the central square of the town four times a year, once per season). Such a different periodicity inevitably affects farmers' perceptions of the opportunities provided by farmers' markets in the two countries.

The third main type of super short chain is sales to order, which farmers collect both from individual customers (households) and from other food operators such as: small shops that want to retail farm products (local butcheries, small organic shops); restaurants, pubs and cafés that want to use farm products as ingredients; and other producers willing to retail a wider range of products (at their farmshops, or at their market stalls, and so on). Orders can be received by phone or online, most commonly through simple emails even if in some instances producers are equipped with a website through which orders can be placed. The products

purchased to order are sometimes shipped out by the farmer and delivered to the buyer, either personally or through a courier, whereas some producers accept orders only if the buyers are able to collect them at the farm.

The fourth and last type is box schemes. A box scheme is a farmer-managed subscription system to receive a weekly (or fortnightly) crate or box of vegetables and other products at the doorstep. The boxes are mixed, contain seasonal products, and are usually delivered with farmers' own vehicles. Customers can choose the size of the box and the periodicity of the delivery, and frequently they are given the possibility to customize the content of the box, which farmers communicate to them beforehand. In most cases there is also the possibility to have a single box delivered, without subscribing to a periodic scheme. These systems leverage significantly on online technologies, since subscriptions, purchases and customizations are realized through the scheme's website, and a constant flow of communication between the farm and the customers is channeled through emails and newsletter.

A general evaluation about the instruments chosen by the farmers to cater their products to the public can be made: in all four cases, indeed, producers *go to the customers*, they 'move' towards them to meet them in the most direct way, for the first time in the world of farming. As a consequence, for the first time farmers have the burden of managing every aspect of their relationship with customers. This is a great entrepreneurial effort, since the balance between customer satisfaction and farm prerogatives has to be constantly managed, especially to maintain the high level of trust upon which the commercial relationship is based. Customers' beliefs and expectations and producers' own beliefs and practical constraints have to find a meeting point, which is clearly even more difficult when customers buy without seeing the products, hence thoroughly entrusting the producer:

> "It's not easy to do the shopping for someone who doesn't see the products. He could complain about everything, and at the same time you have to do it following certain criteria in which you believe, and in which he himself [*the customer*] belives. And this is the reason why he buys from you" (ITA16, 34, male)

In other words, the commercial effort is successful as long as customers' ideology matches producers' ideology and, concurrently, as long as it is feasible for producers to meet customers' requirements, given their technical capability and workforce limitations. This is why the various marketing tools populating the alternative economy are selected, tried, kept or discarded by producers according to the resources at their disposal and their contingent conditions. The result is a varied mix of forms of sales, uniquely developed by farmers as another expression of *bricolage* (Di Domenico *et al.*, 2010; Feyereisen *et al.*, 2017; Grivins *et al.*, 2017), in a dynamic balance that is object of constant re-calibration.

The majority of the producers I met, in fact, have tried the different types of direct channels over the years, and in most cases still keep a multiplicity of market channels. During the interviews, they were able to motivate their choices and provide their evaluation about every channel, highlighting their strengths and weaknesses on the basis of their experience. Here, I would like to focus on the two most successful super short channels in the two countries, namely farmers'

markets in Italy and box schemes in the UK, and analyze their pros and cons as reported by the farmers I interviewed.

As said, farmers' markets are more diffused and successful in Italy than in the UK. The figures for Milan show that in 2017 there were 53 farmers' markets in the area of the province, mostly organized on a weekly basis, more than half of which were concentrated in the city's urban core (Borrelli *et al.*, 2017a). The reason for this diffusion can be traced to the Italian habit to shop at street markets: an old custom that never disappeared in the country, as the presence of a *mercato rionale* in every neighborhood even in the modern day can testify. In the UK, instead, economic processes of concentration in the food retail sector are more accentuated, and it is in supermarkets where most of the food shopping is realized. In addition, as noted by Martindale *et al.* (2018) different food materialities exist in Italy and the UK. For many British citizens, the tactile link with food is broken whereas, despite the process of conventionalization of agriculture and supermarketization, which is occurring in both countries, in Italy food still holds its importance as a crucial trait of material culture (*ibid.*). As a reflection of the unchanged familiarity with the visceral qualities of food, Italian consumers tend to prefer to assess food with their senses before purchasing it. They want to see the products and also, as the vegetable grower ITA9 reports, sometimes they even want to touch them:

> "At the market some people come and ask me if they can touch the merchandise, sometimes in ways that are almost manic" (ITA9, 57, male)

These factors, combined with the growing interest about local food, have made farmers' markets trendy and popular in Milan and its surroundings. Unlike in England, I repeat, they take place once a week, thus representing a more robust commercial option for producers who don't dislike being in the street and who are willing to become not only the sellers but also the promoters of their products and their farms. Arguably, 'getting down to the street' and engaging in a personal interaction with the customers entails a series of advantages. Primarily, managing a market stall allows producers to know their demand. As the aforementioned story of the fruit producer ITA13 (section 6.2, pp. 134-135) (who understood that his customers also wanted vegetables and modified his farm characteristics by starting to produce them in order to satisfy such demand) showed, a weekly dialogue with customers clarifies what people expect from the farm, and enables producers to modify or calibrate their practices accordingly. What happens is a process of mutual knowledge, which acts on both sides as a generator of trust and increases customers' interest in the farm. This is also clearly expressed by the wine-maker ITA14:

> "When the *moscato* grape is ready, I bring some to the market, to sell fresh. Customers stand in line, they ask for it. Markets give this possibility, to treat customers in a certain way, and to know the people you sell to. And vice versa the customers know what they're buying. That's why we also invite customers to visit the farm, because we want to be totally sincere. Our business card is the bottle, but the face is ours" (ITA14, 38, male)

For 'new peasants' who interpret their choice to be farmers as a lifestyle decision, and consider personal satisfaction among the outcomes of their activity to be maximized (as I discussed in chapter 4), farmers' markets also turn into a stage where they can express themselves. The conviviality of the interaction with the public adds a layer of meaningfulness to their activity, as they feel the reward deriving from people's appreciation of their endeavors and the social re-connection that comes with it. ITA9, for example, manages a box scheme that accounts for most of his sales – nevertheless, farmers' markets are his favorite market channel:

> "This sales channel is the one that I personally prefer, even if most of my turnover is made by delivering the boxes. I prefer it because you directly bond with the consumers: they get to know you, you can argue your productions... doing the market becomes a moment of conviviality, which is something that we've lost. So maybe you tell them a recipe, how to cook something, the characteristics of the food... cooking is a passion of mine, for example. So I read up on something or try some stuff and then I give suggestions to them, and most times I propose things that are appreciated by people" (ITA9, 57, male)

From a more pragmatic point of view, getting known by the audience is an effective and inexpensive tool to promote the farm and its activities, both food-centered and multifunctional ones. One of the aims of these family farmers, as several time argued, is to attract people to the farm, i.e. to reduce the distance between them and the public, both to build clientele for their multifunctional (recreational, tourism, social) activities and to minimize the logistical effort required to cater to people. The stage of farmers' markets thus helps in the implementation of producers' 'openness project', for three reasons that are exemplified by the following three quotations: to 'educate' the consumer (the wine-maker ITA14), as a visibility/promotional tool for other farm activities (UK9 sell exclusively through their box scheme but they go to farmers' markets *just* to promote their business), and to make the customer familiar with the farm and, especially, with the *style* of farming the producer adopts (ITA18 promotes her multifunctional farm and transmits her peculiar way of doing things).

> "A lot of people don't even know what a vineyard is. A lot of people keep me talking for half an hour because they want to know, and then maybe they just buy two bottles. But that's okay, because those two bottles are a step to see the customer [again] at the next market. Maybe he will buy just two again, and at that point you give him one more for free, to attract him, to make him try it. The starting point is to make [people] understand that wine is grape" (ITA14, 38, male)

> "On weekends we go to farmers' markets and artisan markets and food festivals not to sell veg, but to promote the box scheme. We bring some veg but just to display, and we try to sign people up" (UK9, 32, female)

> "Since when we stopped with [*another market channel*] we started making more [farmers'] markets, to sell the eggs. It's been a long road, but the direct contact eventually brings more people to the farm. It's

> optimal to promote the *agriturismo*, because it [*the market*] attracts a different type of customers. Those who come [to the farm] without having already met you at the markets, have different expectations. They come to try and can be disappointed because there is no waiter with white gloves, or flowers, or English-style lawn. Those who already got to know you, instead, come [to the farm] with full knowledge of the facts, and at the end they're satisfied" (ITA18, 58, female)

Lastly, there are practical synergies with other farm activities. Farmers-*bricoleurs* are multi-active and try to take the greatest advantage of the various market channels, in order to optimize their production, maximize sales possibilities and consequently obtain a higher revenue. If a harvest is better than expected and, to propose an example reported by the Milanese box scheme farmer ITA9, exceeds the demands of the box scheme subscribers, farmers' markets are the outlet where surpluses can be sold. If a farm is partaking in a public-funded social assistance scheme and is giving an employment opportunity to a disadvantaged individual, the farmer can decide to get a stall in a new farmers' market to be managed autonomously by the new employee. Or, like in the case of the following quotation from the sheep and cattle farmer UK10, if the farm shop or the farm restaurant are not able to absorb all of the farm's production, the excess can be sold at the farmers' market, and then if something can't be sold there, the surplus can be processed into a final food that can be served at the farm café. This mutual synergy helps to reduce waste and increases possibilities to diversify production:

> "I think that doing farmers markets alongside farm shop and café makes the job work better. Because when I slaughter a bullock, I have to hang it for three weeks. Then I have to sell it all in a week, because otherwise the meat will start to dry and get dark in the edges – which is a good sign the meat is matured, but only people who know food understand it, the majority just thinks it's gone bad. So this way I can sell half a calf at the shop and the other half at the market. [...] What is unsold then gets into the pies which are served at the café" (UK10, 59, male)

Like many other problems in the world of small scale farming, the downsides of farmers' markets are mainly tied to uncertainty. Every single market has different characteristics in terms of location, management, schedules, composition of sellers, and target audience and, as farmers report, the simple fact that it is made of producers instead of being an ordinary market doesn't grant its success. Borrowing the words from ITA12, a farmers' markets is always an *incognita* (a wild card):

> "Markets are always a wild card. Either you find that one that works well or it is a waste of time and money. Because the fresh produce that you don't sell, you bring it back home and then you can't sell it anymore" (ITA12, 35, male)

The success of a farmers' market is strongly dependent on its location, even within the same city. Different neighborhoods, indeed, are inhabited by different populations and lived daily by different city-users (Nuvolati, 2002), and have distinct characteristics of accessibility. This deeply influences the type and number of customers that decide to shop at producers' stalls. In Milan, for example, this

phenomenon is clearly testified by the weekly farmers' market organized by the international food-advocacy association Slow Food. In its first years it was very successful, but once it was moved to another location (always within the urban core of Milan) producers' business strongly decreased. The first location was a small public park in a neighborhood where many families live, a pleasant area of town where people could not only shop but also enjoy the park and other attractions. There, the market was thriving and producers were enthusiastic. Due to a decision of the municipality, the market was then moved to the yard (thus a more enclosed space) of a municipality-owned dismissed factory that also hosts a social hub and various cultural events. This building lies in an area in which many migrants live (especially the Chinese community) and which is undergoing a process of gentrification therefore attracting a population of young professionals and families without children. In this new setting the sales of producers dropped, for perceived motivations they relate to the characteristics of the people in the neighborhood: in the opinion of farmers they are less interested in local food and less keen to shop on a Saturday morning, which is when the market is organized.

The location-related issues of success and failure also reflect the socio-cultural differences between the two countries I visited. In Italy, indeed, if we zoom out from neighborhood-level considerations, it is still possible to conclude that farmers' markets work better in larger cities than in smaller towns. The urban population of Milan is more 'hungry' for local food and more actively trying to re-establish the lost connection with the countryside. As a consequence, farmers' markets in the city are more appealing to producers than those organized in the squares of smaller towns of the province. In these peripheral and 'more rural' centers of Lombardy, a sufficiently large mass of interested consumers, which is needed to make a farmers' market viable, is sometimes lacking for what seems to be the effect of a double (somehow contradictory) phenomenon: on the one hand, the higher proximity to rural production gives the inhabitants of small towns and villages more opportunities to procure local food through other means, and on a more stable basis (other forms of direct contact with producers, or traditional local shops providing local produce), then making the waiting for the farmers' market's day less necessary or appealing; whereas on the other hand, and concurrently, the 'new wave' of interest in local-sustainable-decommodified food originated in the city, it feeds on urban energies and spreads thanks to the dynamism and cross-contamination of urban populations, and only slowly leaks to the countryside centers, where mainstream options are deep-seated and more difficult to eradicate.

In the part of England I visited, instead, this argument doesn't seem to hold valid. In English farmers' accounts, the farmers' markets in the urban core of Manchester or Liverpool are reported to be struggling more than in the villages of the outskirts or in the rural towns. According to the farmers, this is linked to the fact that British consumers value convenience over food quality. Urban citizens live busier lives and are less keen to find a parking spot or use public transportation to buy their food on a specific day, when they can have it delivered to their doorstep at whatever time they want by every supermarket. In the periphery, instead, farmers' markets have a greater accessibility, the lives of people are less frenetic, and the availability of individual services offered by food firms is lesser. British cities, in addition, are less dense than Italian ones. On average, therefore, given an area

with the same radius, Italian markets have a higher potential clientele. If we also consider the aforementioned disappearance of the 'shopping in the street' culture in the UK, then it is easy to understand why British producers consider farmers' markets as trends that will likely fade away, and ultimately unreliable:

> "When you're starting as a small company [a farmers' market is] very good. It's a very good way of getting known to the market. Because suddenly people see you, you're doing something different, you can talk to them, you can communicate, you explain to them, you educate them. But after a while, as you're growing as a company, it doesn't pay really, it doesn't make sense to go and do that anymore. [...] I see people being happy to know that there is a farmers market, but they don't support it constantly, there is no guarantee for the producer. It doesn't support you. You cannot live for farmers markets in this country" (UK7, 44, female)

Another problem which is worth mentioning, felt in both countries even if in a more accentuated way in England, refers to the organization of farmers' markets, which sometimes doesn't fit producers' necessities and increases uncertainty. Organizational issues mainly refer to two elements: the frequency of market days (more problematic in England), and the inability of market organizers to protect farmers-participants from competition (an issue in both countries).

Like those regarding location, the choices concerning time are crucial to the success of a market. Selecting the right day of the week and the right opening hours so as to be most favorable to the specific population of the area is key to obtaining a crowded market. In England, as already mentioned, farmers' markets take place no more frequently than once a month. In Italy, instead, they normally take place weekly, if not more than once a week. This way, Italian producers can select a few markets in different places and sell their products almost every day. In England, given the lesser overall number of markets and their less frequent occurrence, most producers are not given such a possibility. As an alternative economy, therefore, farmers' markets in the UK fail in proving to be a steady source of income and a reliable outlet for farm production:

> "I keep saying to the local authorities that the problem of farmers' markets is that they're organized once a month, whereas a grower would need them twice a week. Growing many crops in the most natural way, there is no way I can have all of them ready for a specific day of the month. As a market gardener, if there was a market in Lancaster twice a week, I could work with that" (UK3, 60, male)

The selection of stall-holders operated by market organizers is also central to the outcome of the market itself. Several producers I met, in both countries, have quit a farmers' market because, after an initial phase of success, managers looked to expand by allowing new producers in, often of the same kind. Then, if the custom of the market stagnates or decreases, producers find themselves facing competition, which sometimes makes the trip to market no longer viable. In addition, producers find this competition to be unfair when market stalls are assigned not to actual farmers but to 'traders', i.e. retailers that re-sell other producers' products, often produced conventionally and so offered at a lower price.

This suggests that the selection of stall-holders is a very delicate task for farmers' market managers, especially crucial if the aim of the initiative is to tighten the link between city and countryside and promote forms of endogenous rural development. The following quotations from the dairy farmer and cheese-maker UK4 and the vegetable grower UK3 make the point:

> "Especially for cheeses, one of the problems with farmers' markets is that as soon as they look to expand, they take in a second cheese stall, which is often a cheese monger and not a producer. There are few producers and many mongers in this country. [...] The monger displays a wide array of multi-colored cheeses, which despite being often just industrial products attract the attention of customers way more than my stall, which looks relatively empty with my eight-product range" (UK4, 40, male)

> "Another problem I see in farmers' market is that in Britain people have the mentality that if they go to markets it is for buying cheap stuff. So whenever at these markets there is a conventional producer, people will choose him for the price" (UK3, 60, male)

To conclude the discussion about farmers' markets, I would like to mention an Italian producer I met who is completely against them, for conceptual reasons. The opposition of this farmer is not useful for a general interpretation of the phenomenon, but allows me to introduce the most successful category of direct sales in the English field, i.e. the box schemes, since they owe their success precisely to a principle which is antithetic to that advocated by the Italian farmer who dislikes farmers' markets. This producer is ITA22, a 55 years old woman who runs a family business in a peri-urban Milanese *cascina*, producing mainly chicken, beef and cereals. For her, the fact that farmers go to markets makes little sense, because citizens are those who should go to farms, and not *vice versa*:

> "I don't do them [*farmers' markets*] and I really have a bad opinion of them, because I think that farmers should act like farmers and it is the citizen that has to discover them, that has to go to the farmer. [...] It's not possible, the farmer does the farmer, he must stay on his farm. It is the citizen that has to go and discover the *cascina*, which is a common heritage, it's tradition, it's culture, it's environment. He could learn, [the *cascina*] is a testimony of the past. [...] Why should I go to do markets? It makes no sense! [...] It's a fundamental error because the farmer must attract his citizens, his customers [to come] to the *cascina*. Because he has a reality that is so important to show!" (ITA22, 55, female)

The view of ITA22 is quite radical, but her inspiring principle – that a stronger physical connectedness between farmers and citizens is to be favored, in the form of the latter starting to 'live' more the farms – is shared among many Italian producers I met. Box schemes, instead, respond to a diametrically opposite principle: they are the utmost effort of farmers to *go to customers*, by delivering products to their doorstep, one by one.

Their success in the UK is motivated by cultural reasons, investing both the

culture of consumers and producers. As already mentioned, consumers in the UK tend to be moved more by convenience than by research of the most authentic food. They, on average, even if interested in local food are less keen to go the extra mile to procure it than their Italian counterparts. In addition, they enjoy the countryside but, as observed by English farmers themselves, more for leisure reasons (a 'getaway' from the city, a daytrip with the whole family) rather than as a steady source of food. On the British island, furthermore, online sales and home deliveries are far more common than in Italy, also of 'delicate' products such as food, which many Italians instead prefer to 'touch before buy', as analyzed earlier in this section. Every British supermarket nowadays offers the service of delivering customers' shopping, at a very cheap price. That's why for many consumers willing to buy local food, whether foodies or health-concerned individuals, the option of receiving a weekly box from a trusted producer is particularly appealing.

At the same time, British farmers show a different attitude than Italian ones in their 'openness' to the public. Indeed, if re-connection with consumers is sought after in both countries, the modalities of the actual engagement with the external world differ. Rather than cooperation and joint ventures, English farmers tend to look for autonomy and flexibility. They are less interested in opening the gates of their farms to the audience, and if they do it is because they offer a structured service, like a very well organized farm shop or a restaurant-café. But especially, they are less prone (or able) to mediate between different interests, which is an inevitable requirement when working, for example, with GAS groups. A box scheme, then, is for them a way to get into direct contact with customers and obtain the premium price this entails, with the only duty being to create a brand image, manage a portfolio of customers, and plan production accordingly. Even if the logistical effort is evidently multiplied, this allows them to skip any intermediate step as well as any work to coordinate different stakeholders, hence providing autonomy and flexibility, as the vegetables grower and box scheme manager UK9's words express:

> "At the beginning we used to bring veg to the markets but then we decided to focus on the box scheme model which we consider easier and better working. We've also received offers from restaurants and cafés to supply them but we declined. Growing for a box scheme gives us more flexibility, we can vary production the way we want, without needing to have a consistent offer at all times. [...] It's better to concentrate on the boxes, and then we can grow for those, rather than trying to meet someone else's demand. I've heard of other small growers that they've tried to do some boxes, they've tried to do some wholesale, and they ended up having a bit of a reputation that people aren't getting what they want from them" (UK9, 32, female)

The price to pay for this flexibility, though, is that the relationship with customers is more commoditized than in other examples of direct or AFNs-mediated sales. Box schemes customers purchase a good and a service, and there is little space to also 'sell' them a story, a face, and other intangible values. The connection is less strong, more opportunistic, and therefore more likely to be broken or interrupted. UK3, for example, had been managing a box scheme for 25 years at the moment of the interview, which was very successful up until the late 2000's when the austerity crisis kicked in and his business dramatically dropped. This is also why

the Italian box scheme farmer ITA9 enjoys more going to farmers' markets than selling through the box scheme, even if the latter accounts for most of his turnover. Or, similarly, this is why the aforementioned UK9 inserts in every box a printed newsletter, which she and her husband scrupulously draft and which customers reportedly appreciate a lot. This communication effort, in addition, is facilitated by online communication technologies, which are an indispensable instrument to sustain the non-economic components of the producer-consumer relationship, in an attempt to overcome the lack of physical contact. Supportive evidence of these two last elements of analysis is provided by the following quotation:

> "We communicate with our customers through a newsletter we put in the boxes. On one side it usually contains an article about what's going on at the farm or other food-related topics, and on the other side it has recipes. It's getting very popular. People love it and look forward the newsletter each time. I think it's just our communication that they like, it feels very personal. Also, when they email the farm it's always me on the mail, so communication easily gets personal. Like, 'I'm going on holiday' or stuff like that" (UK9, 32, female)

As we can see, and as I have been arguing, a relational effort is always needed, and an effective management of the patterns of re-connection with consumers can really translate into a significant market advantage for family farmers. In super short chains, the burden of extending this effort is all on the shoulder of producers. When sales are instead realized through the ideologically-oriented mediation of AFNs, then producers are relieved of part of the endeavor. What this means for the farmers of my study and what the implications of selling through AFNs for the alternative food economy are are the topics of the next section.

6.2.2 *Selling through AFNs*

The alternative food networks are groups of people – either informally aggregated or formally organized into an association or even incorporated as a socially oriented enterprise – that organize and manage a short food supply chain. They offer mediation between producers and consumers, creating a common ground on which they can meet. It is a mediation of a different kind than that operated by the 'commercial' players of the food chain (wholesalers, supermarkets, shops) as it is not aimed at obtaining a profit (even though in some cases these schemes appropriate a margin on every transaction, like in the case of Food Assemblies and some food coops) but at fostering the re-connection between local primary producers and citizens, procuring healthy good food for the members, defending the local farming sector and promoting its development, and advocating for a fairer and greener food economy. It is a mediation, then, that is enrooted in a different mentality and pursues a well-defined ideology of active commitment to environmental and social causes and cultural change. This is testified to by the fact that for these groups food is often not the only focus; they are active in several other fields such as promotion of the territory, environmental battles, social support to families and disadvantaged individuals or, in general, activities to champion solidarity in defense of food sovereignty and social cohesion (Sage, 2014). More broadly then, they can be considered part of wider social and political movements (Friedmann, 2005; Starr, 2010; Holt Giménez and Shattuck, 2011) and are at times affiliated with political parties (mainly left-wing, as per the Italian

case).

It is important to notice that AFNs-mediated short food chains are much more a feature of the Italian alternative food economy than of the English alternative food system. In my Milanese field, in fact, there is a host of schemes and organizations that involve farmers in projects and offer them an outlet to sell their production. This is due to the proliferation of GAS groups, which in the last decades spread throughout Italy at an astounding rate: in the sole province of Milan in 2017 there were more than 175 GAS groups (Borrelli *et al.*, 2017a). The success of GAS in Italy and the associated phenomena have been object of multiple studies, especially under the lenses of political consumerism and social innovation (see, for example, Brunori *et al.*, 2012; Graziano and Forno, 2012).

On the field, such developments brought to fruition a wide series of social experiences focused on food procurement, most of which operate on a micro-level whereas some have had the ability to consolidate and structure themselves in order to obtain a higher degree of efficiency and effectiveness. This also reflects a specific approach of Italian consumers towards food- and farming-related problems which is distinguished from the English approach for it is much more centered on building an economic infrastructure for the development of a different model of exchange. In Manchester, indeed, there is only one scheme that works in a similar fashion to an Italian GAS. This is not to say that in England food and food-related concerns are not objects of social mobilization. In fact, food is an intense political object in the UK nowadays, as evidenced by the array of social organizations battling over food issues (currently, for instance food waste is a hot topic addressed by nation-wide food organizations targeting supermarkets and the government to provide solutions) and by the electoral rhetoric of local politicians that I had the opportunity to witness.

Nevertheless, the social response to food-related concerns vary between the two countries. The social-collective effort in my English field was indeed more directed to re-socialize food itself, i.e. food as a cultural and community object, rather than re-socializing the farmer-citizen relationship. As a consequence, most food-centered groups have a more explicit purpose of community outreach, with goals such as restoring the lost connection between individuals and food through the development of food and farming knowledge and skills, tightening community bonds employing food as an instrument, sensitizing the citizenship about seasonality and local food production. This is why associations performing urban agriculture or managing a community garden are quite popular, whereas purchasing groups have less membership.

I will postpone a more detailed account of the differences between the alternative food economies in the two countries to chapter 7. However, this insight was useful to clarify the distinct agendas of AFNs in the two fields, which inevitably affect farmers' perceptions of them and the modalities of their collaboration with the alternative schemes. For English producers, the most successful AFNs-mediated sales channel is represented by food coops, which in turn are completely out of the radar in my Milanese field. Food coops are grocery shops managed by social enterprises, which are usually owned by their own employees or, following the

model of the celebrated Park Slope Food Coop in New York City, run by their own members through a rotation of volunteer work shifts. Their aim is not to profit but to ensure fairly-produced and traded food at a reasonable price for its members/customers while granting a just price to producers, and providing special support to local farmers and local rural development while raising public awareness about issues of seasonality, health and food justice. Given this landscape difference, the analysis about AFNs that follows draws almost exclusively from the Italian fieldwork due to a greater availability of data, even if some considerations are also applicable to the English farmers in their relationship with food coops or other food-related organizations.

What producers appreciate of the collaboration with AFNs is the nature of the relationship that is established. AFNs' primary goal being to disseminate good local food and concurrently to pledge support to local farmers, the relationship that they promise to create is not commodity-centered nor exclusively customer-oriented: the needs of producers and of consumers are both taken into consideration, and when they diverge a reconciliation is sought. This happens because there is, at least at the level of premises, a certain cohesion between consumers' ideology and needs – concretized in the very existence of these networks – and producers' own ideology and, to a lesser extent, needs. If these premises are respected, then producers are willing to embark on the venture, giving a high value to the human support they receive. The young market gardener ITA16 speaks about GAS groups, which he reports as difficult to serve because they make everyday work at the farm more complex, but nevertheless appreciates on a human note:

> "From a human point of view, though, it is the working relationship that better synthetizes the idea that I have about an alternative to the traditional economic model, the one that we live daily. Precisely because there is an aspect of mutual trust which is even more fundamental than money or than the same product, paradoxically" (ITA16, 34, male)

Even in the UK, where producers are less enthused by the idea of navigating through multiple relationships and coping with diverging interests, initiatives of the alternative organization that are well conceptualized are welcomed by farmers, precisely for reasons of ideological adherence. The goat-meat producer UK2, for example, doesn't like farmers' markets nor she is interested in giving a try to this channel. Notwithstanding, she always participates in the seasonal market organized by LESS, a Lancaster-based environmental and food advocacy association, because of what the association represents and the work it carries out:

> "This market is perfect for me, it's everything I'm looking for because I make the customers I want to do, and it also supports the same movement I'm trying to support, about local food, animal welfare, local producers. It ticks all those boxes as well, so it's perfect for me, it's everything that I'm looking for" (UK2, 40, female)

On the same note, in Italy several producers show a great respect for GAS people, for the effort they have put in to set up their organizations and for the underlying

motivations of their choices. To provide some examples, the following quotations come from ITA22, for whom GAS are not a great source of income but something she supports anyway for 'cultural' reasons, and from ITA7, who comes to colorfully define GAS people as 'heroes':

> "However, I keep supporting GAS because it is right that these people go to producers, they are people who changed their culture of nutrition, different from the majority of people who still rely on supermarkets" (ITA22, 55, female)

> "The *gasista* [*GAS group member*] is a savvy consumer. Often he is savvier than me, and I am the producer. I mean, he knows more than I do. Yet he is someone that in order to have a bit of quality at home makes sacrifices. Especially if he is the person responsible for the GAS. [. . .] I mean, they are heroes. If you think of the Milanese GAS, those families are heroic. Those who buy 100% biodegradable soaps, or the mozzarella coming from the lands confiscated from the Mafia. . . They are a small niche, but they're heroes nowadays" (ITA7, 50, male)

From a pragmatic point of view, this mindset translates into concrete forms of support. They operate directly on strictly economic conditions, protecting farmers from market adversities, or more indirectly by buffering producers to help them develop further innovation. In general, they relate to reducing producers' business risk by providing various types of guarantee. These can regard, for instance, paying a price higher than the market average, assuring that the farm production will be purchased or – as in the case of the bee-keeper ITA21 (already quoted in section 6.2, pp. 138-139) to whom GAS groups agree every year to pre-purchase part of his production – contributing to solve liquidity problems collectively.

Clearly, this supportive endeavor is not always effective, but when the patterns of cooperation are well engineered AFNs constitute a strong contribution to the small businesses of the producers I met. British food coops, for example, are generally well organized and the farmers who supply to them are quite enthusiastic about the way they work, as is highlighted by the following two vegetable growers' comments on the biggest (and most successful) food coop of Manchester, to which they both provide:

> "Now [the food coop] buys most of my stuff. They're brilliant! [. . .] It's better to deal with people like [them], because they're more sympathetic and understanding. They're very fair. They're always trying to get the highest price they can for the growers. But at the same time trying not to make it too expensive in the shop. [. . .] We used to get together at the end of the season and discuss together on what to grow for the forthcoming season. So we can plan production with them, and this is great" (UK5, 50, female)

> "We discuss with them the crops for the following years, and they give suggestions regarding what they will need, so that we can see if we can fit it into our planning. [. . .] You can tell it's a business with a different ideology. We get paid very quickly, which is something

> unusual. Everything is done properly. And, say, if you have a price for certain things, if they reckon it's worth more they'll tell you and they'll pay you more. No one has ever done that before, so they're very ethical. We appreciate this a lot. Plus, it works both ways, so you like to give them the best quality produce" (UK11, female, 65)

In other instances, as said, the civic pledge to support farmers has the effect of helping the development of innovations, especially in the realm of interventions to increase environmental protection and to foster the provision of additional (multifunctional) services. Commonly, groups of consumers gather around a farm to support its transition to organic farming methods (which requires a three-year period of conversion during which producers are farming organically and thus paying the associated higher costs but the product can't be labeled as such). Assisting evidence comes from the milk producer and cheese-maker ITA17 who explains what motivated her to convert to organic:

> "The input has been given by the citizens, that in 2009 started DESR[59]. Its members had promised to buy the products, therefore sustaining the income and defending the agriculture in the Park. We had been sitting on the idea to change [to organic] for a long time, but the strength to take this decision came with the birth of DESR. All technicians advised against converting to organic" (ITA17, 60, female)

On a broader level, AFNs also have the effect of influencing the agenda of mainstream food players. By emphasizing the role of small producers in the current food system, and propagating the *idea* of 'buying local' together with the concrete tools to do it, they raise public awareness and contribute to creating and channeling a 'demand' for a certain type of agriculture. As another expression of *co-option*, mainstream forces react by internalizing this potential value, and begin to propose a similar offer to their customers. The proliferation of local products on supermarkets' shelves and the diffusion of labels that assure the consumers about the provenance of food are evident signs of this process. The final outcome of this process is unforeseeable, because if on the one hand it re-internalizes socio-economic innovations within a corporate-controlled paradigm therefore hindering the development of a new economic model, while on the other hand it creates new business opportunities for small farmers. In section 5.2, I have already discussed the processes of co-option attached to the renewed interest of mass distribution players towards small-scale farmers. What I would like to highlight here is that part of the farmers I met recognize that AFNs have an important role in building a positive image for territorial agriculture, de facto supporting also those small producers who don't perceive themselves as alternative and are not very hopeful about the destiny of the alternative economy. The clearest case in my fieldwork is represented by ITA24, a dairy farmer who performs direct sales but doesn't engage with any AFN, and is especially uninterested in selling to GAS groups. His favors go to mass distribution, but he recognizes the positive effect of the GAS world:

> "All in all, [GAS groups] have helped us, in a sense. Not because we went in their direction – because we couldn't or we didn't want to

[59]The *Distretto di Economia Solidale Rurale del Parco Agricolo Sud Milano* (District of Economic Solidarity of the South Agricultural Park of Milan – see footnote 36), born thanks to an initiative of various GAS groups.

> – but because we eventually could go in another direction [*the mass distribution*]. If they [*GAS*] wouldn't have developed, there would have been no way that these ones [*the mass distribution*] would have come here and asked for our milk. The fact that these solidarity processes are born... they give the impression of creating a different economy, [*an economy*] of exchange. Eventually they crash against a harsh reality, but they influence traditional commerce" (ITA24, 65, male)

Despite all these positive evaluations, reality is harsh, as ITA24 reminds us. Indeed the system of AFNs also presents a series of shortcomings that generate tension and incomprehension on the side of producers. They can be condensed into two main (intertwined) problematic issues: when the promise of a non-commoditized relationship is broken; and a decrease of organizational energy due to a crisis of volunteerism.

As long as the approach is cooperative and producers' needs are taken into account, everything is fine. In many cases though, as both Italian producers and GAS members report, the initial ideological thrust that constitutes the lifeblood of these organizations begins to fade, and consequentially the ability to pragmatically support the producer decreases. What results, then, is that albeit keeping the activities of AFNs in high consideration, several producers in my Italian case study dismiss the collaboration with GAS groups because it's deemed too demanding:

> "I don't do them [GAS] and I've never done them. And I have no intention to do them, they are first-class ball-busters" (ITA9, 57, male)

This is the evidently negative opinion of a vegetable producer who never approached the world of GAS groups and sells his products through a box scheme subscription and at farmers' markets. As commented earlier, in the alternative food economy every producer creatively selects a personal mix of market outlets, reflecting his or her personality and work arrangements. A clearer depiction of the transformation of some GAS groups into excessively demanding buying clubs is provided by those producers who work with them and recognize their negative developments. The three insights that follow reveal three elements around which the critique to GAS groups revolves. In order, they are: too heavy demands posited on the producer, a shift to a marked commercial-orientedness, and the inability to pursue and practice solidarity.

> "I have some GAS experiences that have been following me from the beginning, that sustained me from the beginning. And others with which instead you have to make calculations up to the penny, you make a lot of calculations, price lists, transparent price... and then they always ask for something more. [...] The pretentious ones, like these ones, I don't keep them anymore. There comes a point when the relationship breaks. You can't treat me like this, if you don't respect me, my work, my effort [...] then don't take my product. You don't believe me? Take it from someone else, for God's sake!" (ITA18, 58, female)

> "They [*GAS*] were a good initiative but they have become the flipside of the coin. Because they prefer those [*producers*] who offer the widest

> choice possible, so if you want to work with them you have to adapt" (ITA6, 50, male)

> "GAS are starting to fade, because solidarity, sharing and confrontation are very difficult. People are hypercritical, they demand the impossible, and don't understand how much the other is able to give, how much effort it puts. [...] Some producers have decided to not supply GAS any more precisely for relation problems. Many GAS have lost the 'S' of 'solidarity'. [...] The approach is defensive or critical, it is no longer exploratory, knowledge-seeking, cooperative" (ITA1, 66, male)

The supervening inability to meet producers' needs goes hand in hand with what I label as a 'crisis of volunteerism', which affects many GAS-like organizations. AFNs schemes leverage on volunteer work for most activities. GAS groups usually nominate a responsible person per every family of products (vegetables, meats, cheeses, and so on) who are in charge of selecting the producer(s), taking care of the relations with them, and acting as a mediator between producers and the rest of the group. In addition, other practical activities, such as collections, deliveries and distribution of products, are realized by volunteer members. What volunteers provide is a real service to the rest of the subscribers of the scheme, which, as the wine-maker ITA4 notices, in the absence of other incentives requires a strong political-ethical motivation to be produced on a stable basis:

> "Look, the choice of shopping together has to be motivated by a – so to speak – 'political motive', which doesn't mean starting the revolution but simply being willing to change the way we shop. Politics means being willing to modify or change or adapt [things] to other standards which are more suitable to reality. [...] Some GAS people are going ahead, self-criticizing and finding new forms. But for the majority of GAS it has been a bit of a fashion, a bit of a way to save money, a bit of a way to be together... But then when it became a nuisance they stopped. So in my opinion as soon as the political choice starts to fade, these GAS will get emptied out. [...] And then, if there is a service, you need people and they have to be paid, because if it's based on volunteerism eventually volunteers will get sick and tired" (ITA4, 62, male)

In other words, if AFNs are willing to enhance their scope in order to build an alternative system of food procurement, then also the volunteer work on which they are based (or, more broadly put, the work of the people who partake in these organizations) needs to be systematized. This means introducing a set of incentives to overcome what can be defined as the weakest point of AFNs practice, as also recognized by the farmers in my study. See, for example, the argument of ITA22:

> "It's not a problem of enthusiasm or trust for the producer. GAS work well and go ahead if there is a person who takes on the responsibility of keeping track of the orders and going to collect the bags for everyone. It happened to me that some GAS have stopped buying from me because the reference person for personal reasons couldn't perform his role anymore, and once the reference person went away the whole

> group got dismantled. [...] GAS must be supported by a person or two who are willing to take the assignment and the responsibility and guarantee the continuity of this service to the other members of the group" (ITA22, 55, female)

From the field, the need to address the crisis of volunteerism from an organizational point of view emerges as the future development path for the world of AFNs. Indeed, various attempts to set up schemes embedding a system of incentives, aimed at operationalizing the activities required to create a small food chain, are already visible in the two countries I visited. Interestingly, the modalities that are being chosen to reach this goal make use of market mechanisms, i.e. they implement an 'economization' (in the strict sense of the term) of processes to give fluidity and reliability to the scheme's organization. This happens in diverse ways that generally call for the application of instruments that are typical of the market economy (maybe as simple as waged labour) but without losing sight of the socio-ethical goals of solidarity, even if in some cases forms of potential capitalistic appropriation can be envisaged.

The organization of British food coops is efficient because they don't contribute to the alternative food system as solidarity-oriented social groups but rather as solidarity-oriented not-for-profit enterprises. They promote the local small-scale farming sector while at the same time creating jobs: the grocery shops they manage are cooperatively owned by the workers which therefore are given a wage (which usually is an equal amount for everyone) and among which labour is equally shared. They don't have to rely on volunteerism because customers pay a small margin which is directed to pay wages and expenses[60]. This also enables them to pay higher prices to farmers and concurrently to be cheaper (for products of the same quality) than supermarkets. Hence they are economic operators of the food chain in their full right, but they are also able to embody the idea and the practice of a fairer economy and, as documented by the farmers of my study, maintain a supportive interaction with food producers.

Other than food coops, a new wave of other 'marketized' alternative food initiatives has recently been on the rise thanks to the diffusion of the Internet and mobile technologies. The online frontier of the alternative food scene has become particularly lively in recent years, with apps and geo-localization tools being used to share food among individuals, tackle food waste and, obviously, procure local food, often buying it directly from producers. These new 'online AFNs' draw on past AFN experiences, borrowing their models and adding new features which are made possible by technological advancements, in order to make them more appealing to individuals-users and open up opportunities for market exploitation. The box scheme model, for example, is 'enhanced' by companies that buy large quantities of products from many small producers and offer customers an online supermarket of local products that are delivered to their homes, selling them

[60] For a matter of precision, the food coops that work following the model of the New York's Park Slope Food Coop – indeed very rare in my British fieldwork – have a slightly different organizational mechanism. They employ a restricted number of people, while most of the labour is carried out by members through periodic shifts of unpaid work. Volunteering for a few hours a month is mandatory to be a member, and this gives the right to shop at the coop, which is – differently from most British food coops – not open to the general audience.

the idea of 'shopping in the countryside'. This has been made available by the developments of the logistics-delivery sector and the diffusion of e-commerce, and once again allows for the co-option of some traits of the alternative food sector. The farmers who work (or have worked) with these schemes, in fact, witnessed the disappearance of the elements of 'alternativeness' (economic and human support to producers, to synthetize) in their relationship with them, as soon as these companies consolidated and expanded. Beside negative evaluations, many producers couldn't keep collaborating with these schemes, due to a supervening incompatibility in terms of scale and requirements. The development of likewise models, then, can be read as a 'corporatization' of alternative food practices, entailing the risk of losing the ethical traits that characterize the alternative food movement's final purpose.

The GAS model, instead, is object of an 'online transformation' which calls for a more nuanced reflection. Thanks to information technologies, many purchasing groups have had the opportunity to improve the management of their operations. This enabled them to consolidate or scale-up, or simply to reduce their labor requirements. At the same time, various web platforms have been introduced, proposing online food marketplaces or other forms of producer-consumer mediation. Most of these new schemes operate on a local or national scale, with differing degrees of success. One specific scheme, instead, works on a European horizon: it is born in France and is now present in nine European countries, among which are Italy and the UK. The opportunity to perform a direct observation of such 'new online AFN' both in the Italian and the English fieldwork, brought me to select it as a specific case study, the illustration of which is the focus of the next sub-section.

6.2.3 *The 'new online AFNs': the case of the Beehives*

Born in France in 2011, with the name of *La Ruche Qui Dit Oui!* (The Beehive That Says Yes!), this alternative food procurement scheme is constituted by a centralized IT service that offers the possibility to create a local *Beehive* – i.e. a community marketplace where alongside market exchange physical interaction between producers and consumers takes place – through the use of an internet platform that puts consumers searching for fresh products and local producers in contact, allowing a local handling of offers, orders, sales, cash flows and billing. The mother-company, *La Ruche Qui Dit Oui!,* was founded in France in 2011 by two highly skilled individuals, experts in food marketing and website/digital management. It defines itself as a 'for-profit company', and its setting up was facilitated by various financing rounds involving equity funds, banks and individual successful entrepreneurs (Regazzola, 2015). In less than six years it was able to follow a rapid consolidation trajectory in France, where (as by August 2018) the number of working Beehives has grown to 882 (source: company website), and open subsidiaries in eight other countries (Belgium, Netherlands, UK, Germany, Denmark, Switzerland, Spain and Italy). I chose this specific example as a case study for the new 'online AFNs' precisely because at the moment of my fieldwork it was present – with the exact same model – in both countries of my study, hence enabling to keep under control all the other variables and more immediately capture the similarities and differences in outcomes and producers and consumers' perceptions.

So far, the venture has had a distinct fortune in the two countries. It entered the Italian market in late 2015, with the name *L'Alveare Che dice Si!* (a literal translation of its French name). It immediately gave signs of a successful development: to date, the Italian *Alveari* (beehives) count up to 168 and their membership is rapidly increasing (source: company website). They are mainly concentrated in bigger cities and towns in the north of the country, but evidence seems to show that they are also spreading in the south and in other peripheral areas of the peninsula.

For its UK branch, the mother company chose the name *The Food Assembly*. Albeit having entered the market a year earlier than in Italy (2014), on the British island the scheme has been facing more difficulties and never really took off. In 2017, when my fieldwork was realized, the total number of *Assemblies* was less than half that of Italy: they mounted up to 76 (source: company website) and many of them were lacking the participation both of consumers and – interestingly – producers. Despite the fact that some Assemblies were obtaining decent results, a large number of them were still performing poorly or even being shut down due to an insufficiency of customers. A year after the end of my fieldwork, the mother company announced its plans to retreat from the UK market, with the effect that every Assembly still operating in the country would be shut down by September 28th 2018. In a newsletter sent out to all members (received September 13th) the company justified the decision, affirming that "the model has been challenging to set up and after four years there are not enough Assemblies which are flourishing in the UK", and that the company will continue "its mission to build a fair food system in other European countries where the model works well and momentum is building".

The analysis that follows, clearly, is based on data collected prior to this announcement. It gives account of the troubles of the scheme in the UK, but also of the hopes of some producers for its future development in the country. The choice of this example of 'online AFN' as a case study was clearly not based on the sharp difference between success in one country and complete failure in another. Nevertheless, the event adds a layer of interest to the comparative analysis of the different alternative economies in the two countries, which is also addressed in chapter 7. This section presents a radiography of the working mechanisms of this scheme, and the ways it has been received and reflected upon by producers in the two countries.

The model of this scheme, as said, is the same everywhere. A local *Alveare/Assembly* (from now on I will call it 'Beehive') can be formed on the initiative of a single individual, an association, or a business. An individual takes the role of the Beehive manager, and chooses where to install the Beehive, takes care of building a local group of consumers, and selects producers. All tasks are realized autonomously, with the mother company providing guidance and support. As stated by the company website, every Beehive has the chance to develop "an autonomous project within a collective entrepreneurial logic"[61], while the mother company provides assistance and looks after the growth and the vitality of the network.

[61]Source: https://alvearechedicesi.it/it/p/join-us, last visited 26th August 2018

Producers must be carefully selected, and they must be located no more distant than 250 km from the Beehive, even if they are usually drawn from an even smaller area (35 km radius on average). They are required to detail the characteristics of their products, their business, and their agricultural practices. Yet, they freely establish what they are selling, and advertise weekly on the website the list of available products, the minimum quantities they want to set to justify delivery, and the prices they require for their products.

Consumers, for their part, have no obligations but to subscribe to the closer Beehive(s): this way they are filed in the central server, but – contrarily to what happens in traditional GAS groups – this does not imply any particular commitment towards producers, neither in terms of frequency, volume or periodicity of orders, nor in participating in collection rounds or other forms of volunteer activity. Being able to know the producers' locations and whether their products are organic or not, consumers freely choose the products and quantities they want and pay online via the platform. The local Beehive records all orders until the day before the collection, and if minimal quantities are reached, the Beehive manager confirms single consumers' orders via email (the Beehive says yes). Consumers, then, can collect exactly what they ordered by going to the Beehive during collection hours (normally 2-3 evening hours, once a week). If minimum quantities are not reached, customers receive a refund for those single items they couldn't buy, on the same card they used for payment. The website works as a social network. Besides forms of mutual help and exchange of recipes, consumers can publicly express their (dis)satisfaction and comments on the organization, on food quality, price and so on. Also producers engage in this communication, giving explanations and justifications about their products and their choices. As Regazzola comments (2015), this whole set of exchanges generates a form of social pressure that eventually ensures compliance with the rules, thanks to a sort of collective auto-control.

The Beehive manager is responsible for taking care of the internet spaces made available to local producers and consumers, and must ensure the availability of a private physical space where producers and consumers can meet and exchange the products (to avoid paying a rent for the space, managers usually rely on associations or other commercial activities, such as bars and pubs, providing free support to the initiative). On collection days, the manager receives the products and packs them into individual boxes or crates, and supervises the collection activities and the interaction of producers and consumers. He or she is also usually engaged in organizing social activities, product tastings or other forms of promotion.

For this role, the manager gets paid 10% of the overall sales that are realized at his or her Beehive. The company websites is transparent with respect to the partition of value: producers get 80% of the consumer price, while the rest is equally split between the Beehive manager and the mother-company (whose share, they claim, is mostly used to cover VAT and financial transaction costs) (Regazzola, 2015).

As resulting from my fieldwork, the Beehives have been welcomed differently in the two countries. In Italy, as already mentioned, they have rapidly become successful, and I could record accounts of appreciation by both producers and

consumers, even if also a number of critical points have been raised, especially from producers and managers. In England, instead, the reaction of the public has been lukewarm, and most producers polarized into two separate groups: those who believe in the goodness of the idea of an internet-based purchasing group, see in it a potential evolution of the food economy and therefore keep showing up on collection days even if it is not economically justifiable; and those who are more skeptical and are not willing to invest precious hours of their workdays for no economic return.

The Beehive scheme innovates the GAS model by simplifying its procedures and making it accessible to a broader audience, so it is not surprising that in Italy – where for the last two decades the alternative food scene has been dominated by GAS groups – it worked well from the beginning. Both producers and consumers are indeed used to this type of sales, so the 'transition' towards the Beehives doesn't require a strong endeavor.

Consumers, for their part, enjoy the possibility of finding local fresh food, which is given to them by the same hands that crafted it. They can fulfill their curiosity by asking the producers questions or requesting culinary tips, and even get the chance to taste something new they might want to include in their next purchase. Crucially, all this is realized in a more convivial atmosphere than farmers' markets, but without having to engage in active participation and volunteer work within a sustained net of stronger interpersonal relationships, as happens in a GAS. This means that Beehive-style food purchasing is more in line with contemporary lifestyles: to be appreciated it doesn't require a peculiar activist or ideology-inspired attitude, or a very strong sensitivity to food-related problems; therefore it can spontaneously attract a higher number of customers.

In Italy, then, almost all producers catering to Beehives I had the opportunity to interview generally showed a sense of optimism toward this new form of alternative food network, which they conceived as an innovative organization that was worth following from the beginning, for it is thought to possibly be playing a major role in the future local food market. The potentiality, for many farmers, lies in the fact that Beehives provide the public with easier, more 'user-friendly' and direct instruments to buy 'alternative' food – and therefore are able to attract larger strata of interested consumers – while simultaneously keeping intact the physical foundation of the exchange between producers and consumers. As I have argued throughout the present work, the physicality of this interaction is crucial for producers, because it is through a material re-connection that the socio-cultural re-connection between local food and citizenship happens; this in turn generates personal satisfaction for family farmers and enhances the economic viability of their businesses. The clearest argument to justify the potentialities of the Beehives comes indeed from a farmer:

> "Among the online projects, I think that the Beehives have the highest potential. Because the 'physical act' is still included. More than in GAS. Because even if what's behind [GAS] is very noble, the purchase is less personalized, because reference people make the selection and then the group turns into a central purchasing hub. In Beehives instead every consumer is the protagonist of the purchase. Everybody

> manages their own purchase. And the good thing is that the producer has to physically be there, this makes the difference in my opinion. For producers it is surely a commitment, but if they believe in it and use these moments to make promotion, then it will work. Seeing customers' faces, shaking their hands, telling them your logics: that's an advantage for the producer. I think the Beehives have a competitive advantage. [...] [Furthermore] the Beehives' project can open up to the world of young people. It is more inviting for a young person to get into a Beehive than a GAS, because [GAS] are always politicized and require a different type of commitment" (ITA5, 32, male)

Even if some farmers (especially in England) are not willing to spend time at the Beehives on collection days when the economic return is not satisfactory, many others are happy to spend a few hours a week meeting customers, presenting themselves and speaking about the products, even if it means overloading an already excessively busy workday. What producers also appear to appreciate is the simplicity and effectiveness of the online ordering and paying methods provided by the platform. They know all products they bring along are already sold, meaning there is no monetary transaction in place and no need for bargaining. Unlike at farmers' markets they are not required to extend effort in managing offers or applying discounts to attract customers. Thus they are able to focus solely on the product, and for producers like the goat cheese-maker ITA2, this is lived as a relief:

> "I happily go to the Beehives because people have already paid. And we can talk about cheese or whatever we want. There is no need to discuss prices, and if people have bought it, it means that the price was ok for them. And this is a great relief for me" (ITA2, 50, male)

In England, instead, the Beehives struggle to develop a base of loyal customers. Individuals are in fact attracted by the novelty represented by these food markets, so they get interested in them, subscribe to their local Beehive and maybe even try to shop once or twice, but they rarely become regular customers. What results is that Beehives in England have a membership of hundreds of subscribers, but only a few dozen (if not less) of shoppers a week. The motivation, as purported by the English farmers that provide these schemes, relates to the fact that British consumers are more interested in convenience than in knowing the person who crafted their food, so they desire their products to be delivered at home, or at least always available, and are not prone to wait for a week and commit to food collection. This is acknowledged by Beehives providers:

> "The Food Assembly works with a certain degree. People looking for certain products do sign up to it, but then you do get people that think it's going to be a Tesco online, and then they're very disappointed when there is a very limited choice for a lot of the products. [...] My Food Assembly sent out a questionnaire to subscribers, and it turns out that people's complaints regard having a narrower choice than supermarkets, so people are comparing it to a supermarket" (UK4, 40, male)

> "Realistically, people don't want to go and collect their stuff. Nor they want the chance to meet people and the chat that comes along

> with it. They want convenience. [. . .]That's all it is, in this country. People are so far removed from where their food comes from, that the producer, the person who makes the food, is of no interest to them" (UK6, 55, female)

The last quoted interviewee, UK6, despite her sharp awareness of the problems of the Beehives in the UK, in 2016 accepted to take on the management of the Beehive she used to partake in as a supplier. When asked why she embarked on such a venture perfectly knowing the difficulties it entails, she reported a thorough appreciation for the model and hopes for its future functioning. This highlights how small-scale farmers tend to give value to the modalities of re-socialization and re-localization of the food economy, since their expectations are aligned with those of the alternative food movement, which they entrust as a bearer of change in the long run:

> "I like the concept of [the Beehives], I like the model. I don't think it'll work at the moment, I don't think it does work anywhere in the country. All the hosts have the same issues, they have lots of members but no customers. But I think future ones will work, when people will start to think more of where their food comes from. There is a bit of a movement towards that at the moment, but it's just come back on the supermarkets really. But I also [do it] because I'm quite passionate about food traceability, and I do most of my shopping on the food assembly, or at the farmers' markets" (UK6, 55, female)

Notwithstanding, many producers in Italy are not enthusiastic about the ways information technology is innovating the world of AFNs. Albeit recognizing the potential to scale-up innovative practices possessed by a network like the Beehives', they sense the risk of losing that nucleus of values which used to be the fundamental asset of the 'first wave' of AFNs. The relationship with customers that is established at Beehives is sometimes regarded as cold or less satisfying, and in general a shadow of commodification is perceived. However, even when their personal values are slightly de-aligned, farmers accept and stand by these online schemes out of pragmatism:

> "I think the Beehives' is a rather cold system. It's not what I 100% believe in. At [farmers'] markets the relationship is warmer, more meaningful, while at the Beehives people come, collect, and go" (ITA10, 30, female)

> "These new online systems, they allow people to have the same product but without all that fuss. Someone seeks producers for you, and brings them to you. The advantage for the producer is that they create a customer for us, and they advertise for us. For the customer the advantage is that there are not the formalities, fuss, and commitment of a GAS. It might as well become the GAS 2.0. I hope not though, because GAS are a reality that works well because they are people that commit because they want to change things, and not someone who is tired of the organic from [the supermarket] and so goes to the Beehive. I would prefer not having to sell through these channels. But if we won't be able to increase the number of GAS and make [farmers']

> market work better, then we'll have to" (ITA8, 36, male)

> "Compared to GAS, a different set of relationships is established. In a GAS after a while you know everybody. Even the purpose is different, the GAS are born to sustain the producer. These Beehives are a different thing. Maybe in time they will consolidate, and get better, because anyway in Milan there is a large demand and not enough offer. [...] However, the more personalized the relationship, the more satisfying it is – but if it becomes convenient from an economic point of view, even if the relationship is not [based] on loyalty, it's fine by me. We need to stand up" (ITA12, 35, male)

The warning of commodification envisaged by farmers is the flipside of the coin of Beehives' easy approachability. It is framed as a positive feature as it facilitates the initial engagement of customers, but it can lead to a high number of excessively disengaged and light-hearted consumer-community relations, ultimately hindering the construction of a critical mass of committed buyers which is essential for feeding the working mechanism of a nuclear food system like the Beehive (and which embodied the fortune of GAS schemes before the aforementioned crisis).

However, the system of incentives, represented by the overarching economic structure overseeing the development of the Beehives network and its functioning, is assigned the role of contrasting, at least partially, this perceived inability to capture consumers' involvement. The fact that Beehive managers get a percentage of all sales makes them interested in constantly amplifying the base of buyers, and so continuously experimenting with novel ways to present the initiative, keep attention high, or attract new members. The Beehives being a reticular organization, all these bottom-up ideas and practices can flow into a common pool, where they can be adopted and adapted to the various realities, thus potentially contributing to the development of the system as a whole. At the same time though, the susceptibility of capitalistic exploitation increases, carrying along the legitimate doubt that the productive logics that lay at the base of the food system crisis will never really be challenged, and therefore that the change, if it happens, will be incremental as opposed to radical. This is the standpoint of the dairy farmer ITA24, who refuses to work with both online and offline AFNs but seems to have a quite clear idea about them:

> "Every now and then a responsible person for these online channels comes to us to make proposals. They want a nice product but also demand too generous cuts on the price. It becomes a competitive market, whereas GAS were always a bit 'partisan'[62]. You go on the internet, you compare all prices... the logic remains always the same. [...] Anyway, online sales will develop a lot, and inside there will also be space for direct sales. Many sites do a type of mediation that allows you to directly interact with customers" (ITA24, 65, male)

In conclusion, the system of the Beehives can be conceptualized as a new service in the alternative food economy, one that draws upon past experiences – ethically

[62] He actually uses the word *carbonaro*, meaning active in 'underground' organizations that aim to challenge the establishment and modify the *status quo*.

and (to some extent) politically connoted – and innovates them not only by implementing technological solutions, but also soaking them in a capitalistic profit-oriented resource pool, with all the advantages in terms of efficiency and the risks of losing identity and ideological strength this entails. Furthermore, the opposite outcome of the Beehive model in the two countries I visited gives proof that AFNs, even in their 'facilitated' online form, are strictly dependent on the specificity of local socio-cultural environments and provide distinct 'alterities' that respond to specific geographically- and socioculturally-situated aspirations (Martindale *et al.*, 2018). As a consequence, the superimposition of a model – even if representing the evolution of a well-tried model such as Italian GAS – may not produce a positive outcome if the innovation is not grounded on the local specificity of consumers' and producers' expectations, desires and habits.

6.2.4 *Cautious entrepreneurship*

The innovations in the modes of commercialization and the associated productive re-patterning – whether regarding food growing or multifunctional diversification – expand the range of options made available to farmers to pursue their livelihoods and seek viability for their farms. As I have been discussing, the alternative economy, in general, provides a host of opportunities to farmers, and is characterized by a high dynamism. New paths open up continuously, defining new potential trajectories for business development, but many of them are risky and uncertain.

The producers in my study follow these evolutions but they are very *cautious* in their entrepreneurial spirit. They appropriate and make use of new networks and new marketing spaces in a varied way, and they differ in their ability/willingness to recognize and realize new business opportunities through the tools of the re-socialized food system. Despite these differences, they all seem to be attentive to the developments of their local food system, which they scrutinize under the lens of their *value-inspired pragmatism*: the 'alternative turn' at the level of their working environment matches their ideological stance but at the same time is framed as a chance to solve the crisis of profitability that affects their businesses. In practical terms, though, the cautious entrepreneurship of the farmers of my study translates into the fact that changes are often incremental and a loop of positive feedbacks to reduce uncertainty is required before further steps are taken. This is true also for those who underwent the process of 'de-industrialization' which I analyzed in section 6.1, with the difference being that after a quite radical and often sudden change motivated by the severe detrimental effects of conventional market conditions (consisting of a reduction of scale of operation and an orientation towards high-quality and high-value-added production), for the subsequent development pathway a step-by-step approach is adopted and long-term expansion plans are rarely envisaged.

Entrepreneurialism is generally associated with processes of innovation, reorganization and creative action aimed at (re-)ordering resources to exploit, or create, opportunities for realizing value (S. L. Morgan *et al.*, 2010). In the case of agriculture, though, there is a paucity of studies addressing the issue of entrepreneurialism, and a comprehensive definition of farmers' entrepreneurship remains elusive (*ibid.*). Authors have noted that classical theories of firms, and the methods used to analyze business entrepreneurs, are not readily applicable to

farms, especially family farms (McElwee, 2008), and some conceive farmers more as producers than as business people (see, for example, Gasson and Errington, 1993).

McElwee (2008) indeed maintains a distinction between ‘farmers as farmers’ and ‘farmers as entrepreneurs’. The firsts’ business is scarcely diversified or pluriactive and is based on cost-price strategies, and collaborations with other farmers are rarely realized. These farmers are characterized by individualism and their activity is mainly affected by *push* factors, such as falling or growing prices and demand. The ‘farmers as entrepreneurs’, instead, tend to identify and exploit non-farming opportunities (tourism, hospitality, culture, entertainment) and high-value agriculture and food production. They use farm resources and features in flexible and innovative ways, and are motivated by pull factors, such as freedom, security, autonomy, reproduction of livelihoods, lifestyle, environmental concerns, and so on. They are likely to take on a definite role within the rural economy and realize forms of cooperation through alliances and networks.

The juxtaposition of my frame of analysis makes evident that the farmers I met can be filed as ‘entrepreneurial’. Under this light, their ‘alternativeness’ is shown to be enrooted in a different entrepreneurial spirit than conventional farmers. The processes of de-industrialization and down-shifting that many formerly-conventional farmers have undergone to join the alternative economy can then be read as a voluntary shift towards a form of more outward-oriented entrepreneurialism. The family-sized dimension allows for a more creative recombination of resources, while networking and relational openness help farmers to understand and meet societal expectations. At the same time, the peasant-like attitude (Van der Ploeg, 2008) of alternative family farmers is expressed in their reluctance to plan impressive long-term projects or aggressive marketing operations, and in other elements of cautiousness that define the particular nature of their entrepreneurial approach.

In this respect, the aspects of entrepreneurship of the farmers of my study partially overlap with Morgan *et al.*’s (2010) general depiction of farmers’ entrepreneurial spirit. Their outline is based on what they gathered from a representative sample of the rural population of two regions in the same countries in which I carried out my fieldwork, namely Tuscany in Italy and Wales in the UK. They aimed for a general evaluation, and didn’t keep under control variables such as ‘alternativeness’, realization of direct sales or collaboration with AFNs. The comparison of my findings with their outline reveals interesting insights to support my argument about the cautious entrepreneurship of alternative small-scale farmers.

The scholars affirm that farmers, in the conduction of their business, tend to judge the results of specific decisions, actions and processes, and make incremental adjustments on an ongoing basis. This is also true for alternative small-scale producers. Having to deal with a multiplicity of stakeholders (customers, AFNs responsible people, and so on) and a differentiated activity, they ‘play it by ear’, waiting for feedback and taking the time needed to deploy all necessary resources before moving on to a more ambitious development goal. ITA15 provides an example. He guided his family farm through a thorough restructuration, transforming

it from a conventional intensive pig farm to a small-scale organic one, adding business branches such as internal processing and a farmshop, and shifting sales to the alternative channels. Despite his innovativeness, his business mentality favors a piecemeal approach:

> "I try always not to bite off more than I can chew, I try to stabilize a range of customers and products, and once you are settled maybe you try to implement something more, modifying this or that. Because if you start by putting together this, and then that, and then something else, eventually you end up doing everything poorly. And we don't want to go down this road" (ITA15, 32, male)

In the same vein, Morgan *et al.* (2010) find that in their sample long-term business strategies and plans are rarely discussed. I could also detect this feature among the farmers I interviewed. With the exception of very few cases, farmers' ideas and plans about future development are not clear. For many of them, reasoning on the long term is not even conceivable, mainly for two reasons: because their limited dimension utterly impedes the gathering of the financial resources necessary to make investments; and because their working environment has become so complex and rapidly changing that a long-term commitment appears undesirable if not practically impossible. In order to grasp their aspirations and attitudes towards expansion, during the interviews I always asked farmers to think about what they would do if they had possession of ten times the amount of land they actually owned. This question almost always failed to achieve its purpose. The majority of the interviewees didn't have a ready answer, and dismissed the question either by discarding the hypothesis as absurd and impossible, or by affirming that they wouldn't make any substantial change to their current way of working. ITA5, instead, gave me an articulate response, albeit lying on the same foundations. He opened a farm business as a spin-off of his family's forestry enterprise, on land owned by his family's company, where he grows and processes soft fruit and other niche fruit and vegetables. Despite land availability as well as labor availability (the forestry company employees are also employed on the farm), he also opts for a piecemeal approach:

> "This is how I live it: I would like to get to have 100 hectares, but one hectare at a time. Because it would mean that I was able to do it and that I always had new ideas to put on the field. If I had had it all [*the hectares*] from the beginning, I probably would have done the same thing [*business the way I'm doing it*]: starting with little and seeing if it works. My wish is to do something that outlives me, so that when I'm gone my creation will last. That is the objective, not to get rich. Otherwise I would have gone to work in finance" (ITA5, 32, male)

Morgan and his colleagues (2010) also detect a conservative attitude in farmers entrepreneurial orientation, which is concretized in their desire to maintain current strategies unless the pressure for change is overwhelming. In my research, this finding is confirmed only partially. Once again, the dual nature of alternative farmers' attitudes, which originally combines values and pragmatism, has to be referred to in order to analyze the issue. The business management attitude of most of the farmers in my study is not susceptible to being defined as 'conservative'. Most of them, as I have been discussing throughout this chapter, have

promoted a significant transformation of their farms, implementing substantial innovations to their business models. Nevertheless, such transformations were not oriented towards the maximization of growth or profit opportunities, but strongly motivated by pragmatic necessities induced by economic constraints, and thus directed at providing a means of resistance in unbearable market conditions. In addition, they were backed up to a varying degree by a set of personal value dispositions feeding on the discourses about sustainability, food sovereignty, and endogenous rural development. This brought the farmers in my study to develop a form of entrepreneurialism which is more in line with Vesala and Peura's (2003) concept of 'forced entrepreneurship', which is not activated by deep inner motivations towards entrepreneurship but rather is "grounded in a practical perspective concerning the opportunities for the survival and development of rural economies and societies" (*ibid.*, p. 219).

In addition, the objectives that alternative small producers' prioritize when managing their businesses are not always economic-dominated, but are human-dimension-oriented, and often contrast with the rationale of business growth. I already underlined (in chapter 4) that these farmers interpret their economic choices as a means to adopt a broader lifestyle, in which the ultimate goal is the maximization of satisfaction rather than profit. This attitude intersects with the issue of entrepreneurialism and defines a certain reluctance to realize new business opportunities inasmuch as the required change is not accompanied by an increase of self-fulfillment. Therefore, entrepreneurial efforts are avoided unless they fit the frame of a desired farming lifestyle. ITA16, for instance, after speaking about his plan to exploit some underused productive capacity and produce more vegetables, points out his philosophical stance against the chase of growth; the goat dairy farmer and cheese-maker ITA2, instead, keeps no secrets about personal priorities:

> "We work with quantities of human dimension. Not family dimension, but... If in [our small town] everybody decided to come and do their shopping here I would say: fair enough, let's stop then, I'll serve only them, I don't need anything else. Why should I go bigger? I would make the right price to live decently" (ITA16, 34, male)

> "I don't feel like fighting anymore, I don't want to argue. My priority is waking up serene in the morning, and going to bed tired – very tired – but serene" (ITA2, 50, male)

Following with the analysis of Morgan *et al.* (2010), when addressing the nature of change in farmers' activity the authors also argue that change tends to be strictly related to farming practices – a finding that my fieldwork suggests to dismiss, given that the emphasis in the sector I'm looking at is put on innovations in the realm of commercialization and on the addition of non-farming activities to the core agricultural business – and that fundamental or strategic change is commonly resisted because it may require a re-evaluation of the farmer's role and identity. I point out, instead, that farmers performing direct or AFNs sales show a greater capacity to carry out different roles, assuming identities traditionally not associated with the farming world – a process which is often indispensable given the expansion of the range of activities required to propose their farm directly to the public. Nevertheless, fundamental changes are still resisted, but for reasons related to issues of trust. The interplay between farmers and consumers, and the

economic/personal success that depends on such interaction, is based on a process of trust building and, importantly, trust upkeep (see sub-sections 6.2.1 and 6.2.2). Mutual trust between producers and consumers is an indispensable trait of the new commercial relations upon which the alternative food system is built, and it rests on a delicate balance. The construction of trust is an endeavoring task for producers, and its maintenance requires a constant managerial effort, which calls for the possession of skills that are relational and entrepreneurial. The risk of losing consumers' trust therefore acts as a disincentive to realize fundamental changes even if they bear a promise of economic development, since they could undermine producers' reputations and, subsequently, produce the necessity to build a new customer base. The young egg producer UK1, for example, has potential for sales development, since the demand for his eggs is greater than his offer. He reflects upon buying and reselling eggs from some other producer, like many of his colleagues used to do, but refutes the idea in order not to risk losing his customers' trust:

> "I don't have enough product. I don't even have the facilities to have more birds, they're at their max. Actually there is plenty of room, but I don't want to squeeze too many birds inside [...] I could buy and resell eggs from someone else, but I don't want to go down that road of buying them in, that's not how we work, because I don't know what I'm buying – I would have an idea, but it's not mine, it's not ours. I wouldn't want to put something there that wasn't right, and then get a bad name. You can't afford that, can you? [...] We've got what we've got, no greed, no greed at all, and just stick at it" (UK1, 20, male)

Interestingly, the theorization of farmers' entrepreneurialism that appears to best fit the cautious spirit of my farmers' business attitude is offered by Bock (2004) in her study about the entrepreneurship of women family farmers. Bock proposes a distinction between a 'masculine' approach to farm business management, which is growth- and profit-oriented, and a 'feminine' approach, which is instead grounded in seeking a balance between professional and private aspirations, as well as between economic and non-economic goals, such as product quality, flexibility and self-fulfillment. She states that women-entrepreneurs choose a strategy of *fitting in and multitasking*, which concretizes in adding additional tasks to the already existing working scheme and accumulating more work since nothing or little is delegated to somebody else. This is also what happens on the farms I studied, where for the entrepreneur – whether man or woman – the entrance into the economy of direct sales and AFNs entails a multiplication of tasks and roles that are all carried out single-handedly or with the help of his or her family members (when available), because the possibility of employing more labor is absolutely out of reach and thus the only option is to intensify their working schedule.

Regarding the inclination to realize business change or promote business development, Bock (2004) argues that women may change their approach and expand their business when they understand that work and care may be successfully combined and that the new business may be rewarding financially as well as emotionally. Even if the concept of 'care' might be declined in different ways by the farmers in my study – instead of care for children and the household, male farmers might emphasize care for their family well-being, their lifestyle

and their land – these aspects of 'femininity' can arguably be generalized to define the entrepreneurialism of all small-scale alternative farmers. The cautious entrepreneurship of my interviewees is enrooted indeed is this type of business orientation.

Various similarities in fact emerge between Bock's depiction of women entrepreneurialism and the field data I collected. She sees women as centered on 'coping on their own' in order to restrict financial liabilities, and therefore as wary to realize large investments and striving to economize on necessary expenses – such as, to use an example of the author, carrying out a renovation with the help of friends instead of professionals. My interviewee UK3, male, owner and manager of a vegetable farm and a box scheme, did something similar: he built from scratch a cottage on his farm's premises in order to develop a multifunctional activity (tourism) and did it entirely on his own with the help of his friends and acquaintances. An analogous approach is expressed by the wine-maker ITA14, also male, who warns about the need to be very cautious when introducing a new business branch (in his case an agri-tourism and restaurant), and opts for a strategy of patient waiting and incremental realization:

> "In the eighties and nineties everyone was better-off, it would have been easier. [...] Now you need to be way more cautious. You need to think very well about the thing that you want to do. We renovated the place in 2009, but we applied for the agri-tourism [*license*] only in the summer of 2016. And for the moment we work only on advance reservation, we're not open every day" (ITA14, 38, male)

Lastly, the objective of concurrently pursuing multiple goals that describes women farmers' attitude in Bock's work – many of which relate to non-economic ambitions such as satisfaction and a self-fulfilling lifestyle – is also reflected in several accounts I recorded during my interviews. Like Bock's women, the vision of alternative farmers rarely encompasses a strategy of expansion, because their economic rationality operates within a different paradigm. The vegetable farmers ITA9, male, expresses this personal orientation:

> "The money you make from this type of activity allows you to live decently and to make those small investments that are needed to improve your business. In agriculture, to make big money you need numbers, you need quantities. And this is not even remotely an option for us. But I'm fine with that, in the sense that I have no aim to expand, so I'm not looking for another type of development" (ITA9, 57, male)

The cautious entrepreneurship of farmers can be explained as the confluence of the peculiar business attitude of family farmers with the requirements of the alternative economy in which they are embedded. The discussion of their entrepreneurial behavior conducted so far highlights that the family farmers in the two contexts of my study present some characteristics which are commonly attributable to farmers in general, while at the same time they are connoted by a peculiar relational orientation that informs their business choices, and a certain 'femininity' in the way they carry out their duties, that is evident in the fact that they privilege aspects of care, trust building and lifestyle over aspirations of economic expansion.

Family farmers step into the alternative economy in order to obtain autonomy, which is threatened by the conventional system. To gain more personal control over their business choices, though, an active entrepreneurialism has to be developed, in order to be able to navigate the opportunities furnished by the alternative economy, which is dynamic and multi-stakeholder in its essence. Alternative farmers, then, are required to overcome the traditional passive entrepreneurialism of the conventional farmer, and develop skills and a mindset that enable them to recognize and exploit those *pull* factors (McElwee, 2008) potentially generating business. At the same time, given the complexity of the alternative scene and the need to constantly negotiate between multiple interests, farmers are keen to preserve what room for maneuver they have been able to conquer. The following quotations illustrate the case. ITA13 is proud of his transition to the alternative economy, because for him it means not being dependent on supermarkets and wholesalers (external forces) anymore; ITA22 instead avoids expanding the scope of her business in order not to be overwhelmed by external pressures:

> "Now that I am in this situation, I can say 'I don't need you', but before I couldn't. Before I needed [*supermarkets and wholesalers*] because if you have stuff then you have to sell it, you can't eat it all yourself. Whereas now: 'if it's ok for you guys [*the price, the economic offer*], fine; if it's not ok then no problem, I can sell my stuff [*somewhere else*]'" (ITA13, 45, male)

> "Outside my farm there is no sign saying 'direct sales'. It's a choice of mine, because my customers all know me through word of mouth. [...] They discover me, I get discovered, it is not me reaching out to make myself visible. I didn't put [the sign] on purpose, because otherwise I would have a line [*of customers*] here and I would no longer be able to satisfy the demand. [...] I have a number of chickens that is enough for my weekly customers, and it's enough for me" (ITA22, 55, female)

Hence, alternative family farmers avoid being absorbed in situations that might undermine (again) their autonomy, and navigate their economic environment in a cautious mode, setting small achievable objectives to resiliently increment their business while focusing on the protection of their families' well-being. And many of them, like ITA2, pursue this strategy with consciousness:

> "Right or wrong, this is my policy. And it is a policy of small steps, but these steps are always taken on a hard ground; it's unlikely that you will sink" (ITA2, 50, male)

Some might interpret this as a lack of entrepreneurialism *tout court.* Instead, in line with Pyysiäinen *et al.* (2006) I argue that alternative farmers possess a *different* set of entrepreneurial skills than traditional farmers, because they are called to realize a different set of entrepreneurial tasks. The Finnish scholar and his colleagues in fact recognize such distinction carrying out a comparison between conventional and diversified farming entrepreneurs. Their analysis of the entrepreneurship of diversified farming is also applicable to the alternative farmers in my fieldwork. Pyysiäinen *et al.* (*ibid.*) argue that while production- and growth-oriented tasks are associated with conventional farming, for diversified farmers a major role is assumed by functional tasks, related to marketing and

product development, and by 'meta-tasks' aimed at identifying business opportunities and achieving resources. Diversified farmers, as well as farmers operating in the short-chain sector, are thus required to develop functional and meta-level skills enabling them to implement 'collateral' processes such as pursuing business opportunities even when resources are lacking, networking, cooperating with other stakeholders, developing joint projects, and so on. These skills are connected with social resources (ties, networks, social embeddedness and social capital) and are strongly impacted by situational factors, i.e. the whole set of alternative food organizations, market arrangements, and consumer expectations composing the local food system.

Therefore, to respond to the restructuring of productivist agriculture by diversifying into alternative enterprises and exploiting novel opportunities and markets – like those created by the system of AFNs and direct sales – meta-level skills related to market orientation and social networking must be developed. These skills are hardly susceptible to being transmitted through formal education, hence the only means for farmers to develop them, the authors conclude, is "the self-activation of farmers and the ancient art of trial and error" (Pyysiäinen *et al.*, 2006, p. 36). The cautious entrepreneurship I empirically detected is a reflection of this process. It is the device by which farmers try to conjugate productive capacity, relational effort, business development and lifestyle aspirations, given the specificities of the circumstances in which they act. The balance they seek is delicate, and to build and maintain it they adopt a piecemeal approach, meticulously gathering and deploying resources in an attempt to increase their business, and waiting for positive feedback before taking a further step in order to minimize the risk of autonomy loss. Success in this endeavor is strongly dependent on farmers' abilities to manage the aforementioned meta-level tasks, which in turn require a multifaceted relational effort. The innovations occurring at the farm-level in the realm of relations between farmers and the other stakeholders of the alternative systems are discussed in the following section.

6.3 Mode of relation

> "Working in agriculture today is more complicated, but it's not impossible. [...] You need to know your job, being passionate and – especially in this sector [*of small-scale production and direct sales*] – you need to have a good relationship with people: being able to communicate what you really do, being simple and honest. This relational component is a novelty for farmers, not everyone is familiar with it. [...] The farmer is always that rather closed-off person, who is afraid of letting people onto the farm, who fears people might touch his animals. [...] But nowadays the farmer can't afford to be close-minded. If he wants to increase his profit he must open up, not only on a social level but also on a technological one" (ITA11, 36, male)

Paraphrasing the words of the young multifunctional dairy farmer ITA11, producers, as members of the alternative economy, are embedded in a dense relational environment they have to skillfully navigate in order to pursue their personal and

business goals. The importance for producers to renovate their relational attitude has been emphasized throughout the present work, and its concrete implications for the transformation of the work of farmers have already been discussed several times implicitly. The purpose of this section is to provide an explicit account of how farmers' relational skills are deployed and translated into concrete business practice, on the basis of the empirical material I gathered. Prior to discussing the practical terms of producers' relational efforts, though, it is important to give account of their own interpretation of the concept 'relational', that is, the meaning they attach to the process of enhancing their relations with the various stakeholders of the local food system.

In common culture, farmers are not evaluated as relationally-committed social actors, rather they have been long considered as individualistic agents, detached from centers of societal networking and interacting with societal structures – especially urban ones – almost exclusively through the market for commercial purposes. The remnants of this type of behavior are still visible today in the 'average' farmer's difficulty of engaging in forms of collaboration or joint projects, as assessed by many of my interviewees. Nevertheless, the farmers that are active in the alternative economy generally acknowledge the need to develop a different attitude and become open and welcoming to a whole series of stakeholders, expanding the boundaries of their networks and realizing a mentality shift. In both the Italian and English fieldwork, indeed, most farmers explicitly argue that a crucial component of the innovative spirit required to farm on a small-scale in the post-productivist society deals with the introduction of elements of openness and receptiveness towards the external world. The wine-maker ITA4, for example, is frustrated because his farm is not as beautiful, 'well-groomed' and attractive as he thinks it is supposed to be:

> "Farming has become so multifunctional that you have to work in a certain way, the farm has to always be beautiful. It's unacceptable for the grass to be as tall as we have it now. [...] The farm has to be endearing – a place where people come to taste the wine. Spontaneous but functional: you can't serve wine in a plastic cup. These are small things but they are fundamental if you want to go ahead" (ITA4, 62, male)

The new mentality, as can be inferred from ITA4's quotation, has to do with 'opening the gates' and not only relates to inviting – attracting – consumers to discover and enjoy the farm, i.e. re-socializing the activity by inducing a movement of stakeholders towards the farm unit, but also to concurrently practicing the opposite: bringing the values and assets of the farm outside the farm, for it to be appreciated by external stakeholders (i.e. the public, in its different forms) and for the farmer to take on a new – more complex – social role. This principle underlies all the innovations I'm analyzing, both regarding the sphere of production (discussed in section 6.1) and the practices of commercialization (discussed in section 6.2). The vegetable grower and box scheme manager UK9 points out that this new mentality is key to developing a new agriculture, and embodies a crucial chance for future success:

> "[One of the problems of farmers is that] they are not willing to deal directly with the customer. [...]We've found that by doing veg boxes

> we can create a sustainable business, and it's profitable. We were told 'you're not making any money out of veg', but we've managed to stay [...] and I think it's because we are willing and used to deal directly with people. I think that's how we've been more successful, that's kind of the big difference. A lot of old time farmers are stuck in this mentality that they don't want anyone on the farm, they don't like that the people are there, they don't like dealing with the public, and they think the public is difficult. It's like a little trap that they are in then, because in order to make your farm profitable and keep it going you have to do something differently, and they're not willing to do that"

The 'urban' stakeholders (individuals but also associations, groups, firms, institutions) of the new agriculture have significantly multiplied, and each one represents a potential contact and business opportunity for those farmers who are able to establish and maintain an appropriate relationship with them. The complexity of farmers' social worlds subsequently increases, and their job is transformed into a challenging exercise of entrepreneurialism, based on the ability to constantly monitor the surrounding environment and seek opportunities. The capacity to exploit such opportunities depends on the possession of relational skills and flexibility, and increases exposure to social liabilities:

> "We need to pay attention to what's going on around us and be open to contact with new subjects and projects we could work with: the new small restaurant opening, the GAS that is being set up, the school that wants to change its canteen food. There is a lot of word-of-mouth, and you need to pay attention, because it is edifying as long as you work well, but if you make a mistake you're done. [...] The fact that you get your face out there prompts you to do well" (ITA15, 32, male)

The working relationship, even if still grounded on the exchange of a commodity or a service, becomes, in a sense, 'personalized'. I argued (in chapter 4) that this process, that bilaterally attaches human values to a commodity-centered relationship, is a source of gratification and personal fulfillment for farmers. At the same time, it is lived by producers as an increase in their responsibility towards their networks. In some instances it is perceived as a dramatic increase, since in the alternative economy the tendency for farmers' networks is to grow larger, and the relationship with each of the subjects within the network is usually much less mediated. ITA3, for example, realized the transition from conventional to direct and AFNs-mediated sales, and expresses this ambivalence – on one side a higher satisfaction, on the other the burden of responsibility:

> "When you sell your stuff to a retailer, you are impersonal, I mean, you are a part of the chain. Whereas here [*doing direct sales*], it's so good when they give you satisfaction: people coming back, people being content. [...] But it's also a responsibility because if something goes wrong you are the one who has to respond, and you must respond, you can't say 'mah, I don't know'. [...] You do your part and you have to expose yourself, it has to be that way, but it's a responsibility. Eventually it becomes a habit, but at the beginning it may be a problem for those who are not used to it" (ITA3, 33, male)

As a counterweight to the assumption of responsibility, farmers are aware that they are given the opportunity to carve out a new role within society. Given the multiplied societal expectations that are placed on agriculture (Van der Ploeg *et al.*, 2000; Salamon *et al.*, 2014) – especially small-scale agriculture within the frame of environmental- and diet-related concerns – for an increasingly large segment of society farmers are no longer sheer commodity producers, but carriers of multiple meanings and providers of desirable services of a multifaceted nature. Farmers understand these demands and try to turn them into personal advantage, in terms of economic as well as human affirmation, since meeting them can generate new streams of revenue and at the same time provide farmers with a space for personal expression. These demands sit at the intersection between relational and productive values and practices, and to be satisfied require farmers to multi-task and perform a wider array of activities. In the following two examples about the expansion of farmers' roles, the rice grower ITA10 emphasizes the aspects of story-telling and value-bearing which have become attached to production, while the goat farmer UK2 highlights the importance of her role as a steward of the environment and a promoter of best practices, also for her business' sake:

> "There is a reason it's better that you buy this rice rather than the supermarket's, and if you don't talk to me you won't ever know. Yet it's not easy, because on top of growing it, processing it, packing it and selling it, we must also talk about it. Ours is a huge role" (ITA10, 30, female)

> "My customers want that. The customer base that comes to me wants me to know my animals, they're looking for animal welfare, for environmental impact, they're looking for that stuff. And the customers that come to me that don't want that, aren't the ones that keep coming back time and time again: they are those one-off sales and not the ones that make profit" (UK2, 40, female)

To pursue these opportunities, farmers carry on activities that don't fit the traditional farming job description. On top of growing crops, rearing animals and taking care of the economic balance of the farm, in fact, they leave the field to speak about their products, promote their activity to customers and other actors, engage in projects, collaborate with other producers, mediate between different interests, manage different businesses and network with a series of stakeholders, comprising customers, organizations, universities and institutions. For many of the farmers I studied innovation takes the shape of an (more or less explicit) 'openness project', leading to new frontiers both in their lives and in their businesses. Clearly this is seen as a deep transformation by many producers, especially those who were once embedded in the conventional mode of farming and selling. Sometimes this process not only entails a reformulation of the tasks performed, but also an adaptation of farmers' personal characters, as they have to develop new modes of expression (and perhaps self-representation) to fit the new relational setting. ITA6, for example, reports that entering the alternative economy put his personality to the test, as he had to overcome his shyness:

> "It didn't only change the work, it also changed me. Character-wise I've always been very shy and quiet, but now I'm always moving around, to be at meetings, to organize stuff with people. This year I've

> even given classes [at a foundation] on organic rice farming; something that until a few years ago I would have never thought I would have been able to do. I like it but it's also heavy" (ITA6, 50, male)

As can be inferred from these accounts, from the point of view of relations the main innovation in the lives and work of farmers is constituted by *networking*, which becomes a crucial business tool. Networking is the principal instrument to innovate small-scale agriculture within the frame of the alternative economy. Farmers' efforts are directed towards creating and sustaining relational networks on three levels: with consumers; with other farmers and food producers; with groups, associations, organizations (among which AFNs, food or ecology advocacy groups, and unions), and other firms and institutions bearing a direct or indirect interest in the food system. In the following three sub-sections I'll delve into the practical implications of network management realized by the farmers on these three distinct levels, from an internal point of view provided by my interviewees in the two fieldsites.

6.3.1 *Networking with consumers*

Networking with the *end consumers* erves the main purpose of providing farms with a social base. For producers who made the strategic decision to skip any intermediary in order to deal directly with the customers, it is crucial to be able to count on a tank of consumers who are interested in the farm and willing to purchase its products. The direct relationship with customers is based on trust and, as many farmers in various ways suggest, consumers' trust is hard to gain but very easy to lose. This is why producers have to keep their relational attention high, with the aim of taking care of existing relationships and procuring new ones, also to compensate for the inevitable clientele turnover. I have argued (section 6.2) that multifunctional diversification of products and activities is a strategy that is directed towards serving this objective, since multiplying the elements of interest gives people more motives for getting into contact with the farm, and thus increases the chances of converting interest into forms of support, economic as well as other. In any case, the view proposed by farmers to grow the customer base and subsequently promote the growth of the farm business advises listening attentively to the consumers and trying to understand their desires and their demands, because they are seen as the real restructurers of the food system, through their consumption choices and orientations. Many farmers I met report having put a specific effort into monitoring their customers' requests and having adapted their activities accordingly:

> "We grew up together with our customers, listening to their needs and complaints until we got to a standard, that is always evolving but has more or less stabilized. The workload has increased constantly, so that the organization has to be constantly improved" (ITA15, 32, male)

It is a relational exercise that mainly addresses consumers, but is more broadly directed toward monitoring the forces at play in the local food scene, clearly intertwining with and mutually reinforcing the relational efforts extended on the other two levels (colleagues and organizations). Understanding the characteristic of the potential custom and of the social and spatial interactions between the various subjects of the local alternative food economy enables farmers to envision

opportunities and exploit them as soon as they are made tangible. The type of development that is thus prompted is incremental, in line with their entrepreneurial attitude (section 6.2.4). Network expansion parallels business growth, since new goals and activities are added/adjusted as the outcome of new contacts. This results in a snowball-like development pathway, which strongly relies on the expansion of the alternative/niche food segment:

> "[Our pathway] has been... not random, it's been as if it were a chain. We managed to get into Slow Food's [*farmers'*] market [...] and then, also thanks to other farmers' markets, we got to know people who needed a different product and weren't able to find it in their situation [*i.e. at supermarkets*], and so we started following what the customers wanted, what our customers wanted. Because, you know, our customers go to [*farmers'*] markets, they are always the same [*people*], they can only increase: very rarely you'll find a person who buys at farmers' markets and then goes back to buying exclusively at supermarkets" (ITA3, 33, male)

Managing the relation with customers, therefore, becomes a very delicate task, for the realization of which specific skills and knowledge are required. The persona of farmers, together with their stories and their values, are turned into assets that are able to add value to farm products. Many farmers don't hide the fatigue with which they carry on the role of being promoters and 'faces' of their farm, but at the same time they consider this relational re-connection as a sensitive activity that they have to realize in person. Delegating it to other people might reduce its effectiveness or, like in the case of ITA22, even generate anxiety:

> "I want it to be me talking to my customer, because I'm able to reply to every question. Once I tried to ask a girl who works here with my daughter to be the guide for a group of school children visiting the farm. She had been listening to me guiding for years, and she knows everything of the farm, but eventually I was feeling bad, I had to step in. [...] You've got to communicate the product and its agricultural nature, otherwise the value of what you're doing is belittled" (ITA22, 55, female)

The attention (and the regard) reserved for customers is motivated by the fact that they are seen as sponsors of a type of agriculture that is re-grounded in human and environmental values, of which farmers feel they are the bearers. Customers are weighted in contraposition to a market economy and an institutional environment, which instead are no longer able to provide such support. Some features of the sales channels of the alternative economy (for instance, let's think about the periodicity of payments of a box schemes, or the liquidity flows generated by selling at farmers' markets, or the promises of purchase pledged by GAS groups) indeed act as replacements for traditional state support measures, such as credit facility, price control and other types of market support, which small-sized farmers are not able to access or enjoy anymore. This support is offered by consumers only when a relationship of mutual trust is established, which in turn is based on transparency and openness. The vegetable grower and box scheme owner UK3, for example, is well-aware of this, and like many of his colleagues offers the physical space of his farm to his customers for their own leisure:

> "I always don't think of our customers as customers, I always call them the 'supporters' because that's what they do: by buying from us they support me and [my wife] to do this. And I always thank them for paying a little bit more for their food, 'if you ever want to come to the holding and sit down and listen to the birds you've sponsored for the last ten years, be my guest!', and people will do that, they come by often" (UK3, 60, male)

Maintaining a direct link and a transparent relationship also allows for a sort of 'natural selection' of the custom. Consumers who buy directly from small producers are generally interested in procuring good local food for their families, and tend to show a certain sensitivity towards environmental and agricultural causes. Notwithstanding, sometimes they may be very demanding and picky, and producers report it being very difficult to constantly meet their expectations. For producers, it is crucial to have a sufficiently large customer base; the size of it, though, is not the only dimension that has to be taken into account. Since both the relationship and the production characteristics are very personal and mirror the farmer's personality and beliefs, customers must be compatible – at least to a certain degree – with the farmer from a human and philosophical point of view. The producer-consumer dialogue acts in a twofold way: on the one hand producers get to know the details of consumers' preferences, and direct their activity on the basis of this knowledge; on the other hand consumers become more knowledgeable about issues of cultivation and animal rearing and familiarize themselves with the producer's personal style of farming. Only when the prerogatives from both sides are compatible, a trust-based relationship can be built. This process is effectively summarized in the next quotation, from the horticultural farmer and box scheme manager ITA9:

> "The direct relationship with customers is useful because it allows you to understand if they like [*your products*], if the things that you do are appreciated. Generally the comments are positive, actually I also have customers that bring me things they cook [*with my products*] for me to taste. But also… maybe in organic farming there are some apples that are ugly, but they are super good, and someone still protests because they're ugly. I mean, what am I supposed to do? One, two, three times, but then I write saying: 'dear lady, you are not a customer that is good for me'" (ITA9, 57, male)

Developing a customer base which is entrusting, 'like-minded' and sympathetic has a vital importance for farmers, because it can act as a guarantee and protect the farm from exposure to market uncertainty. The tighter the relationship between producers and consumers, the more likely the farm will be buffered from the variability inherent in agricultural production. Farmers are indeed aware that if they are able to develop a network with these characteristics they can enjoy the possibility of relying on a good outlet to sell their products, whatever the agricultural-climatic conditions of a specific year. In a strive of pride, ITA13, the formerly conventional apple producer who had never thought he could possibly become a market trader (see section 6.1.1, p. 117), delivers the essence of this argument by provocatively referring to the idea of selling a bag of stones:

> "By now, I have a lot of loyal customers. I've been doing them right for eight years. If one day I brought a bag full of stones, I'd make

> them buy it. Once. Then they would come back and tell me 'what the fuck have you given me'? But the first time they'd take it, because I loyalized them and people believe in me" (ITA13, 45, male)

In addition, given the value-inspired pragmatism that informs their choices, producers are also personally satisfied by the human exchange with customers. Many of my interviewees express devotion towards 'good' food and 'good' farming, since this is what they dedicate their lives to, often sacrificing other dimensions such as free time or economic satisfaction. Winning consumers' interest and engaging them in a dialogue that revolves around their production is perceived as a sign of social recognition, and therefore generates self-fulfillment. Challenging the idea of farmers as closed-off individuals, the growers I met were very available to tell their life stories and were especially keen on detailing the characteristics of their products and their production techniques. Even if sometimes the network of relations with customers becomes heavy to manage, and makes the job more tiresome, producers share feelings of contentment with the idea of being able to get the citizenship closer to them and of contributing to re-connecting people with farming in general. Earlier I quoted ITA22 as an example of a producer who feels uncomfortable with delegating other farmworkers to be the spokespeople for the farm, because she feels the responsibility to give the best answer to all questions customers may ask. She is committed to the 'openness project' and values the contact with customers as an important business tool, especially because her farm is located in the periphery of Milan, literally surrounded by buildings of the urban fringe. Concurrently, she is very happy that her farm is a place of relations, because she sees this relational density as a form of resistance against the commodification processes that have been defining the economic development of our society in the last decades:

> "I spend the whole day talking. Here [*my farm*] is a place where there is an exchange of everything. There is still that relationship with the customer, with the citizen. There are conversations also about other things, other types of information get exchanged, apartments for rent for example... There is a very nice relationship, like back in the days, a thing that got lost with the mass distribution. For me, this is the nicest thing about direct sales." (ITA22, 55, female)

The networking practice, as said at the beginning of this section, is not limited to creating bonds with customers. A second level of relations indeed regards the collaboration between farmers, or between farmers and other food producers, which is addressed in the next sub-section.

6.3.2 *Networking with other farmers*

The practice of *networking between farmers*, or between farmers and other food producers, aims to create joint projects and collaborations for mutual (business) support, as forms of cooperative alliances intended to either facilitate the operations farmers have to carry out to sell in the alternative economy or to develop new ideas and opportunities. Empirical data collection in the two fields allowed me to detect different patterns of cooperation and, especially, a distinct disposition towards building networks of 'collaboration among peers' between Italian and English farmers.

In both countries, the most common type of cooperation relates to logistics. Logistics represents the main weakness of the family farmers in my study because, with respect to selling in bulk through the conventional channels, performing direct sales involves a multiplication of logistical operations that understaffed farms struggle to cope with – from product handling (preparation of boxes, preparation of individual packs and, sometimes, processing into final foods) to product delivery (to the various farmers' markets, GAS groups or individuals). Many farmers report that they work at the limit of their logistical capacity, and in several instances lament not being able to exploit new business opportunities precisely because they can't afford the physical process required, while the option of employing new much-need workforce is completely out of reach. Both in Italy and in England, then, the most immediate and diffused form of cooperation among colleagues has the object of sharing the burden of physically handling the products. When they have a sales channel in common (the same GAS, the same food coop, the same Beehive), for example, nearby producers jointly plan delivery trips, putting together resources to optimize them. Getting into the city during rush-hour for many producers (especially if not located in the immediate outskirts) means losing half a working day. If this effort is shared, the assessment of economic viability of serving a certain market outlet can significantly differ. Producers are aware that some innovative channels (like the Beehives, for instance – see section 6.2.3) or, in general, newly-established initiatives need a quite long period of time to get consolidated, and that at the beginning it might be useful for them to be present at a new scheme in order to monitor the developments rather than for economic gain (which tend to be disappointing in the first phases). Clearly then, if the cost of such operation is reduced thanks to the organization of mutual help between producers, the possibilities to manifest their presence in the various schemes that are expressions of the alternative economy are enhanced.

The scope of networking with other farmers is not limited to relieving producers of part of the logistical burden. Even if small-scale farmers perceive the other small-holders rather than the large conventional farmers as their competitors, they frame the notion of competition in a peculiar way: the development of new small farms is seen as a positive sign because it contributes to generating a 'system' which, in their opinion, will eventually favor the whole sector. This conviction is based on the supposition that the demand for local-artisanal food will keep expanding, and the increasing value that locality is assuming in the realm of consumer preferences will guarantee a tank of potential clientele for every small-scale producer. At the same time, an increased weight of the family farming sector is supposed to provide more chances of socio-political recognition and institutional support, eventually assigning more economic strength to the sector. This type of orientation, despite being tangible also in Italy, is more evidently felt in the UK, where it agonistically corresponds to a higher degree of commodification and conventionalization of the whole agricultural scene. In Britain, the local food system (in general) and the small-scale farming sector (in particular) are weaker than in Italy, therefore an increase in the number of small farms is interpreted as a sign of consolidation of the 'movement' and so framed as an aspiration. The small-scale pig grower UK6, for example, shares this view; while the goat meat producer UK2 is even actively contributing to the growth of

the networks of small producers by giving courses on goat farming:

> "I see small farmers as my competitors, rather than conventional ones. [...] And they're popping up, everywhere at the moment. I see them on Facebook, they all use social media. [...] But I think it's a good thing, if it's making [local food] more available to people" (UK6, 55, female)

> "I also run training courses about goat meat, for people to come here and learn about goats. I do them for the people who want to produce goat meat elsewhere. [...] I'd like a reticular diffusion of goat producers, in order to cover all areas. And I don't mind if this means losing a territory, because it would also mean goat meat consumption is getting consolidated so that I can focus on my locality and my production" (UK2, 40, female)

Despite these claims, though, English producers show a much less pronounced collaborative attitude than their Italian colleagues. Except for cases of simple logistics-sharing, in the English field very few example of factual collaboration among farmers were observable. Once again, the 'alone *versus* the market' mentality prevails and British farmers appear to be more focused on building their own market, developing a successful business model and taking care of relations with their customers, rather than enlarging the scope of their networks to embark on multi-actor projects and integrate forms of more structured cooperation among peers. Farmers perceive this lack of a collaborative attitude as a shortcoming of their environment, but at the same time are aware that a diffused mentality is difficult to eradicate. Empirical evidence is provided by the market gardener UK11, who coordinates deliveries to the food coop and the organic wholesale markets he serves in Manchester with another small producer of his area. Aside from sharing trips to the city, he observes, no other form of collaboration is likely to be envisaged, due to the overarching mentality:

> "Unfortunately in Britain farmers haven't got the appropriate mentality. People don't tend to like to work together that much, really. Even with [*the producer I collaborate with*] sharing delivery works, but if we had to also share growing plans and things like that, it wouldn't work. People are single-minded. Possibly, you don't want to share your ideas. It's wrong, but I suppose it is what it is. [...] I think people tend to guard what they're doing, they are not too happy to share everything" (UK11, 65, male)

The 'single-mindedness' of farmers, as defined by UK11, is an attribute that describes the traditional farmers' mentality everywhere. Even in Italy it is hard for the average farmer to engage in forms of collaboration with other colleagues, owing to what my interviewees regard as consolidated behaviors and out-of-date business orientations. The difference between the Italian and the English 'alternative' farmers, though, is that the former almost univocally affirm that they are ready to be embedded in a network of collaborative relations and, on the practical level, evidence confirms they are already experimenting with a varied set of cooperative initiatives. The young dairy farmer and cheese-maker ITA10 summarizes this awareness and attitude:

> "I like collaborating very much. It's not very easy in our sector. Because many [*farmers*] are quite closed-off. Many just keep to their small corners, they think that if they get themselves into a network they won't be able to sell their product anymore. But it's not like this, because joining a network together makes us grow together. I've often had contrasts with people who don't think this way. It's a problem of ideology, not an issue of age. The farmer has always been in his existential bubble, and that's it. [...] Also for us in the beginning it has been hard to open up to the external world, to organize events and parties – inviting people to come here hasn't been easy. [...] But I think we should keep on this way. The fact that people come to the farm has to become a normal thing" (ITA10, 30, female)

To realize a thorough relational innovation, then, some inertial forces of tradition have to be overcome. In Italy, a more pronounced relational attitude is indeed detectable among the 'new peasants' (Corrado, 2013) who entered the world of farming without a family farming background (often after various unrelated working experiences). Contrarily to individuals who have been socialized within an agricultural environment, these subjects manifest a higher propensity towards innovation, not only in a market-oriented way but also in a relational sense. They are more prone to acknowledge the evolution of the sector and employ the opportunities generated by new networks. ITA19 interestingly proposes herself as an example of this argument. With a background as a nurse, she started managing her husband's farm after he inherited it. She had no knowledge about agriculture, so she immediately inserted herself into networks comprising other farmers, consumers and local food activists, which slowly helped her to set up her activity. She now produces special ancient grains and legumes, which she processes into various foods and sells almost exclusively through AFNs. She admits it has been very challenging to take the lead of a farm, and that she made many errors before finding a working model. By now her business has become successful, also maybe, as she asserts, thanks to her lack of agricultural socialization:

> "Farmers are very loose, everyone thinks for themselves. [...] In the past, your neighbor was your competitor. [...] But then things changed, even the biggest of us is still small, because we're dealing with a global market. So we must understand this and find a way to get together in groups, or at least stop seeing our neighbors as the ones who want to screw us over. Farmers still have a bit of this mentality, [which] is quite strong still. Someone told me 'you are lucky because since you didn't have a family which directed you towards agriculture, you are like a *tabula rasa'*. I mean, all the decisions I took, [whether] good or bad, were coming out of my own head. Whereas if you're born into a family in which things have been carried out in the same way for generations, for you it's obviously easier to know [*how to do things*], but it's also a limit because it will be harder for you to see beyond what you're used to seeing or doing" (ITA19, 50, female)

Posited that the traditional agricultural mindset acts as a break to innovation – especially relational innovation – in both countries, the distinction that needs to be underscored here is that 'alternative' farmers in the Italian field are more straightforwardly aware of the need to operate a radical change, and are more

focused on enlarging their vision in a relational sense and using the benefits of networking to experiment with new productive-commercial arrangements. British farmers also share (at least part of) the ideological basis of this view, but they are more wary to translate such premises into concrete forms of opportunity- and synergy-seeking. It is possible to conclude that the farmers in the Italian field appear to be more aware of their 'alternativeness', in the sense that they consciously envisage the possibility of building an alternative economic paradigm for rural development, i.e. a system in which they, as autonomous actors, overcome the constraints imposed by the conventional food regime (McMichael, 2009a) to propose a solution for re-launching the local food economy. A good deal of this solution rests upon the need to extend a deeper multi-level relational effort. In this regard, ITA5 seems to have clear ideas:

> "We need to start collaborating with other producers. Because this changes our mentality, and creates a multiplier effect. By mutually promoting each other's projects, by exchanging products, it's like we have many marketing offices scattered throughout the territory. Whereas if you act individually, either you are the best – but sooner or later someone better than you will come and will take your market – or you lose. We need to be quick and streamlined, read the change and be able to jump onto new projects, create a system and create networks. If you network, you become powerful. This is the only way to really compete against shops and supermarkets. We could become an alternative purchasing model, and that's the goal we should aim for" (ITA5, 32, male)

How does this renewed attitude translate into empirical terms? Fieldwork data and observations suggest that in Italy a system of integrated collaboration among alternative farmers is still in the process of development, yet some attempts have already been put in place. Many farmers of my study complement the range of products they offer to end consumers by purchasing other farmers' products. They tend not to consider these colleagues-providers as anonymous suppliers but rather as their network of collaborators. They stress the importance of having a direct knowledge and a fruitful exchange with these producers for three reasons: to be sure about the quality of the products they propose to their customers (once again to not betray their trust); to have a direct channel to hand down consumers requests and comments, and therefore to be nimbly accountable to consumers on the one hand, and able to introduce improvements by cooperating with producers on the other; and lastly to have the possibility to eventually enjoy other types of synergy or mutual help with like-minded colleagues. The relationship then often transcends its commercial nature, and translates into forms of support:

> "I complete the range by buying from other small producers. [...] By now I have created a network, sometimes we also make exchanges among us. If one finishes the squashes, the other brings him some at the market, and so on. This network also reaches as far as southern Italy: for some specific products I have direct contacts and they send them specifically to me. [...] I never buy huge quantities, but the customers appreciate it. And they remember, they come and ask me 'when will you have those avocados again?'" (ITA9, 57, male).

Farmers are usually transparent about the provenance of these products, thus providing visibility for their colleagues through their farm shops, box schemes, or market stalls. In some instances, more than on financial transactions, their exchange is based on swapping or bartering, and various forms of marketing cooperation are implemented. ITA15 offers insight on his network of colleagues-suppliers and underscores the importance of having a direct cooperative interaction:

> "They are all local producers, some are organic but all are artisanal. With these producers we have developed a fruitful working and interpersonal relationship, we've been mutually selling each other's products for several years now. In case of a problem, the contact is immediate; they're all producers in person. [...] If you sell a product, and you know who made it, and you know that it's been made a few days before, for every comment or requirement from the customer you have a direct channel to forward the communication. [...] Some of these products, we could have them labeled with [the name of our farm], but I don't want because I think that it would create confusion in the mind of the customer. [...] I prefer to keep the two things separated, and actually I'm very happy to make people know these producers, it's a thing that legitimates the work of the others" (ITA15, 32, male)

At times producers decide to exchange more than just products and marketing services. The collaboration between farmers in these cases may take the shape of a formalized alliance. The Italian law allows firms to stipulate a *contratto di rete* (network contract), on the basis of which they can exchange resources and assets, realize common operations and receive fiscal benefits. During my fieldwork, I interviewed two farmers who are members of a formalized 'network of firms'. This type of collaboration is useful to farmers precisely to facilitate the operations that are needed to perform direct sales in the alternative economy. Whether the aim is to develop a niche high-quality product, to partake in a supply chain project, or to follow the multiple commercial outlets of direct sales, sharing resources may contribute to simplifying the management of the farm and achieving more ambitious objectives. ITA2, for example, used to be a dairy farmer, raising cows and goats and selling milk to industrial collectors. He joined the alternative economy by deciding to become a cheese-maker, realizing direct sales as his commercial strategy. For him, though, taking care of cows and goats and producing cheese was too demanding an effort. Therefore he created a network with another producer: he gave him his cows and in exchange he receives milk on a regular basis, so that he can focus on rearing and milking the goats and processing both milks into cheese. Similarly, the cereal and vegetables grower ITA6 is member of a formalized network comprising five farms, all engaged in the production of crops, vegetables and herbs. The network allows them to realize sales together (this way they put together their 'forces' to sell even to mass distribution) as well as purchases, and to exchange products (nursery plants for crops, for example) and workforce. ITA6 also uses this network to divide among participants the (heavy) labor required to cater to their direct channels and AFNs:

> "This is the type of collaboration I've always tried to create, but here with the farmers in the area it is difficult, they still compete for who owns the biggest tractor. Which is a useless competition, since we are all rather small farms, between twenty and fifty hectares. Anyway, I've

> always wanted to set up a consortium to make collective purchasing: instead of buying a sack of fertilizer, we buy a whole rig and then we divide it; but we've never managed to do it. Whereas with the network, yes, because I found people with a mentality similar to mine. Especially one [farmer], thanks to whom everything started: after a violent hailstorm, she found herself without product, and I had excess, so we started exchanging products. Now we've also divided the tasks and the patches: she does the north area, I do the south area. Also, there are some [*partecipants of the network*] who keep contacts with GAS, and some with restaurants, and other activities" (ITA6, 50, male)

Lastly, empirical evidence suggests that other forms of collaboration are possible and likely to be effective, especially to realize supply chain projects and to exploit synergies between farmers' multifunctional activities. The involvement of groups of citizens and AFNs can foster the arrangement of cooperative interactions between actors working at the different steps of a specific product's supply chain (farming, processing and retailing, for example), with the purpose of developing a fully local high-quality supply chain for staple foods. The DESR[63] , for instance, involved the aforementioned farmer ITA19 (cereal grower) in a supply chain project about wheat. Thanks to the intermediation and the promise of purchasing the final goods pledged by DESR members, she was inserted into a collaborative network with other firms involved in the wheat chain – such as millers, bread-makers, bakeries, and retailers – in order to set the premises for an all-Milanese wheat and bread chain. Local supply chain projects are examples of urban-rural re-connection, generating new opportunities for small-scale farmers and holding the promise to promote a territorialized type of rural development.

A similar prospect is attributable to collaborations grounded on taking advantage of the synergies between the multifunctional and diversification activities of different farmers. These types of projects are not yet diffused, but farmers are starting to envisage the opportunities that conducting a multifunctional activity in joint venture with another farmer might produce. By putting together these kinds of resources, the appeal of the farm(s) as providers of multiple services to the public might increase, and therefore conquer larger market spaces. An empirical example from my field derives from ITA16, who grows vegetables, the bulk of which are sold on the farm premises at the farm shop that he runs. Very close to ITA16's farm there is another small-scale producer, who also adopts the same model of selling through a farm shop. This farmer produces meat products, hence ITA16 acknowledges the possible synergy of unifying the two farm shops. The two ranges of products are compatible, and proposing them all in one place – he asserts – could provide a more convenient shopping experience to customers, and thus attract new clientele. Sharing productive and managerial strength, in conclusion, may increase farmers' chances to be competitive against the dominant players of the conventional food system, yet maintaining the small-sized dimension and traits of careful production that are characteristic of family farmers.

To pursue a similar set of goals, a third level of farmers' relational practice

[63]The District of Rural Economic Solidarity of the South Agricultural Park of Milan, see footnote 36, p. 72.

regards networking with other organizations directly or indirectly active in the local food system, analyzed in the next sub-section.

6.3.3 *Networking with other stakeholders and lobbying*

Another promising business tool for small-scale farmers is represented by establishing *networks with various actors, groups, associations and organizations*, such as AFNs, food advocacy associations, agricultural associations, other firms, unions and public institutions. The collaboration with non-farming actors is motivated by a similar rationale as the other examples of cooperation: the interaction with these players often facilitates innovation and the involvement of farmers into projects. The analysis of the relation between farmers and AFNs has already been addressed in section 6.2.2. For the rest of the present section, then, I will focus on the empirical implications of farmers' collaborations with other non-farming stakeholders of the local food chain.

Food-related associations, whether local, national or even *supra*-national, and farmers' unions actively work in the consolidation of the local food system, creating markets, carrying out promotional activities, and developing projects, usually specifically targeted at small-scale farmers. Many of my interviewees take part in the farmers' markets organized by these subjects, especially, in the case of Milan, those set up by the international food-advocacy association Slow Food, the Italian Organic Agriculture Association (AIAB), and by *Coldiretti*, one of the major farmers' unions in the country. Compared to local farmers' markets, those backed up by these national-level organizations have the advantage of being part of a wider net, thus allowing those producers who partake to get in contact with a higher number of colleagues. For instance, ITA13's entrance into 'alternative' agriculture – which he considered a salvation for his fruit-growing business (see section 6.2, p. 134) – was indeed made possible by his involvement in *Coldiretti*'s farmers' markets, which he refers to as a network which has had the effect of creating a 'niche' of producers systematically commercializing each other's products. These subjects also propose an array of projects – such as initiatives of promotion of a specific product or of a specific territory – and organize various events where farmers can get involved and display their production.

Networking with associations and other firms also helps to exploit and develop multifunctionality. Multifunctional diversification is placed at the intersection of food production and provision of non-food products and services in various sectors (restaurant, tourism, leisure, and so on) therefore enlarging the contact surface between farmers' interests and the interests of other players operating in the same sectors (restaurant, tourism, leisure, and so on). New synergies are then imaginable and new collaborations become practicable, advancing the integration of farms into other spheres of rural (and urban) activity. On this note, two empirical examples are worth mentioning. ITA10 (dairy and cheese producer) collaborates with a firm that manages a web platform targeted at tourists visiting Italy. The website promotes to its customers 'authentic local experiences' acting as an intermediary between local people, who can offer a specific 'experience' (sightseeing, workshops, food preparation, and so on) which gets displayed on the website, and users, who can purchase the 'experience' online via the platform. Through this website, ITA10 offers workshops to tourists, during which she teaches

how to milk cows, how to make cheese or how to cook a *risotto*. Thanks to this form of collaboration, the spatial extent of the farm becomes an asset, and farming is exploited as a resource in itself. The second example is reported by ITA22. Together with other farmers and other firms she got into a formal network that was contracted by the municipality to take on the responsibility of cleaning and green maintenance in a public-owned park. This way, a new multifunctional branch is added to the farm's activities, and thanks to their competences farmers become providers of public services, while public administrations can save money.

Mention about the involvement of public institutions in farmers-related issues allows us to introduce a further element of innovation detected in the sphere of relations of Milanese farmers. There is a tendency for farmers to gather and develop associative forms aimed at *lobbying* the public administrations to obtain various types of support. Within the discourses of endogenous local rural development and rural-urban reconnection, the role of territorial public institutions as promoters of a process of restructuration of the food system 'from the ground up' is been emphasized by many sources, both academic (Pothukuchi and Kaufman, 1999; Sonnino and Spayde, 2014; Moragues-Faus and Morgan, 2015; Borrelli *et al.*, 2017b; Calori *et al.*, 2017) and political (FAO, 2018; Milan Urban Food Policy Pact, 2018). From the point of view of farmers, local political and administrative institutions are not deemed powerful enough to shape the destiny of the local food system, but they are referenced as potentially able to influence the agenda and therefore prioritize a type of development (that farmers would want endogenous and focused on local specificities rather than global patterns) that meets the interests of the small farming sector rather than being corporate-oriented, through small concrete interventions in the local economy.

To enhance their lobbying capacity, farmers tend to aggregate into higher-order bodies to purportedly increase their bargaining power and political weight. At the moment of my fieldwork, in the province of Milan there were five farmers' *districts* officially recognized by the Lombardy Region (souce: Lombardy Region website), plus the DESR, which differs from the others for it stemmed out of an initiative of citizens rather than farmers, to which the latter subsequently affiliated. The rural districts are territorially-defined, grouping producers from a specific area, and serve the purpose of increasing (or even generating) the feasibility of concrete projects and making farmers' voices heard not only by institutions but also by the 'heavyweights' of the food system, namely supermarkets and other food corporations.

Excluding DESR, which is an expression of civic food activism and operates on a more radical social-justice-oriented basis, in my Italian fieldwork I met several producers who are members of rural districts. Six of my interviewees, in fact, are affiliated with a district, and one of these, ITA24, was also a key actor for the creation of his district, and now serves as its president. He sees the constitution of districts as an attempt to realize an innovation 'in terms of structure' which he contrasts with the innovation represented by direct sales and AFNs, deemed as pertaining to the sphere of 'commercialization':

> "Alternative networks are an innovation of commercialization, whereas here we tried to innovate as a structure, because we've seen that struc-

> tural innovation works, in order to become 'interlocutors', regardless of the quantities [we produce]" (ITA24, 65, male)

The 'interlocution' he refers to signifies championing the interests of small-sized and peri-urban agriculture or, in other words, uniting forces to make the most of the (restricted) economic and socio-institutional spaces for development and affirmation (also readable as: resistance) offered by the current food regime (McMichael, 2009a). The empirical data I gathered suggests that this form of collective action points to a variety of objectives. The 'megaphone' provided to farmers by uniting into districts is for instance used to fight against urbanization, to preserve green areas within and around the city, and to protect peri-urban agriculture from land speculation. This becomes feasible because a district is able to interact with the city's urban planning departments:

> "The district has a territorial basis, so it becomes relevant also on the level of planning. We interact with urban planning. And finally we can avoid being evicted from our farms, or that they take land away from us to make some stupid shit. At least we can put pressure to find some less harmful alternative solutions" (ITA24, 65, male)

Also due to their territorial dimension, through districts farmers have easier access to public subsidies, EU- or regionally-funded alike. Such institutions tend to privilege aggregative organizations as partners for their projects, and the activity of rural districts are more likely to get funding, because "districts have area plans that allow for a higher impact on the territory, compared to 'watering-can-like' subsidies" (ITA24, 65, male). At the same time, acting as a collective, farmers can improve their negotiating position and get into more balanced commercial relationships with the mass distribution and the food industry, realizing supply chain projects or partnering with corporate players for the promotion of local products. ITA10, for example, thanks to her district, got into a supply chain project focused on rice, which district producers together processed and supplied to a large supermarket company. The price obtained, this way, was higher than the price of rice in the conventional market but still lower, as ITA10 unenthusiastically comments, than in direct sales. Sometimes, to contrast the 'one-sidedness' of the relationship with the corporate retailers (see section 5.2), districts manage to involve the public administration in the negotiation rounds, in order to obtain political support and obtain better economic conditions. Municipalities have an increasing interest in promoting local food production and this can result in new opportunities for farmers to obtain better conditions even within the conventional channels, like for example producing for the private labels of supermarkets. These types of projects don't really match producers' strategic focus on increasing their autonomy and getting out of a condition of anonymity, nevertheless they are still perceived as a step towards a better market. This is how, for example, ITA10 comments on the outcome of the aforementioned district project to collectively supply rice to a supermarket chain:

> "I don't know if this is the right choice, because it resembles the same thing that used to happen thirty, forty, fifty years ago, the same concept. Which is to give all your stuff at a low price, blending it all together. My neighbor works the same way as me? I don't think so. So the product is not valorized. It is valorized as the product of a

> territory, yes, but the individual [producer] is not valorized, [while] this is what we should be trying to do" (ITA10, 30, female)

The involvement of public institutions into projecting with farmers also connects to the issue of urban food policy. In recent years, the city of Milan has been very politico-rhetorically active in this field, taking the lead of an international network of cities committed to promulgating appropriate food policies at the urban level (the *Milan Urban Food Policy Pact*), and setting the ground for the development of its own set of policies. Since its establishment, the district of ITA24 has been included among the urban food policy stakeholders and he, as the district's representative, sits at the meetings organized by the municipality:

> "We partake in the *Milano Food Policy* meetings, and obviously we try to put a bit of pressure. It's been a few years. The meetings are private, invitation only. And, all in all, since we became a district we are invited. Which is not bad, because before we couldn't get in there" (ITA24, 65, male)

Farmers lobbying activity in the political-institutional sphere is currently focused on obtaining support in negotiation processes (as we have seen), on concession of public spaces for farmers to use for their activities (farmers' markets, but not only – ITA21 for example obtained the right to manage a public-owned unused *cascina*, which together with other producers he wants to transform into a multifunctional farm open to the public), and on steering public food procurement towards local food (e.g. the canteen services of the many public institutions, such as schools and hospitals). Clearly, many other partnerships between farmers and institutions can be envisaged, the development of which should be informed, I argue on the basis of the findings of my research, by small-scale farmers peculiar entrepreneurialism, which is an expression of a value-imbued cautious yet pragmatic business orientation (see section 6.2.4). Such partnerships should aim to facilitate the implementation of multi-stakeholder projects, while giving credit to farmers' individual identities and enhancing the multi-layered socio-economic meaning of their activity.

Interestingly, no type of partnership between farmers and institutions was detectable in my English field. The lesser personal relational inclination of British producers therefore seems to be coupled by an institutional environment that is less attentive to small-scale farming issues. This can also be read as a symptom of the fact that the establishment of a fairer, more re-connected, food economy in which small farmers re-gain their value as crucial actors is less perceived as a societal concern than it is in Italy. The actions and organizations proposed by AFNs in the UK are also influenced by this frame, and reflect a distinct prioritization of food system problems (and solutions) that I will analyze in chapter 7.

6.4 De-commodification

The development of the conventional food regime rests upon an ongoing process of *commodification* of food and farming, and of the relations between subjects upon which food production is based. As argued by Rundgren (2016, p. 116), "the capitalist market economy transforms everything involved in food production into commodities. [. . .] [L]and, forests, humans, animals and food, [. . .] everything

is reduced to the universal measure of value-money, a process which also turns nature into a commodity to be consumed". The notion of commodification, in the Marxian sense, refers to the transformation of the products of human labor and relations into marketable objects, valued in terms of their exchangeability and so turned into capital to be accumulated. The relations underlying the human activities of production and consumption therefore become commercial, with the effect of alienating individuals from the mutual social conditions of existence and reshaping the relationship between individuality and community (Vitale and Sivini, 2017).

The paradigm of modernization of the food production sector was fuelled by these processes of marketization, since the free market was addressed as a neutral force capable of providing efficiency and effectiveness to the production and distribution of food. Such view contributed to the dramatic increase of yields and total outputs, but at the same time spurred phenomena of 'demoralization' (Thompson, 1991) of the exchange system, eradicating the relational component of the exchange and removing moral issues from the list of economy-related concerns. The emergence of the food and farming crisis, as well as the phenomena my research investigates, which are framed as farmers' and consumers' reactions to the crisis, are linked to the freedom assigned to the market to shape the food economy, which has resulted in a process of concentration that attributed the power to lead the market to a restricted number of dominant players. Mainstream market forces prompt the marginalization (if not expulsion) of small-scale farmers, threatening their livelihoods and subsequently endangering the rural social fabric. Concurrently, they negatively affect the sphere of consumption, because the food that is widely distributed is flatter in taste, and its freshness and wholesomeness reduced. Furthermore, these negative effects extend to the environment, which is increasingly under pressure and at risk of degradation. The inappropriateness of the free market for food is highlighted: market mechanisms are not able to solve problems if the market is directed by dominant actors who impose their own view of what is fair and/or sustainable (Rundgren, 2016) and seek profit for every transaction.

The productive, commercial and relational innovations brought about by farmers to perform direct sales, and the short-chain practices stemming out of their collaboration with consumers and AFNs can be considered attempts to *de-commodify* the relations that are inherent in the current food economy. De-commodification happens because the economic relations that exist between food producers, distributors and consumers are re-internalized within a net of social relations. The economic activities concerning food production and exchange are deployed on a reticular structure of relations, whose knots interact in order to reduce the impersonality of conventional market exchange. Economic goals (of all actors) are then set within an environment of social practice, where relational and cognitive labor on common conditions of existence and visions (Vitale and Sivini, 2017) produces spaces for mutual acknowledgement, collective learning and experimentation. The power of producer-consumer networks is to counteract market distortions and thus, in the opinion of Vitale and Sivini (*ibid.*), to (partially, I argue) mobilize eco-economic, cultural and social resources out of the capitalist market.

The ways my interviewees interpret their lives as farmers and represent the features of the farming job (portrayed in chapter 4) are already a sign of de-commodification. Namely, the rationale behind their life choices and the attitude with which they carry on their duties reveal a process that reverses the transformation into commodity of two of Polanyi's (1944) 'fictitious commodities': land and labor. For Polanyi, land and labor are resources that escape the definition of commodity, as they are not produced to be exchanged on the market being as they are inalienable substances relating, respectively, to the natural environment and to human life. A self-regulating market 'coerces' their transformation into commodities, with the effect of subordinating the very substance of society itself to the laws of the market. Eventually this exposes society to the risk of *destruction*, as it is left deprived of the protection of cultural institutions (*ibid.*). Even if society at large has luckily not been destroyed yet[64], farmers are a good example of the well-foundedness of Polanyi's premonition: *their* society is at real danger of extinction, and precisely for the inability of the system of institutional protection to safeguard an economic space for the reproduction of their livelihoods, compatible with their features and prerogatives.

In the alternative economy, the relational effort extended by both producers and consumers to get closer to each other acts to re-embed economic practice into a network of social protection, whether voluntary (as in the case of the support provided by GAS groups) or involuntary (as in the safety net unconsciously represented by farmers' customers at farmers' markets). In both cases, an evident *re-humanization of land and labor* is realized. Land, indeed, becomes a place of life, as testified to by the many accounts I gathered from farmers who pair their choice to become farmers with the possibility to live on a farm, in the countryside, experienced as a desired lifestyle choice. Land is respected and coveted by those English farmers I met who accepted to sleep in a caravan for years in order to be able to live on their farms before having the permission to build a house. The environment is also respected, because it is not only perceived as a factor of production, but also as a cooperative agent of a broader life project:

> "We have realized the most beautiful things when there's been cooperation. The same logic has to be applied to nature: if you cooperate with nature, nature gives you plenty; if you compete [*with nature*], nature becomes unkind" (ITA1, 66, male)

Farmers' new relational attitudes translate into an 'openness project' that dismisses the vision of agricultural land as a secluded, private space, and re-positions it among the ranks of common goods. The 'gates' of alternative farms are open to the citizenry, either because farmers organize events and multifunctional activities to attract the public to their business, or because they simply invite their customers to "sit down and listen to the birds [they have] sponsored for the last ten years", as the box scheme grower UK3 (60, male) puts it in this already mentioned quotation (section 6.3.1, p. 181). Land also becomes the resource for shared projects, which blur the distinction between producers and consumers and reinstate – even if only partially or momentarily – the value of land as a commons: for example, ITA8's henhouse is managed in cooperation with a GAS, the tasks are divided between farm workers and GAS members, for three and a half days of

[64]This is debatable.

the week the eggs go to the GAS, and for the rest of the week the eggs go to the farm.

A form of de-commodification is also operated on labor, which becomes an expression of life. Regardless of the higher requirements of manual labor that tend to be associated with small-scale farming in the alternative economy, labor assumes multiple meanings and becomes indistinguishable from life. A break in continuity between work and life, in its metaphorical and concrete senses alike, is rarely detectable among the farmers I interviewed. For them, their activity is their role in life, their social role, and therefore they seek social recognition more than profit because social recognition legitimates their work and socially-validates their lifestyle. In some instances, the very meaning of 'free time' – a concept created, Polanyi would say, by the commodification of labor – is questioned:

> "It's a job, but it's not a job, it is life. I work all these [many] hours and people tell me 'you never have free time'. But, what do I need free time for? What's free time? For me this is free time, I'm at the market, I meet people I interact with, I smile, I exchange positive energies, it's good for me. This is work but at the same time it's life" (ITA18, 58, female)

The labor of these farmers is intense and taxing, but it doesn't equal exploitation; it is able to provide self-perceived autonomy even in a context of (at times severe) economic hardship and uncertainty. A feeling of freedom derives from the possibility to decide the time and modality of the farming activity, and, when the goal of providing livelihoods to the farmer's family is met, a sense of fulfillment is generated, corroborated by the farmer's philosophical stance and human disposition:

> "It's hard but I'm not gonna complain, I don't like complaining, I'm a happy person" (UK1, 20, male)

> "All that's been important to me throughout my life is to have the space for me as a human being to be able to develop" (UK3, 60, male)

> "If I had a lot of money I would make [the farm] perfect and just keep it for myself, and I would teach people how to do better" (UK7, 44, female)

> "Ah the countryside, I would never give it up. The countryside and the growing. But this is a personal thing, it has nothing to do with the job" (ITA3, 33, male)

The phenomena I have been examining also contribute to a *de-commodification of food*, as a useful object and as the outcome of a multifaceted human activity. De-commodification of food happens because the commercial strategies of producers, whether in direct or AFNs-mediated short chains, are directed towards re-socializing their sales and – as a consequence – their activity. To make direct sales to the public effective, in fact, the economic relationships revolving around food have to be embedded in a richer picture of relationships, entrenching the social exchange between producers, consumers and the other subjects of the local

food system, and thus spurring a collective mobilization of resources out of the pure market mechanism. The effect is the development of a force counteracting people's alienation from food, an alienation manifest in the common practice of consuming a product while being socio-culturally detached from the nature of the labor and the structures necessary to produce it. This force also contributes, more broadly, to reducing alienation from the mutual social conditions of existence, thanks to the practice of social solidarity re-sewing the thread linking individuals with communities.

This process is simultaneously put forward by producers on their own, as a value-inspired pragmatic response to the unfeasibility of the conditions imposed by the conventional agricultural market system; and by consumers on their own, as a conscious ethical-political manifestation of 'critical' citizenship. When the two efforts are joint, like in the case of GAS groups or other solidarity-oriented AFNs, de-commodification increases in strength and becomes more explicit because a structure of systematic interaction is built. This structure creates a social space in which sales of products are only one element of the ongoing process, which aims to reach further and question a wider array of fundamental socio-economic assumptions.

On food as an object, the relational density which accompanies the exchange (personal interaction, mutual knowledge, mutual trust, cooperation) socially-validates the attachment of a use-value to the products, as opposed to an exchange-value, wherein the nature of the object is reduced to its intrinsic qualities and de-coupled from its social values. Food is then charged with a multi-layered set of meanings and sought after because it is deemed able to satisfy complex needs, not limited to nutrient intake or pure gastronomic satisfaction, but comprising social and cultural aspirations. Besides quality and provenance, elements referring to ecology, personal stories, human well-being, animal welfare, ethics, politics, and so on contribute to the definition of the value of food as human artifact, which is therefore brought back into the realm of societal issues. The meaning is connected with the context of production, both spatially and culturally; with the mode of production, reflecting health-related, environmental and quality concerns; and with the social role of farmers, signaling concerns of a socio-economic and human-moral nature.

Evidence from the empirical fieldwork indeed suggests that low-intensity sustainable production is appreciated for it represents a societal goal. Specific products and production conditions addressing social issues are given weight and consideration (produce of ancient varieties or techniques at risk of extinction, food coming from fields which have been 'liberated' from crime and mafia, products crafted by disadvantaged groups such as prison inmates), and the circulation of such products allows for the realization of multiple specific projects, which are redistributive in nature. A concrete example of an initiative of redistribution – which Polanyi (1944) considers one of the three pure logics of institutional social regulation of economic activity – is provided by the only CSA[65] existing in the Milanese field (and second CSA ever set up in Italy[66]). The CSA was born thanks

[65] Community supported agriculture. For a definition of CSA, see footnote 12, p. 27

[66] The only other CSA in Italy is in Bologna. In the English case-study, no CSAs were found in the area.

to the collaboration of two small-scale farmers and DESR, which is in turn formed by various GAS and other groups of citizens. One of the workers of the CSA farm is a disadvantaged individual, with past problems of drug-addiction, seeking social rehabilitation. One of the two growers, ITA23, emphasizes the social outcome of the CSA project, which represents a re-allocation of resources to socially-desirable uses, such as providing stable employment to this person:

> "This model [*the CSA model*] erases the division between who produces and who consumes, and puts everybody in the same situation, even if everyone has a different role. But the business risk is common. [...] The strength of the project, in my opinion, is that people are spending the same money they would have spent to buy vegetables from a private business, but since the thing [*the CSA activity*] is managed in this way, with the same money they can grant [the employee] stable employment. [...] If there wasn't the CSA project, we [*the two farm businesses who created the CSA together with DESR*] couldn't have afforded to employ a person, because we wouldn't have had a guaranteed income, and we would have had to cope with business risk" (ITA23, 45, female)

However, the ability of this whole set of de-commodification processes to make a long-lasting dent in the current food system is still unforeseeable. To follow with Polanyi, indeed, the counter-movement that springs out of the renovated relational embeddedness of producers' and consumers' activities within the alternative economy may be seen under his theoretical lens of the 'double movement'. Therefore it can be predicted to achieve an accommodation of protection measures inside the overarching market-led conventional food system, rather than the capacity necessary to build an infrastructure to sustain a whole new economic architecture. As summarized by Mingione (2018, p. 291), the 'double movement' is "a simultaneous combination of dis-embeddedness which destroys social bonds and habits in order to accommodate new market opportunities (here market is intended as a competitive force that destroys social relations) and of re-embeddedness creating new social bonds and institutions". Under this light, short food chains and AFNs can be seen as emancipation movements generating a thrust towards democratization of markets and generating new individual identities (*ibid.*); but it must also be taken into account that they operate within a constant dynamism of expansion and restriction of socially-governed spaces of protection inside a capitalist market-society. The innovations examined, then, rather than being directed towards fabricating a brand new rural development paradigm, appear to act as a complement to market society – a complement of 'resistance' – in a similar vein as forms of state intervention such as Keynesian or Fordist welfare-state, which have historically been put in place to counterbalance market inequities inherently generated by the capitalist economy paradigm.

In this sense, my empirical findings show that a certain level of hybridity characterizes the alternative food economy and the behavior of its players. Producers' perception of their own 'alternativeness' is far from being univocal, and the meaning that the concept assumes varies significantly. The mentality of farmers is pragmatic and not always critical or consciously alternative. As I have argued, despite a certain tendency towards possessing a shared sets of values ideologically coherent with AFNs, producers innovate their behaviors in an 'alternative' sense

out the pragmatic need to escape the productivist system. In other words, they adopt a post-productivist approach not (exclusively) because of an ideological affiliation, but (prominently) because the productivist approach forecloses the possibilities for social and economic reproduction. As also noted by Goodman (2004), even if imbued in a post-productivist framework, the mindset of many farmers is still partly productivist, and this reverberates in some of their thoughts and actions.

Consumers in the alternative food economy, for their part, are surely more inclined to develop their choices on the basis of various ethical-political considerations rather than with a *homo-oeconomicus*-like hyper-rationality, and their collective action is able to exert considerable social pressure on farmers and other players of the food chain as well. At the same time, though, there is an apparent discrepancy between alleged preferences and actual behavior, confirming the observation of Rundgren (2016): paraphrasing the author, when people are in 'citizen mode' they express a strong ideological support to farming innovations of the likes of those investigated by this research, but when they then shift to the 'consumer mode' they tend to adapt to environmental circumstances, 'playing the role' of consumers carefully balancing their commitment. The effects of this are felt when AFNs' business drops during periods of economic crises and austerity, when new schemes (such as the Beehives') struggle to attract people's participation, or when farmers' direct customers become too demanding and difficult to satisfy. Farmers perceive such discrepancy, which adds as a further reason to maintain commercial hybridity between the alternative and conventional channels:

> "I think British people are stubborn. I think people like to say that they are interested, like most people would say that they would buy local, but do they? They say it, and they probably do believe that, but they maybe don't believe it will make a difference" (UK8, 30, male)

> "There are [new] possibilities, they [*the short chains*] are developing and we can see it, but these things are not easy. Because they must be supported by a real change in the consumer, that so far in my opinion has been a change that is much more symbolic than real" (ITA24, 65, male)

Given these characteristics of producers and consumers, and the obvious domination of the logics and infrastructures of the conventional system, the processes of exchange that occur in direct and AFNs-mediated short chains can be analyzed as dynamics that attribute an additional tier of value to food. On top of a 'capitalistic' value related to the intrinsic characteristics of the good (taste, appearance, freshness, 'culinary journey'), the products that circulate in short chains are assigned with a 'de-commodified' value which is the condensation of their 'extrinsic' characteristics regarding production processes and labor, provenance, human and social attributes of the producers, political and ecological values, and so on. Through a relational process of re-connection and re-localization, then, this 'extra' value is added to the commodity, which therefore undergoes a process of *'partial' de-commodification*. The interplay between capitalistic forces and de-commodification that attempts to correct market distortion is at the basis of the alternative food economy, and will likely shape its development for years to come. The possibilities for the system of AFNs to propose a rupture within the

conventional market system and kindle a radical shift towards a truly alternative economic model seem limited. Nevertheless, AFNs embody more than just a political-philosophical standpoint for the reformation of the food system, as they establish collaborations with farmers, which are pragmatic responses (Hassanein, 2003) to problems of sustainability of the food system, striving to achieve what is presently possible given the opportunities and barriers. These collaborations prompt the emergence of innovative responses to the struggle for rural livelihoods, which, by contesting the commodification of food, exert pressure to democratize the food system and challenge the forces controlling it (*ibid.*). The 'consumption side' gets affected, since the awareness of individuals is slowly incremented, and the momentum of the 'alternative' food discourse increased; the 'production side' is affected as well, since farmers' repertoire of rural 'survival strategies' is extended (Goodman, 2004). As a consequence, the change that is envisaged is in line with continuity and incrementalism rather than radical restructuring.

On a related note, the results of 'partial' de-commodification imply that the whole system is constantly exposed to the risk of co-option, that is, the re-appropriation of the effects of alternative discourses and practices by the actors of the conventional system. If the structure employed by alternative sales is the conventional market, and progress means perfecting the characteristics of the alternative exchange to better fit the infrastructure (using new technologies, reducing the requirements of volunteerism, attracting more consumers, increasing efficiency, and so on), on the one hand alternative arrangements will likely upscale and involve a greater portion of the public, but on the other opportunities for a capitalistic exploitation of the phenomenon may increase. Short chain operations will likely become the object of mainstreaming forces, as is already happening with supermarkets and technological start-ups increasingly employing a re-localization rhetoric and providing similar services of local food re-connection. If once again subjugated to the hegemony of the free market, branches of the alternative economy may be *re-commodified* and therefore lose their effectiveness as systems of social protection.

In this context of uncertainty, the main challenge for the alternative schemes of food procurement is to foster a reconfiguration of routines of individuals in their food consumption habits. The true test for 'alternative' farmers and AFNs will measure the effectiveness of their introductions by their ability to significantly contribute to cultural change. This emphasizes the role of consumers and of the socio-cultural environment, which is the collective expression of their orientations and behaviors. It also calls into question the activity of public institutions, and their receptivity towards issues of democratization of the food and agricultural market. This knot is very relevant for my study, because between Italy and England the alternative food economy takes different shapes, mainly due to a distinct consumer (food) culture and to differently operating processes of de-commodification. The next chapter will delve into the comparison of the two contexts of my field research, highlighting elements of variability in the realms of rural innovation, alternative food practice and consumption patterns.

Chapter 7

Lombardy and the north-west of England: Similar innovations but different alternative food economies

The foodscapes in Italy and England are radically different. The ways food is produced, consumed, interpreted, and experienced by the various actors of the chain are distinct, for reasons of geographical conditions, cultural configurations, and historical development patterns. From a geographical point of view, the Mediterranean climate of the Italian peninsula allows for a more bountiful agriculture, which is able to maintain high levels of production all year round and is better suited to the production of value-added crops. In addition, the Italian mountainous landscape didn't allow for a homogeneous process of modernization, which therefore caused the agricultural sector to maintain a tight link with the agro-ecological features of the territory and limited, to some extent, the pressure towards specialization of production (Fonte and Cucco, 2015). Great Britain, instead, has a wetter and colder climate that impedes the cultivation of certain crops, especially in the very short winter days, during which production is markedly reduced. This limits agricultural diversity and the possibilities for food self-sufficiency (Levidow and Psarikidou, 2011).

On a cultural level, food in Italy is charged with a deep social value, linked to the strong connection between family life and everyday practices that characterizes the Italian society (Scarpellini, 2014). Italians keep the Mediterranean diet in high consideration and exhibit a strong attachment to their traditions, especially in the realms of cooking and eating. Intertwined with the historical geo-political fragmentation of the country, this set of conditions allowed for the resistance of a diversity of farming traditions and reduced the scope of the processes of concentration and intensification upon which the modernization of agriculture was based since the second World War (Fonte and Cucco, 2015). In the UK, no such cultural 'brakes' were put on the capitalistic development of the sector, which therefore reached a higher level of industrialization and commodification. The ranks of the British 'peasantry' were almost emptied out, whereas in Italy, despite a significant reduction of the economic weight of the primary sector and the subsequent process of rural depopulation, a lively peasant culture had the

chance to resist.

Today, the agriculture in the two countries presents a strikingly different outlook. Despite the total utilized agricultural area being larger in the UK than in Italy (i.e. the overall amount of land destined to agricultural production), according to Eurostat data[67] the total number of farms is dramatically larger in Italy. In 2013, in fact, in Italy there were slightly more than one million farms, while in the UK the figure is limited to 183 thousand. What obviously results is that while the Italian rural sector is a mosaic of small farms with an average dimension of 12 hectares, in the UK land is much more concentrated and the average farm has a significantly larger size, namely about 95 hectares. In general terms, then, it is easy to grasp why the process of re-peasantization in the UK means introducing a groundbreaking innovation, because it signifies the attribution of worth and consideration to an almost disappeared social figure, i.e. the small-scale farmer, and the reintroduction of the long-gone set of practices ascribed to family farming. In Italy, instead, the same phenomenon implies a sort of revitalization of a struggling class, a form of 'resistance' aiming to ensure the continuity of the increasingly endangered peasant tradition.

Still remaining on a national level of analysis, this also explains why the 'quality turn' that happened in the 1990s following the food scares of the 1980s (Goodman, 2003) prompted responses of a different rhetoric in the two countries. In Italy, the discourse condensed around the protection of national production because it was seen by both consumers and institutions to be synonymous with quality and craftsmanship (Brunori *et al.*, 2013); this paved the way to the social construction of 'Made in Italy' as a reassurance brand (*ibid.*). Arguably, this also prepared the ground for a more economic-oriented reception of the later 'alternative turn' – that is, the diffusion of discourses of food system re-localization in opposition to the predatory forces of long chains, which is the object of analysis of this work – than in the UK, where instead the 'quality turn' was addressed with stricter food safety regulations and further agro-industrial concentration, which indeed has increased since the 1990s (Levidow and Psarikidou, 2011).

My two specific fieldsites differ from national averages for the presence of two large industrial and service-oriented urban centers, Milan and Manchester. The presence of these two cities is the reason why the two areas were selected for comparison: the aim of my research is to highlight how a certain type of innovative small-scale agriculture interacts with urban-based transformative energies, and how the alternative economies thus shape the processes of rural development and urban-rural re-connection. The two contexts are also comparable from an agricultural point of view. Despite a significant urban sprawl around the two main centers and the presence of various other medium- and small-sized cities, the two areas preserve a significant degree of farming activity.

With the exception of the Greater Manchester area, the north-western region of England is indeed predominantly rural (Guiomar *et al.*, 2018). For climactic reasons, its agriculture is mainly based on livestock-dairy, even though Cheshire, located at the extreme south of the region, possesses a higher vocation towards

[67]The data that follow are sourced from the Eurostat website: https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat

horticultural production. In 2013, the average farm size in the area was 85[68] hectares, still very large when compared to Italy, but slightly smaller than the national average. The fieldwork for the Milan cases, instead, spanned across seven provinces[69] that are less rural in overall terms than north-western England, but in which many peri-urban farms have historically resisted thanks to pluriactivity and off-farm work (Salvioni *et al.*, 2014). The Lombard climate is not as adverse to agriculture as the British, but is not as optimal as in central and southern Italy. Also in this region, then, the main vocation is livestock and dairy production, and the cold temperature similarly reduces outputs during winter months. In Lombardy[70], in 2013 the average area of agricultural holdings was 23 hectares, significantly inferior to the figure for the Manchester fieldsite but almost double the Italian average.

My empirical research shows that in the two contexts farming trends are similar, but the interplay between production and consumption forces generates two distinct alternative economies, based on different patterns of de-commodification and ultimately resulting in a different prospect for the future development of the sector. A previous comparative study between the agricultural sector in Italy and Britain conducted by Morgan *et al.* (2010) detected interesting empirical differences in the modalities of rural development and outlined a framework inside which it is helpful to ground my own evaluation about the alternative food systems of the two countries. Morgan *et al.* compared the agricultural sectors and rural development models of Tuscany and Wales, looking at the differences in farmers' entrepreneurial and relational attitudes and highlighting related implications for the development of a pathway for rural progress. Their evaluations are based on the study of a sample of farmers for each region, representative of the *whole* agricultural sector in the two contexts, and therefore not focused on distilling the alternative practices realized by small-scale farmers.

They found that the common understanding enrooted in the Tuscan model of rural development is based on a conscious and shared appreciation for the relationships between food production, food quality and landscape, within a context in which an active networking activity provides strong commercial bonds between farmers, market channels and cooperative institutions. The Welsh model, instead, focuses on making farms viable and enhancing their contribution to a sustainable rural economy, in the frame of a looser and more detached networking environment and a local market that is less developed and sympathetic than that of Tuscany. As a consequence, to create this market Welsh farmers can count on less collaboration and networking opportunities but also enjoy less competition; subsequently they focus primarily on building their own specific market channel, more radically targeted to a specific consumer segment. Tuscan farmers, instead, have an easier time transforming identification with the locality into an identity asset to be used as a marketing tool, thanks to a more structured and networked environment focused on business relationships. Therefore, from an entrepreneurial point of view, Welsh producers tend to develop a set of skills mainly directed towards creating and evaluating a business strategy, whereas the Tuscans appear

[68] The source for this figure is a personal elaboration based on Eurostat data. It includes West Yorkshire, which doesn't belong to the EU statistical region of 'North-western England' but it was included because part of the empirical fieldwork.

[69] Namely Milan, Como, Lecco, Monza, Cremona, Lodi and Pavia.

[70] Unfortunately, no specific data about the provinces of my fieldwork were available.

to rely more on skills enabling them to network and utilize contacts, as well as to recognize and realize opportunities. In this, the possession of Pyysiäinen *et al.*'s (2006) 'meta-level' skills rather than 'functional' skills seems to be emphasized, because rather than on salesmanship and marketing Tuscan farmers' efforts are directed towards gaining access to resources, pursuing business opportunities even if resources are scarce, networking and cooperating with other stakeholders.

These different premises, deriving from environmental circumstances, are also detectable in my two fieldsites, and contribute to the definition of the situation of the alternative farmers and of the alternative food economies in the Milan and Manchester areas. By adding the layer of analysis of 'alternativeness', though, it is possible to provide a more detailed account of the transformative processes occurring in the two fields of my study, whose potential trajectories are dependent on the subtly distinct orientations that the process of de-commodification assumes in the two contexts. To delve into this issue, however, we have to call into question the ways food is elevated as a socially-relevant object in the two countries. In England food is employed as an instrument to create social cohesion, re-skill individuals and ultimately enhance the welfare of communities. In Italy food has a stronger value *per se*, thus social resistance is aimed at safeguarding the cultural heritage attached to food and preserving the actors of its supply chain, i.e. the producers. This translates into a higher propensity for Italian farmers to engage in social activities, and to entrust their economic reproduction to more 're-socialized' spaces. The English farmer, on the contrary, is keener on finding alternative ways to produce a (new) value-added that is susceptible to market exploitation. As a consequence, the farming transition in England appears more prone to adapt to market circumstances, making the production of benefits for the territory less pronounced. The next sub-section will expand this analysis, showing the different approaches exhibited by AFNs in the two countries and how these intertwine with de-commodification and farmers' entrepreneurialism.

7.1 *Food to tackle community issues* vs *community to tackle food issues*

The key to understanding the differences between the alternative food economies being developed in (and around) Milan and Manchester is to be found in the dissimilarities characterizing the dispositions and practices of AFNs in the two areas, which are a reflection of local consumers' prioritization of the problems affecting the food system – especially 'critical' consumers, which represent the bulk of the membership of alternative schemes. In turn, such dissimilarities shape the process of collective learning and skills acquisition by both consumers and farmers, and therefore affect the latters' entrepreneurial expressions within both the alternative and the conventional economies.

In general, English AFNs and food-related organizations seem to be more motivated to (or able to) *use food to address community problems*, whereas their Italian counterparts tend to *use community to address food problems*. The distinction is substantial, especially for what concerns the spaces of opportunity that AFNs open up for producers. The Italian schemes appear to be geared towards building and sustaining a bridge between production and consumption, having

their pillars on economic solidarity and community commitment to set up and run an innovative economic model, with the ambition to create a real alternative market for local and sustainable food production. In concrete terms, then, the priority is put on addressing the distortions of the food market through collective action, mobilizing resources to create spaces of 'resistance'. In addition, although I witnessed a varied mix of successes and failures, the general trend in the Italian field appears to be of consolidation, especially thanks to the means offered by digital technologies. The proliferation of GAS (in their 'classic' or 'technological' form) and farmers' markets stands out as a proof of such phenomenon.

In the UK field, on the contrary, food-related schemes are more centered on increasing the welfare of communities by leveraging on food. A renewed interest in food invests the whole country, exactly like in Italy, and the re-discovery of the social and political relevance of concepts such as food justice and local production is a feature that increasingly inspires social action. Nevertheless, the majority of organizations or networks – even those operating at the national level – promote local action with the main purpose of fostering community ties by attempting to transfer knowledge regarding food growing and cooking and engaging residents in collective projects. The loss of food skills and food conviviality is a timely issue in the country, and AFNs' vision thus proposes to employ the aggregative strength of food as an instrument to resist the disruption of social bonds among individuals in the local community. For these reasons, economy-focused AFNs are less diffused, whereas initiatives that are centered on the aspects of sociality that revolve around food enjoy a much larger membership, like in the cases of community gardens, urban agriculture and food-themed community hubs.

In Italy, de-skilling and individualism in communities are less felt as societal concerns. Hence, the solidarity practiced by AFNs is oriented towards food producers rather than bent in onto community itself. These social groups are aware that a certain type of food producers are facing the risk of disappearance. At the same time, Italians enjoy a larger pool of food culture- and tradition-related common resources, and a more participated food culture that acts to socially-validate a whole set of consumption preferences in which elements related to gastronomy and culinary satisfaction become important contributions to lifestyle and well-being. The resistance of artisanal small producers then becomes not only a matter of social justice but also a symbol of moral-political opposition to the depauperization of common conditions of life for individuals in the modern day. The practice of solidarity that results, as noted by Vitale and Sivini (2017, p. 277) in their study on the alternative food economy in Sicily, has "an ideal and even political character for social actors, but no ideological and abstract meanings. Rather, it is constituted as a material connection, embodied in the practice of a collective intelligence. A rationality that refers to a founding principle: the awareness that the existence of each is the condition for a different mode of existence for all".

As a consequence, in my Italian fieldwork the potential to involve agriculture in innovative economic circuits appears greater, as confirmed by empirical data: many of the farms I studied are able to avoid the conventional chain (at least for the most part), and market all their production through alternative channels. In

England, on the contrary, this appears to be true only for a limited number of cases (mainly vegetables productions marketed through successfully-managed box schemes), because the networks don't seem to be powerful or focused enough to uphold a market innovation.

In addition, on the alternative food scene in the city of Milan, the existence of a 'class of alternative producers' is detectable. Despite having been randomly selected, most producers I interviewed apparently know each other, mainly because they sell their products in similar ways and often even through the same AFNs, whether farmers' markets, purchasing groups or online AFNs. In spite of the heterogeneity of these networks in the city, AFNs providers thus tend to come from a (relatively) restricted group of local small-sized farmers, who have found their way inside the Milanese alternative economy more successfully than others. Conversely, in the northwest of England the greater dispersion of local food system energies does not allow for the emergence of a similarly definite cluster of producers actively engaged in the alternative. Geographically-close farmers have knowledge of each other and may also be engaged in some sort of collaboration, but this appears to be more the effect of good 'neighborhood relations' than the outcome of a coherent system of actors working towards a common objective.

British farmers are well aware of the characteristics of economic detachment of many schemes in the country, and as a consequence know they can't rely on them to make a living. To propose an example, let's analyze the comment of UK7 on *Incredible Edible*, one of the most successful food-related schemes in the UK. Incredible Edible is a network that was born in Todmorden, Yorkshire, with the purpose of bringing people together through actions around local food, especially practicing food growing in public places in order to enhance food self-sufficiency and strengthen community relations. From 2008, the year of its foundation, the movement rapidly scaled out from this small village in rural Yorkshire, and now has more than one hundred local groups in the UK and more than one thousand in the rest of the world[71]. UK7's pig farm is located in Todmorden, so she has had direct contacts with the initiators of the movement and has directly witnessed their concrete actions from the beginning, as well as the movement's dramatic ascent. Despite the local food rhetoric, she reckons Incredible Edible is detached from the economic world and that its action points to a different direction:

> "They're just a bunch of hippies. They believe the world has to be just all about sharing and, you know, if you ask them they don't actually think about 'well, in order for me to feed so many people I need to actually work hard, and make profit', they just do it because they like the process, they like the whole idea [...], so it's more about the interaction. For the people who are lonely, mentally struggling, they get together, they talk, it's good from that perspective, that's very good. [...] I think that British food initiatives are more like this, more focused on the community level than other countries' food initiatives, which are more commercial" (UK6, 55, female)

While she criticizes the economic ineffectiveness of this 'bunch of hippies', UK6

[71]Source: Incredible Edible website, https://www.incredibleedible.org.uk/organisation-information/, accessed 1 September 2018

emphasizes the strong beneficial effects the movement provides to the community, whose web of relations is reinforced. This results in a greater ability for the community to educate and take care of its members, thus generating a sense of belonging and collective well-being. The creation of a safety net increases the resilience of the community, as indicated by the reaction of the people of Todmorden to a flood that struck the area a few years before. It is still reported by UK6, who noted a stark difference between the cohesion of the community of Todmorden in reacting to the flood, with respect to the neighboring village of Hebden Bridge:

> "Incredible Edible in Todmorden is very strong, to the point that when we flooded, and Hebden flooded, they didn't have a community to come together and to help each other: they asked our community to feed people, to give them clothes, to take them to houses and stuff. In Todmorden we didn't have a problem with that, and that is partially because of Incredible Edible, because it brings together people of all levels of society: rich and poor and homeless and businessmen... it makes people do things together, for the greater good of community. And so they care better, the children care better" (UK6, 55, female)

Apparently, then, the strength of these networks is not to realize a de- commodification of food production – which is instead what the producers-consumers alliance in the Italian field attempts to do – but to put forth a de-commodification of the *welfare* state (Mingione, 2018) or, suggestively, a de-commodification of care, obtained through food-centered social practices. This constitutes a good prospect for cultural progress, since it predicates the centrality of food in community-level interactions, which is a process of food re-socialization in its full right. The (re-)internalization of food into circuits of cultural and social reproduction may eventually spill over into economic issues, organizing into a coherent form the impulses of a change that, for the moment, are dispersedly oriented towards a multiplicity of directions. Nonetheless, the state of the art gives British small-scale producers fewer opportunities than their Italian colleagues to escape the purely capitalist market. If they're not able to diversify their activity or add to their products or services a value which is appreciated by the capitalist market – such as home delivery or a product with special distinctive features; in other words: filling a niche – they are condemned to perish.

This major distinction between Italian and English AFNs has an effect on producers' entrepreneurialism and the modalities of their 'alternativeness'. Including these two lenses into the comparative analysis of farmers' innovations will help us to understand the rationale of their actions, as well as the characteristics and potential of the economies they contribute to creating.

Regardless of the different orientations of the actors of the alternative food scene, in fact, producers' strategies in both countries are rooted in common ground. In short, they are centered on producing more value-added that, thanks to direct chains, can be retained by producers and not intercepted by other players. The agents operating in the alternative economy (consumers, AFNs, associations, and so on) not only facilitate the economic process of value-added appropriation by producers, but also contribute to the very creation of value-added, by building and stimulating a demand for the symbolic and cultural qualities of food. In this

sense, both the 'capitalistic' and 'de-commodified' values of food are incremented (see section 6.3.4, p.165).

The two geographical contexts differ for the fact that in the Italian field the production of the 'de-commodified' portion of food value and its economic exploitability by producers are both greater. This is simultaneously the cause and the consequence of the empirically-evident greater disposition of producers and consumers in Italy to build *relational* networks of *business* support. The dynamics by which 'de-commodified' value is generated and used are indeed highly dependent on the relational intensity among the actors involved. Therefore, the lower the relational exchange, the lower the chances to create and exploit 'de-commodified' value. Subsequently, the impracticability of one strategy increases the soundness of the 'other option' provided by food re-socialization, embodied in the strategy that instead aims to maximize the creation of 'capitalistic' value-added and to optimize the means of its exploitation. Business innovations such as the development of a niche product, the offer of a wider range of customer services (such as deliveries), or multifunctionality of a 'market' type (e.g. on-farm cafés, caravan parks, etc.) are in fact directed to increase the 'capitalistic' value of farm production, as opposed to, for example, the development of multifunctionality of a 'social role', such as the organization of educational or social on-farm projects[72] . Similarly, means of optimization of 'capitalist' value-added appropriation include selling through a box scheme or targeting restaurants and organic (specialty food) shops, rather than directing one's activity to consumer groups (such as GAS), which instead reveals an intention to optimize the appropriation of 'de-commodified' value.

In simple words, the more noticeable reliance of English 'alternative' farmers on capitalistic market instruments for the propagation of their products and services is explained by the lack of sufficient social support (S. L. Morgan *et al.*, 2010), which in the fieldwork appears to come short both in its absolute magnitude and in its stability over time. However, British producers have less competition and more chances to succeed by opting for a niche marketing strategy; which is why they focus their entrepreneurial efforts on targeting a specific segment (*ibid.*) within the framework of the conventional market. On a broader level, though, this shows that the potential for innovative agriculture in the country to set the basis for the consolidation of a fairer food system is weaker.

Italian farmers instead exhibit a greater 'social' agency, defined as the capacity to process social collective experience and to implement autonomous projects accordingly (Van der Ploeg, 2008). This assigns them the potential to be an active part of a mechanism geared towards a more radical democratization of the food system. This assumption is also corroborated by the empirical finding of my study that the business strategy of strengthening the links between farm (activities) and society does not only entail an economic return, but also gratifies farmers by investing them with a larger, more important, social role, which is increasingly recognized by larger segments of the population and by their representative institutions (Fonte and Cucco, 2015; Borrelli *et al.*, 2017b).

[72]For a more detailed account of the different types of multifunctional farming I detected during my fieldwork, see section 6.1.3.

Despite the hypotheses of cooption that the diffusion of alternative practices would inevitably entail, the stronger citizens-farmers alliance that is detectable in Italy stands more chances to advance a tangible transformation of the food system. The hegemonic market will most likely never be overthrown, but it is foreseeable that, if the appropriate institutional support is provided, a 'truly' alternative food market ruled by its own logics could emerge, running parallel to the mainstream channels, neither in competition nor in symbiosis with the conventional market.

In England, by contrast, the ground for such a transformation will not be set unless progress in the cultural process of collective learning about food will be realized, and the deeper meanings of food – as a cultural object as well as a center of gravity for interventions in the fields of sustainability, sovereignty and social justice – will be incorporated as elements of collective intelligence. The utilization of food as an instrument of de-commodification of welfare that is currently ongoing in Britain acts already in this direction. Other promising scenarios are related to the fact that the number of organizations structured to compete with supermarkets (such as food coops) is increasing, that community gardens and other forms of amateur food growing (including urban agriculture) are spreading, and that the notion of 'buying local' is increasingly penetrating the sphere of public opinion. Yet, the integration of a system of factual collaborations between producers and consumers will require a huge effort from the actors involved in order to sensitize the citizenry and demand favorable regulation.

In the next section I will argue that in order to increase the effectiveness of the innovations that are occurring in the small-scale farming sector in both countries, it will be crucial to integrate these two processes – cultural progress and public intervention – at the national as well as local level.

7.2 Market power and cultural change: consumers, policy, and the city

During my ethnographic exploration of the alternative food economy in Milan and Manchester, I met many activists and AFNs organizers, engaged in various activities to restore the connection between people and food and defend local agriculture. In Milan, an activist once told me that "there are two spirits animating the organization of alternative food networks: fighting the conventional system with the force of market, or organizing capillary initiatives to promote cultural change"[73]. These two souls are in fact currently shaping the characteristics of the alternative food economy, and they coexist in the field, feeding into each other and mutually reinforcing each other's outcomes. This happens in both countries of my study, even if so far the innovations in England are more directed towards increasing the market power of small producers, while in Italy a stronger cultural movement centered on food is detectable, and therefore 'resistance' to the farming crisis is more prominently being enacted through relational channels.

Whatever the circumstances, though, these two directions should be followed

[73]Source: fieldnotes.

jointly if the objective is to contrast the disappearance of small-scale farming and put forward the transition to a fairer and more sustainable food system. Market-oriented devices and cultural innovation should be implemented simultaneously because, in the light of the prominence of corporate interests in the governance of the food system, there appears to be no alternative to a pragmatic incremental approach (Hassanein, 2003) to the transformation of the food economy. The likelihood of a radical shift in production-consumption patterns is indeed hard to conceive, especially in the critical era of the Anthropocene, in which, in addition to food, many fundamental aspects of human life are facing disruption and impoverishment (Patel and Moore, 2017). Nevertheless, the phenomena analyzed in my study suggest that transformative energies are lively and, albeit entropic and scarcely coordinated, have potential to re-configure food-related consumption routines and practices and create spaces for fairer economic reproduction. To meet such objectives, it is foreseeable that alternative food practices will have to win the favor of consumers and, concurrently, the 'participation' of public institutions. Only through the joint effect of higher consumer awareness and application of protection policies will it be possible to create a fertile cultural and economic ground upon which to enroot new production-consumption arrangements.

Consumers in Italy and in England, as has been analyzed throughout the work, have a different approach to food. The Italian farmers of my study perceive Italian consumers to be generally knowledgeable about food, focused on food quality and interested in its provenance, but also at times excessively demanding. They maintain a material relation with food, which they often want to 'touch' and evaluate before buying, therefore being wary to purchase online or without physical interaction. For these reasons, they are not prone to immediately accord absolute trust to the producer, but when producers succeed in winning their trust they may become effective supporters of small farms, as demonstrated by the many accounts of satisfaction deriving from direct exchange that farmers reported in the interviews. In some cases, customers of small farms are seen in an extremely positive way, as 'heroes' making sacrifices to feed their families healthy quality food (see section 6.2.2, p. 156), while in other cases the individualistic aspect of food procurement prevails and the practice of solidarity may be undermined.

Consumers in England are instead portrayed by English farmers as less knowledgeable and less skilled in what concerns food. In fact, several interviewees in the English fieldwork describe their customers as those individuals 'who still cook', which is not an element that can be taken for granted in an environment in which consumer culture tends to maximize convenience and time-management. Despite mounting concerns about locality and environmental protection currently making their way into the mainstream, the majority of the population seems less interested in food narratives, i.e. the stories and the sets of conditions behind food production, and is subsequently more difficult to engage in a food-centered dialogue. An explanatory insight is provided by UK12, who grows a special type of lamb – a *terroir* product, since this lamb pastures on the salt marsh that is a unique geographical feature of the coast of northwestern England, and therefore acquires peculiar organoleptic characteristics – and also runs a café on his farm where the product is served. He finds that there is a growing demand for this specialty lamb; but less people are buying it as an ingredient, rather what they

want to purchase are ready-cooked meals:

> "The café is very busy, but I sell less fresh lamb than I did ten years ago. Most goes through the café, [...] people seem to want convenience as much as anything. There's more people buying our ready-cooked meals to take home with them, than the fresh. They want to try the salt marsh lamb but they don't want to cook it" (UK12, 56, male)

For similar reasons, the product of 'alternative' farmers is seen (and treated) by British consumers as a luxury, rather than as a compromise between quality (in a broad sense, also accommodating positive externalities) and cost. The very essence of direct sales is embodied in the possibility for both the producer and consumer to enjoy a better compromise, the former receiving a higher price than in the conventional market, and the latter paying a lower price for the same quality than he or she would pay in the conventional market. Nevertheless, during the austerity crisis of the late 2000s the business of my English interviewees followed the same destiny as the luxury market, with people cutting expenses of the likes of salt marsh lamb and free-range pork sausages; whereas in Italy 'alternative' food businesses seemed to go in an anti-cyclical direction, denoting a prevalence of consumer trends over financial limitations[74].

This distinction in the substance of consumers' attitudes and values is crucial to inform appropriate processes of cultural progress, which appear indispensable in both countries if the objective is to advance the local food system agenda. To be 'saved', a certain type of societally desirable agriculture must indeed be effectively integrated into society itself. The development of effective alternative food channels is in fact intimately associated with issues of social capital (Nelson *et al.*, 2013); and as demonstrated, farmers are more willing to partake in civic networks of food exchange if they feel socially recognized and accepted (Charatsari *et al.*, 2018).

It is important to promote the education of people, especially of the new generations, which are those who will inherit a problematic situation and who are already being slowly sensitized to issues of food re-connection. In this respect, indeed, the 'lost generations' are the middle ones, made of individuals born in the 60s and the 70s, which are the least represented among the customers of the producers I met in the two countries. In both contexts, the clientele of 'alternative' farmers tends to be composed mainly of the least food-dis-connected segments of society, namely elderly individuals who seek products with a similar taste to the food of their childhood, and young educated people who express a higher degree of interest in food and awareness of the detrimental aspects of productivism. The in-between generation is missing because it is composed of individuals who have been socialized within a context of abundance of cheap food, as highlighted by the account of the goat meat producer UK2, who calls it the 'supermarket generation':

> "If I look at my customer base, the only gap is that generation, the supermarket generation. So I get a lot of older people, wanting food

[74] Clearly, the crisis and economic austerity have also had an effect on the Italian food economy, as testified by the rapid growth in those years of discount supermarket chains offering super-cheap 'globalized' food, but most of my interviewees report not having particularly suffered the years of the crisis, which instead in some instances represented years of expansion for the new 'alternative' mode of their business.

> like food was when they were young, and I've got a lot of my age group, early-forties-late-thirties downwards, but we don't get high-forties-to-the-sixties age range, they don't come, because they were the generation who were brought up with supermarkets, wanting everything for nothing, wanting everything as easily as possible" (UK2, 40, female)

Young people are not only more susceptible to being engaged in the collective learning process required to make food re-connection emerge as a problem worthy of societal attention; they also are those who will come up with new ideas to overcome the barriers that hinder the development of AFNs and short chains, such as the exhausted thrust of volunteerism or the excessive logistical requirements producers face (see sections 6.2.1 and 6.2.2). They will likely do so by proposing new solutions in line with new societal trends, more suitable to the evolution of lifestyles and diffused practices. My research suggests that Italy is currently better positioned to aim for these goals, due to a (slightly) more favorable conjunction of common cultural traits, consumers' interests and institutional behavior. In the UK people are more detached from food in the triple social, cultural and economic bottom line, thus filling the gap appears more challenging; though some developments, such as the ongoing growth at record rates of organic food sales (Smithers, 2018), hold a promising prospect.

Simultaneously, on the other side, if the conventional system is to be fought by equipping alternative operators with more powerful market instruments, new policies need to be implemented and new institutions need to be created. The history of our food economy shows that the forces of free market have prompted the marginalization of the agricultural sector, especially of that portion whose revival is the object of the present work, causing standardization and diversity loss and systematically failing to incorporate the production of externalities (both positive and negative) into the price mechanism. On the altar of cheap food, many vital aspects of food production have been sacrificed. Therefore, playing by the rules of the free market, even if the behavior of actors is backed up by motives of fairness and sustainability, may not solve any problem, since, as Rundgren (2016) asserts, the last word on the functioning of markets will always be the preserve of dominant actors that will impose their profit-led view of what is fair and sustainable[75]. To democratize the market, the author continues, political actions of many kinds are needed, to limit the detrimental effects produced by the conventional system on the weaker players of the chain and to address the development of new initiatives, obtained through a re-allocation of research funds and a revision of tax and support measures (*ibid.*). Concurrently, "new institutions should be created, or old one revitalized, [...] some of them [...] organized by people directly, others by local or central governments" (*ibid.*, p. 118).

[75]To validate his argument, Rundgren (2016, p. 110) proposes to reflect on the market-oriented solidarity mechanism of Fairtrade, arguing that "[w]hen you buy a cup of coffee for € 2 the farmer gets a few cents for the coffee in that cup. If you buy a cup of organic and fair trade coffee the farmer will get a cent more. The farmer's income will increase, perhaps by an impressive 20-25%. Looked at from another perspective, however, you spend an extra 50 cents to increase the farmer's income by 1 or 2 cents. This begs the question of how efficient the market mechanism is in transforming consumers' willingness to pay for the direct or indirect benefits of a product into an increase in producers' income".

New national-level policies should be directed at small-scale producers, to facilitate the improvement of their self-perceived condition of 'helpless entrepreneurs' (Vesala and Peura, 2003) lacking political recognition and representation (see section 5.1.3), squeezed between an insufficient economic power and a bureaucracy of productivist inspiration, calibrated to the operations of the big players (see section 5.1.2). Regulation should aim to promote protection measures instead of further market liberalization (Marsden and Sonnino, 2008) and impede the free forces of market from resulting in sharp power imbalances and one-sided relationships, especially targeting the modalities of the commercial relation between primary producers and corporate retailers. A public administration that is more sensitized towards the issues of family farming will be less likely to implement operations like the ban on raw milk vending machines – which behind the mask of public health regulation resulted in favoring corporate milk processors (see section 5.1.2, p. 83). The responsibility of public administrations is to contrast these forms of oppression, which constitutes a major risk for the development of the alternative food economy. Farmers' awareness of such risk is portrayed by the father of ITA10, who 'snuck into' the interview I was carrying out with his daughter to offer his view on the system of direct sales:

> "I'm skeptical because I know that conventional operators will always be able to obstruct the functioning of alternative networks, if these start stepping on their feet. [. . .] If GAS will concretely become a thing, surely new regulation will come out – for example about refrigerated transport – that will hinder their work and put a brake on their development" (ITA10's father, around 60 years old)

In addition, the local-regional political system is crucial, because the horizon of action of small-scale agriculture is (or should increasingly become) local and territorial. In this sense, interesting introductions are predicted to derive from the front of urban food policies, around which an increasing multi-level institutional consensus is being built. In this field, the municipality of Milan with its 'Milan Urban Food Policy Pact' is trying to take the lead of the transnational urban food policy movement, even though to date the relative work appears still to be in a preparatory stage, with few effects visible on the ground. In the English area I studied, instead, no city council has noticeably included the development of a coherent framework of food policy on their agenda. Particularly suggestive is the hypothesis of the creation of food policy councils with the mandate of developing food policies and integrating them with other urban policy areas (Sonnino and Spayde, 2014). The analysis of pioneering examples of food policy councils suggests that they are meant to rely heavily on the involvement of civil society and on the implementation of participatory instruments (*ibid.*), therefore potentially embodying the type of new institution directly organized by people that Rundgren advocates (2016).

The city will likely be a critical arena for food system reformation in the years to come. The literature on rural development and AFNs indeed increasingly considers the urban as a site of dynamic creativity and experimentation where new political possibilities are realizable (Donald and Blay-Palmer, 2006). The transformation of the food system is seen to be led by a well-educated urban middle class that drives the interest in rural sustainability and demands produce grown close to home (Jarosz, 2008); therefore the city is framed as the *locus* where the concentration of a

critical mass of consumers liberates transformative energies that, on the one hand, are able to create unique niche opportunities (Donald and Blay-Palmer, 2006) and, on the other hand, spur the creation of governmental agencies and private organizations dedicated to support farmers and farmland preservation (Jarosz, 2008).

The proximity of small-scale farms to major urban centers is hence seen as a facilitating factor for producers who seek re-connection and practice alternative sales. This theoretical assumption is largely confirmed by my fieldwork, even though a more nuanced analysis seems to be required, in order to better grasp the essence of the phenomenon and make sense of various points of incongruity that have emerged. The following sub-section will attempt to describe the effect that urban features have on the innovations discussed, taking into account the differences detectable between the two fields.

7.2.1 *The 'city effect'*

My research work was not operationalized to explicitly investigate the interrelations between urbanity (as a concept as well as a social world) and farming innovations, but these constituted an indispensable part of the backdrop on which my specific research purposes were situated. As a consequence, the empirical work allows me to put forth some evaluations about the 'urban effect' acting on the phenomena I have been analyzing. Although, due to the limited scope of relevant data collection, they ought to be considered more suggestions for future research than empirical findings.

In the two fields I investigated, I detected clear signs that being positioned close to a large city is an advantage for farmers. In my study, the presence of Milan and Manchester is for many farmers key to their possibilities of resistance, because of the economic features traditionally associated with densely populated areas, in terms of numbers (demand, wealth, larger organizations) and dynamism (open mentality, receptivity to change, use of technologies). These elements mainly relate to the existence in the city of 'critical masses' enabling the creation of economic circuits that, in the realm of the studied phenomena, specifically translate into the presence of alternative channels. The effect of the big city is that these circuits are either 'large enough' to absorb the whole production of a small farm (like in the case of UK11, who sells all vegetables to only two channels in Manchester), or are widely diffused, thus becoming 'numerous enough' to allow farmers to sell all their production (like in the case of ITA15, who enjoys a wide array of alternative sales opportunities offered by Milan):

> "The proximity of Manchester does make a big difference. I don't quite know what the alternative would be if they [*the food coop and the organic wholesale market they supply*] weren't there. In the conventional system we wouldn't be making enough" (UK11, 65, male)

> "Being close to Milan is a great advantage. All the online sales[76], for example, wouldn't be there if we were just in, say, Lodi[77]. Also,

[76]He refers to the sales he realizes through a corporate box schemes that only serves the Milan area.

[77]Lodi is a neighboring municipality around 40 km away from Milan.

> Milano has a trailblazing open mentality, a catchment area of millions of people, there is a whole world of GAS" (ITA15, 32, male)

This last excerpt from ITA15 also helps to connect the analysis with the peculiar characteristics of urban food consumption. Parallel to issues of magnitude, in fact, urbanites show a greater sensitivity towards the products of a re-territorialized agriculture, and this is strategically recognized by farmers themselves as the outcome of a post-productivist movement that is developed and nurtured in cities. They realize that the success of their enterprises is linked to the cosmopolitanism of urban consumers (as ITA11 almost explicitly comments in his following quotation) and that their strategies should increasingly be oriented to target the urban population, which shows a higher receptivity to their value-laden products (as directly addressed by the mill-owner and special grains producer UK8):

> "It's an amazing advantage [...] because now in Milan you find many more people who are sensitive to the product we make" (ITA3, 33, male)

> "Being close to Milan is a huge advantage for us. Because it's a very important economic source. And because it's a crossroads of many people, many cultures, many ideas. It's a hub that in the last years is being renovated very rapidly. The fact that it's becoming a European capital is very important" (ITA11, 36, male)

> "You get young people who are more conscientious about products and what they eat, and you also get the money in areas like that. So I think for expanding the sales of the mill, I think we should push towards Manchester" (UK8, 30, male)

A series of benefits for farms located in the surroundings of big cities are thus undoubtedly acknowledged. At the same time, though, what in the field appears even more fundamental is the type of commercial intermediation between farmers and their customers. The crucial knot of the renovation of the small farming sector is arguably represented by intermediation: short chains have the precise purpose of substituting the mainstream form of intermediation (many steps along long chains dominated by powerful actors) with a reformulated type of commercial arrangement, directed either to eliminate any form of intermediation, like in the case of direct sales to the public, or to benefit from the work of middlemen who operate following different principles, like in the case of AFNs-mediated short chains. Such a commercial transformation, as we have seen, is facilitated by an ensemble of socio-economic practices and actors that tend to condensate in urban areas. The presence of a big city in the catchment area of a farm, though, is neither a sufficient nor necessary condition for the development of the farm business within the alternative economy. What the most relevant is instead the ability of farmers-entrepreneurs to create networks and procure a social basis of customers for their farms.

Except for some forms of (super) direct sales, which require the physical proximity of a sufficient amount of potential customers to be viable (such as farmshops, for instance), direct sales are indeed realizable also over longer distances. This

becomes feasible because direct sales are the cause and consequence of the reduction of the 'conceptual' ('mental') distance between producers and consumers, more so than they represent a reduction of 'physical' distance. Farmers indeed see alternative commercial arrangements as possible even without exploiting purely urban resources, in the conviction that, as ITA5 (32, male) puts it, "in the world there is surely more demand than you will ever be able to satisfy". UK3's box scheme provides empirical evidence to this point:

> "We serve a patch that roughly goes from Lancaster to Preston: there are no big cities in it. Nevertheless, I think our patch is big enough. [...] We managed to set up a successful business even trying to sell organic vegetables to small towns" (UK3, 60, male)

Here resides another potential area of public intervention. Besides facilitating the physical interactions of producers and consumers, policies should aim to foster the creation of intermediaries of a new kind, able to favor the connection with a larger audience while keeping in mind the interests of producers. In line with the findings of Smith (2006), who reports that UK farmers engaged in direct sales identify a need for new intermediaries, my interviewees frequently refer to the necessity to have subjects who relieve them of part of the burden of intermediation – both in the sense of promotion and physical handling of products – but without the greedy logic that characterizes the conventional chain players. The relevance of this observation increases along with the distance from the city:

> "If you are located at a greater distance, then you can't think that a zero-food-miles strategy is enough. At that point you need intermediation, but the important thing is to find an intermediary who speaks the same language. [...] Being close to Milan is surely an advantage, but if you have a peculiar product, distinctive, and you are able to narrate it, [...] then being close to a center becomes secondary" (ITA5, 32, male)

To complete the picture, it is also important to notice that some urban characteristics might as well constitute an obstacle to farm business development. Urban consumers have at their disposal a wide array of options to purchase their food, many of which are architected to provide a high level of service meant to fit the demand for convenience expressed by urbanites (24-7 supermarkets, for example). In the city context, therefore, farmers face impressive competition, which they have to overcome by adjusting their offer to fit the frenzied life of urban dwellers, although this principle often clashes with the prerogatives of food re-connection.

Also related to the specificity of urban consumption models, farmers who sell most of their production to a big city are heavily exposed to the seasonality of population presence in the city. In summer, indeed, in urban centers like Milan food demand is strongly reduced, because during the holiday season economic activities slow down as locals leave the city to go on vacation and the presence of other types of city-users (commuters and other business-related daytime population) (Nuvolati, 2002) decreases. The summer holiday season, though, coincides with farming peak season, creating a problem for farmers every year: in the moment during which the most abundant production is available, there are not sufficient people around to buy it. Some producers react by processing part of the production into

preserved food, while others resort to selling the surpluses to other channels at a lower price, even, if necessary, conventional ones. The characteristics of urban consumption, in this case, justify farmers' strategic choice of keeping a multiplicity of market outlets and, at times, hybridity between conventional and alternative sales.

In addition, peri-urban farms are constantly exposed to the threat of urbanization. Even as we witness a restoration of the relevance of peri-urban farming, to which a utility role as an urban function is increasingly being attributed, pressures for alternative land use of farming areas are still strong. In the past, the advancement of urbanization translated into land dispossession for many farmers, especially if they were not owners but tenants of land made suddenly more appealing for real estate development than food production. The few farmers in urban belts that didn't disappear had to engage in sometimes-harsh struggles to preserve their land, and surely they did not consider being close to the city a beneficial feature. ITA24's farm, for example, is located in what is now a neighborhood on the outskirts of Milan. He managed to resist, and now sees the opportunities that being so close to a subway station give him, but he remembers that his father had a different opinion:

> "My dad didn't see this proximity as an advantage, but as a disadvantage. Many farmers back then were trying to go away, thinking 'let's get out of here before others kick us away'" (ITA24, 65, male)

Today, the threat of land dispossession is probably lower, but farms close to urban centers still face a series of constraints deriving from their location. Over time, most of them have seen their land reduced for various reasons, and now their management costs are higher than in more deeply rural areas. Plans to expand their businesses are more difficult to implement, because possibilities to acquire more land are precluded (mostly because the surrounding land is built, not destined for agricultural production, or simply too expensive), or because their urban position makes it harder to obtain the necessary permission to renovate or modify the physical structure of the farm[78]. ITA24, whose residual farmland has in time become separated from the farmhouse due to urbanization, delivers a sense of the difficulties farming in a peri-urban position entails:

> "In Milan we have an agriculture with very high running costs compared to those who are further out, who maybe are owners, don't have to buy water. Outside it's easier. [. . .] To farm we make do, we survive, but maybe we are a little culturally ahead, because we understood the value of agriculture especially in a city like Milan, and this is rewarding. Not in money, though" (ITA22, 55, female)

Lastly, the differences between the two countries of my study with respect to the 'city effect' suggest that future research should take into account that different patterns of urbanization might produce a distinct impact on the modalities of urban-rural re-connection. In the Italian and English fields, in fact, I detected an opposite urban-spatial response to two types of alternative commercial devices, namely the Beehives and farmers' markets, although their formula is exactly the same in both contexts. In Italy, these two alternative channels are more effective

[78]In Milan, for example, most peri-urban *cascine* (farmhouses) are considered historical buildings, therefore no modification is allowed without the permission of local authorities.

in the city center, where they are able to attract a larger customer-base, than in towns or villages in the hinterland. In my English field, conversely, both Beehives and, more interestingly, farmers' markets work better in suburban areas than in the centers of big and medium-sized cities. The words of my interviewees make a clear case:

> "Assemblies[79] in city center don't work because, despite being more populated, they often lack car parking space, so it is easier to drive to supermarkets. People don't like to walk. When I moved my Assembly from Chester city center to Hoole [*a suburb of Chester*], the sales increased. And the same goes for farmers markets" (UK6, 55, female)

> "Now farmers' markets are a fad in the hinterland. But they struggle to work well because these villages are small. Many [farmers] give it a try and eventually quit. I keep doing the farmers' market in Abbiategrasso[80], but the number of producers has dropped by half. [...] In Milan instead they work well, they're very crowded" (ITA7, 50, male)

> "It's difficult not to sell in a [farmers'] market in Milan. Actually, many times we have to be the two of us selling, because you can't have people waiting too long. To the other markets [*in the hinterland*] instead I go alone" (ITA9, 57, male)

Understanding the interplay between different urban structures and food system issues exceeds the scope of my study, nevertheless it seems arguable that the highlighted different fortune of farmers' markets is to a certain degree related to the different density of Italian and British cities. In Britain, urban sprawl is more accentuated, whereas in Italy populations tends to be more concentrated in high-rise buildings, even in suburban areas. A different spatial distribution of the population might then call into question the need to adjust the characteristics of local food sales sites accordingly. I'll leave this consideration as a hint for a future research avenue.

In conclusion, the urban level is revealed to be a nascent field of reflection and intervention, which will likely increase its relevance for the governance of food system transition in the years to come. It has been a difficult dimension to explore, as the effect of urban food policies on the ground is still scarcely visible, and therefore the analysis of farmers' standpoint on the topic has been far from straightforward. Farmers are still not used to seeing the municipal policy-maker as an actor of their food system, hence they struggle to imagine the transformative capacity of this type of intervention and to suggest desired avenues. Nevertheless, there are various urban resources that municipalities and local authorities may manage for the benefit of small-scale farmers and to incentivize the construction of a fair local food system. These relate, among others, to the management of public spaces, which could be more easily conceded to farmers and food-related organizations to carry out their promotional and sales activities. Public food procurement is another important arena to foster local food production through

[79] She refers to Food Assemblies, also known as Beehives (see section 6.2.3).

[80] A town in the province of Milan, around 35 km from the city center.

the purchasing power of local administrations, which could introduce local food requirements in its food services contracts to supply publicly-owned sites such as schools and hospitals. Lastly, promotional and operational facilitation is pursuable at the urban level by incentivizing third-party actors to realize activities of 'fair intermediation', both to counteract the power imbalances among food chain agents and to facilitate certain types of operations, such as logistics.

Conclusions

Farmers who sell their products through direct or AFNs-mediated short food supply chains tend to be small or very small, with few exceptions for the cases of those producers whose scale of operations is slightly larger but never reaches the dimensions of their industrial-conventional counterparts. They also share a common characteristic: their activity appears to be motivated by a mix of desires and ambitions, many of which are extra-economic and run parallel to the economic orientation of the farm as a business. The choice of farming is often motivated by a desire to live a certain type of life and thus relates to the adoption of a specific lifestyle in which a strong interest in nature, the countryside, the soil and food is openly pursued. The human engagement is so high that, for these individuals, life becomes farming and farming becomes life.

From the point of view of their personal and professional trajectory, the farmers of my study tend to fall into one of the two categories illustrated by Corrado (2013, drawing on Van Der Ploeg (2008)) of 'new peasants' and 'converted agri-entrepreneurs'. The first are people coming from differentiated and agriculture-unrelated walks of life, who 'get back to the land' either because they want to find a way out of the precarious urban labour market, or in order to realize a substantial change in their lives and radically transform their lifestyles. Van Der Ploeg (2008) defines them as 'new peasants' because from their very entrance into the agricultural world they tend to adopt a peasant-like form of farming. The author defines peasant agriculture as being based on the sustained use of ecological rather than financial and industrial capital, and more geared towards the defense and improvement of the farming family's livelihood than to the market. In peasant-like farming, labour is generally provided by the family and resources can be mobilized either through the market and/or through relations of reciprocity within the local community (*ibid.*).

Demographically, 'new peasants' tend to be either young people (around 30 years old) who were struggling to find a stable occupation in the city and opted to get involved in a farming venture, or older professionals and white collars (more than 50 years old) who decided to quit an unsatisfactory job to seek a new expression of life.

Conversely, the converted agri-entrepreneurs are people who have always been involved in agriculture, most commonly because they inherited a family farm and the burden of running it. The businesses they found themselves managing were normally conventional and market-oriented intensive farms, falling under the category Van Der Ploeg (2008) labels as 'entrepreneurial agriculture'. Entrepreneurial

farms are built upon financial and industrial capital and their production is specialized and completely oriented towards the market, while constantly aiming at expansion of activities and scale enlargement (*ibid.*). In this type of farming – which has come to be the most prevalent model in the countries I visited, so much so that I also refer to it as 'mainstream' or 'conventional' – labour processes are partially industrialized and multiple types of market dependency are detectable, especially on the side of inputs.

Due to the current systemic crisis and the exhausted viability of the entrepreneurial farming model, these producers have undergone (or are undergoing) a 'conversion' of their business model to a more peasant-like form of farming. Such 're-peasantization' consists of a process of *de-industrialization* of the agricultural firm and a *downshifting* of the scale of its economic operations. It entails a transformation of farming practices, which now aim to produce a better quality and a lesser quantity, obtained through an increase of labour-intensity and a decrease of mechanization. De-industrialization is a key aspect in the world of small-scale farming, whether it takes the form of 'actual' de-industrialization or it simply embodies a 'conceptual' resource. With the notion of 'actual' de-industrialization I refer to a completed concrete transition from a previous way of farming to a new one, from industrial-intensive methods to 'alternative' low-intensity practices. 'Conceptual' de-industrialization instead represents the internalization of the same underlying principles in the *modus operandi* of new farmers, who launch their business already equipped with an alternative mental disposition. In both cases, de-industrialization and downshifting are a reflection of an imperative to develop a new productive attitude that dissociates itself from the industrial mode and sets the basis for a new peasant agriculture better prepared to resist the incumbent food system crisis.

My research suggests that this process also entails a radical transformation of the producer's commercial strategy: dealigning production practices from the needs and mechanisms of the conventional food chain calls for a search for new market avenues for farm products, ones that may enable the farmer to appropriate a greater share of value-added and involve a lesser degree of market-dependency. This is where short chains and AFNs come into play: their underlying functional logics and operational mechanism support the trend (to a certain extent and with significant differences which are context-dependent) of the development of a different agriculture, which is characterized by a focus on quality, follows a less accentuated industrial pattern, and is arguably more socially and environmentally sustainable.

Whether 'new peasants' or 'converted agri-entrepreneurs', the producers selling through AFNs and direct chains share a series of features. As said, their economic scale tend to be small or smaller than in the past, and their farming style tends to be similar, as it aims to produce sustainable (and often, but not always, organic) food, privileging the employment of physical work over invested financial resources. In addition, their businesses are geared towards selling the produce locally and directly (as much as possible) to the end consumer. Furthermore, from a personal point of view, a very strong commitment and passion for their work and lives as farmers appears generally coupled with their orientation towards

maximizing *satisfaction* and *autonomy* rather than profit. Profit and economic viability are surely crucial elements, but don't appear to be reckoned as the ultimate goal of their farming businesses, or the main motivation inspiring their action. Rather, what 'alternative' farmers seek is the possibility to live a satisfactory and meaningful life, which is obtained by doing a job they're passionate about, being constantly outside and in contact with nature, eating good food and making other people happy with their products and, lastly, being free from external crushing or conditioning forces.

In fact, their representation of farming life is defined by an awareness that life as farmer is made of hardships and continuous struggle, and frequently reaches the point of self-exploitation, while at the same time remaining able to provide satisfaction. The reason is not only connected to the perception of freedom, but also to a sense of personal reward that derives from the act of the creation of good food that is proposed to and appreciated by the public.

To better grasp small farmers' attitudes and objectives, I analyzed the modalities of their *entrance* into *farming*, i.e. the dynamics following which their life decisions regarding farming were taken, and the main motivations backing those decisions. By looking at my interviewees' trajectories, I developed a typology to illustrate the ways they got involved in agriculture. I found that the producers in my study began farming: because they a) joined their family farm at the beginning of their working career or later in life; or to take b) a decision of passion, motivated by love for agriculture or by a desire to have good food; or because they were c) unsatisfied with other jobs, or for the lack thereof; or due to a combination of more than one of the previous items.

Deepening the knowledge of family farmers' trajectories assisted the analysis of their ways of reacting to the crisis of farming, which affects the whole sector but inflicts the most serious consequences on smallholders. Instead of assuming an external standpoint, I provided an illustration of the farming crisis from the internal point of view of my interviewees, who report having to deal with a deep crisis of profitability caused by increasing costs and lowering returns, while being embedded in a hostile political-regulatory environment. They perceive a lack of political recognition in a system in which legislation seems to be architected to favor big groups and powerful operators of the food chain and is thus unable to protect them from the adverse effects of the globalization of markets.

Even the players of the large distribution, i.e. supermarkets and wholesalers, are no longer a reliable commercial partner for small farmers. The enormous power they have accumulated in the last decades allows them to offer collaborations to suppliers that are often one-sided and very risky for the weaker party. The farmers of my study are well aware of the difficulties of collaborating with the players of the conventional chain, especially big supermarket companies, whether they have had (or still have) a direct relationship with them or not. Such difficulties emerge out of strongly marked power imbalances resulting in relations of accentuated market dependency to the detriment of the players of the agricultural steps of the chain, since the commercial relationship (and therefore the economic outcome) is not secure and involves a high degree of uncertainty.

As a response to the crisis, then, a new course of action for agriculture is inaugurated. In order to resist, and reproduce their wellbeing as farmers, small producers have to develop innovative strategies, which, in general, prompt a separation from the conventional food system and its *habitus*. Whether they have concretely 'de-industrialized' their farms or have created an agricultural business already within a post-industrial paradigm, innovative agriculture calls for a thorough transformation affecting three distinct, yet interrelated, spheres of activity: production, commercialization and social relations.

The productive mentality is shifted from a yield-maximization mindset aimed at producing the highest possible output of anonymous commodities, to one directed at creating and maintaining optimal conditions for food production by taking care of its productive factors (soil, plants, animals, people). The focus shifts to producing quality, and the fundamental strategy is to develop ways to create and retain more value-added. The empirical evidence that I gathered on the field suggests that this goal is mainly realized following three lines, which in addition frequently overlap: producing a specialty food with peculiar organoleptic properties to address a market niche; diversifying production in order to be present on the market with a wider offer; processing raw materials into final foods internally or through contractors, and labeling the production with a self-brand to obtain a better price.

These new productive arrangements are paired with strategies focused on enhancing the ecological value of farming (among which the conversion to organic production) and offering multifunctional services, of a leisure, tourism, social or educational nature. Ecology and multifunctionality act as complementary strategies that strengthen the project of value-added creation by adding new ways to satisfy the demands of society. In the post-productivist era farms are required to be more than sites of food production, and a series of food- and rural-space-based additional services are increasingly being demanded. For farmers, trying to satisfy as many societal expectations as possible translates into enjoying more chances to obtain social recognition and, subsequently, value-added appropriation. This also means that the processes of downshifting and de-industrialization can't be seen as producing a simplification of farms, as these farms are rather transformed into more complex rural enterprises engaged in the production of new products and services, becoming multi-product firms operating within different socio-economic spaces and markets.

The nexus of innovation for farmers in the alternative economy, though, lies in the transformation of their modes of commercialization. Despite being visible also in the innovations of product, the core of their 'alternativeness' is enrooted and becomes manifest in the development of new marketing orientations, which are an expression of farms' specific conditions (type of product, location), farmers' other strategies (multifunctionality, branding, global attractiveness of the farm) and personal beliefs regarding the market and the food system in general. Selling in short chains implies the abandonment of intermediated long commercial chains and the adoption of direct methods of sales, which are realized by either catering directly to the public without any form of mediation, or through the solidarity-

oriented intermediation operated by AFNs such as purchasing groups, food coops and other organizations of consumers.

Approaching the consumer in direct ways allows farmers to put 'a face and a story' behind a food product and therefore translates a whole set of societally desirable characteristics of farming activity into economic advantage, while mutually reinforcing the aspects of sustainability and resilience of the small-scale farming sector. By performing direct sales farmers affirm their presence, become social actors and position themselves to receive forms of support that are not based on market mechanisms but conversely act as correctors of market distortions and inequalities, operating directly on economic conditions (a higher price is paid), or indirectly to protect farmers from market adversities, by reducing their business risk or buffering them in order to facilitate the development of innovations.

Concurrently, direct commercialization increases the complexity of activities and tasks that farmers are called to perform to create their personal mix of market channels and negotiate their positions with stakeholders. Many activities regard areas that do not traditionally belong to the agricultural capacity, thus requiring a restructuration of the mentality and attitude of farmers, the possession of new skills, and the capacity to process varied and more complex activities. Above all, farmers are required to possess a set of relational skills to help them fruitfully interact with consumers, colleagues-producers and all the other stakeholders of the alternative food economy. The stereotypical image of the farmer as an individualistic, peevish person, reluctant to open the farm gates to the public and to coordinate his/her activity with anyone else, can't exist any longer in the reality of the 'new' small-scale local agriculture. In addition, digital technologies and online social networking are increasingly utilized as instruments to establish, exercise and maintain such connection. As a consequence, producers are increasingly expected to master these techniques, which are rapidly becoming tools of agricultural business in their full right.

In the distinct attitude towards the diverse direct sales channels and in the deployment of relational skills lies an important difference between the farmers of my two fieldsites. Although emphasis on the patterns of producer-consumer re-connection is a common feature of both countries, English farmers maintain an 'ourselves alone versus the market' mindset, therefore elements such as autonomy and room for maneuver are more strongly sought after. Their strategic priority, as a consequence, is to develop a business model that can attract customers, whereas in Italy farmers show a stronger tendency to address issues of resistance and seek support for their innovations through cooperation - that is, getting involved in nets of stakeholders collaborating towards a common goal. What results, then, is that among the various alternative channels Italian farmers privilege those that have a more marked social component, while in England producers tend to prefer those channels that grant a higher degree of autonomy and require less interpersonal negotiation.

Despite these empirically detected differences, the deep nature of alternative farmers' entrepreneurialism is shared. The alternative economy, in general, multiplies opportunities provided to farmers, and is characterized by a high dynamism.

New paths open up continuously, defining new potential trajectories for business development, but many of them are risky and uncertain. In both countries, my interviewees follow attentively the evolution of their local food system, and evaluate it through the lens of their *value-inspired pragmatism*: the 'alternative turn' that innovates their working environment meets their ideological position but at the same time is framed as a pragmatic opportunity to tackle the crisis of profitability that threatens their businesses. Therefore they adopt a very cautious entrepreneurial spirit, implementing incremental changes and waiting for a loop of positive feedback to reduce uncertainty before taking a further step.

The *cautious entrepreneurship* of alternative farmers is explained as the outcome of the interplay of a traditional farming business orientation (reluctance to change), a more pronounced relational disposition (ideological stance), and the characteristics of the alternative economy in which farmers are embedded. Farmers enter the alternative economy with the purpose of obtaining autonomy, which is increasingly constrained in the conventional system. They are thus called to develop an active entrepreneurialism in order to gain personal control over their business choices and acquire the ability to navigate the opportunities furnished by the alternative economy, which has a dynamic and multi-stakeholder nature. Simultaneously, the complexity of the alternative scene and the need to constantly negotiate between multiple interests suggest farmers to protect themselves from the risk of losing room for maneuver, which they have been able to conquer precisely thanks to the alternative economy. They avoid situations that could potentially undermine (again) their autonomy and cautiously advance their business through small achievable goals in order to obtain resilience while focusing on the protection of their families' well-being.

These goals are achieved by extending a greater relational effort, which is systematized and condensed into an *'openness* project' in which both Italian and English producers partake, albeit in different modalities and with different outcomes. This project springs out of the acknowledgement that in the post-productivist society a fundamental component of the innovative spirit that is required to farm on a small-scale relates to increasing the farms' levels of receptivity towards the external world. This is not only practiced by 'opening the gates' and attracting stakeholders to the farm, but also by bringing the values and the assets of the farm outside, to be appreciated by a wide range of actors and subsequently carve out a new social relevance for farmers.

The principal instrument to carry out this renewed openness practice is *networking*, which therefore becomes a pivotal business tool. I analyzed the relational networks created by alternative farmers on three levels: networks with consumers; networks with other farmers and food producers; and networks with groups, associations, organizations (among which AFNs, food or ecology advocacy groups, and unions), institutions, and other firms bearing a direct or indirect interest in the food system.

Networking with consumers serves the purpose of providing farms with a customer base that is entrusting, 'like-minded' and sympathetic, with the awareness that a high relational density between producers and customers grants better protection from market uncertainty. Networking with other farmers and food producers aims

to create joint projects and collaboration for mutual business support that, in turn, have the potential to facilitate certain operations and assist in the development of new ideas and opportunities. Networking with other (non-food-producing) stakeholders also facilitates innovation and increases chances to be involved in projects and, in addition, points towards gathering sufficient aggregated strength to put pressure on public institutions and large private actors of the food chain in order to obtain larger spaces of opportunity.

This renewal of productive, commercial and relational orientations, which involves farmers as well as consumers and AFNs, can be considered an attempt to realize a *de-commodification* of the productive relations that are inherent in the current food economy. De-commodifying forces are envisaged because the economic relations that exist between food producers, distributors and consumers are re-internalized within a net of social relations. The product of alternative farmers is re-embedded within a network of interpersonal relations where product and producer cannot be separated, and so symbiotically contribute to the definition of the overall value. Forms of reciprocity and redistribution translate into symbolic values that emphasize both the characteristics of the product and of the producer. Specific production conditions addressing social issues are given weight and consideration, and the circulation of such products allows for the realization of multiple specific projects, which often have a redistributive nature.

However, de-commodification in the Marxian sense, i.e. the reversal of the process that transforms use-values into exchange-values, is not complete due to a high level of hybridity affecting both the actors of the exchange and the structure within which the exchange is realized. The overarching economic structure, indeed, is dominated by conventional capitalistic actors, and alternative sales employ capitalistic economic architectures for the realization of their objectives. Producers, for their part, are as pragmatic as (if not *more than*) consciously alternative and their mindset is sometimes still partly productivist. Consumers, instead, even if 'critical' or politically committed, are also partially motivated by issues of personal utility. What results is that the process of alternative food exchange is to be read as an initiative of *partial* de-commodification that, rather than transforming the very essence of value, produces an additional valorization of products and relations: on top of a 'capitalistic' value related to the intrinsic characteristics of the good or service (taste, appearance, freshness, 'culinary journey'), products and relations are attributed a 'de-commodified' value which is the condensation of their 'extrinsic' characteristics regarding production processes and labor, provenance, human and social attributes of the producers, political and ecological values, and so on.

This process entails a series of benefits for the farming sector, because it provides pragmatic responses to problems of sustainability of the food system and exerts a significant pressure pointing towards its democratization. But a partial de-commodification also exposes the whole alternative food economy to the risk of co-option, i.e. the re-appropriation of the positive effects of re-embedded food production practices and discourses by the actors of the conventional chain. In fact, perfecting the operations of short chains within a conventional infrastructure will on the one hand attract more customers and allow alternative initiatives to

scale-up, but at the same time increase opportunities for capitalistic exploitation of the phenomenon. In a hypothesis of *re-commodification*, the alternative food economy would lose its effectiveness as a system of social protection for farmers and of food sovereignty for consumers.

Empirical evidence suggests this risk is higher in the UK than in Italy. In the two areas of my study, indeed, the characteristics of the alternative food economy are significantly different. Their distinct configurations relate to the ways food is elevated as a cultural object and to the patterns of prioritization of consumers' preferences. In Italy food possesses a stronger value in itself, therefore social resistance is framed as a struggle to safeguard the cultural heritage of food and preserve the actors who are responsible for its production. Italian alternative food schemes, as a consequence, seem much more oriented towards building and sustaining a bridge between production and consumption, setting the priority on protecting producers from the distortions of the market through collective action and resource mobilization. Conversely, in England most food-centered initiatives employ food as an instrument to increase the welfare of communities, prioritizing the promotion of community well-being and internal solidarity, which is practiced through initiatives of knowledge transfer regarding food growing and cooking and engagement of residents in collective projects.

On average, the English schemes are directed to *use food-related resources to tackle community issues*, whereas Italian schemes deploy their *community resources to tackle food issues*. Conceived as simultaneously the cause and consequence of these different developments, farmers in my Italian field exhibit a higher propensity to be engaged in social activities, and are more willing to situate their economic reproduction in more 're-socialized' spaces, while English producers are primarily in search of alternative ways to produce a (new) value-added that is susceptible to market exploitation.

In Britain, producers receive less social support and therefore develop a lesser relational attitude. At the same time, and for the same reason, relying on capitalistic market instruments to propagate their products and services becomes the most suitable strategy for them, rather than entrusting the fortune of their businesses to a weaker system of relational spaces. Broadly speaking, then, the potential for the world of AFNs in England to set the basis for the consolidation of a fairer food system appears weaker.

In Italy, by contrast, the stronger citizens-farmers alliance activates a more intense production of the 'de-commodified' portion of food value, which circulates along the lines of relational networks. Farmers are therefore incentivized to take part in these networks, and by leveraging on their social skills they can access a wider range of business opportunities. In this sense, the chances for the Italian model to advance a tangible transformation of the food system appear greater.

In modern day Europe, to conclude, the small-scale farming sector occupies a peculiar position: on the one hand it is increasingly crushed by the predatory forces of the globalized food system, which, if left ungoverned, will likely erase every possibility for the survival of small farms; on the other hand, small-scale

sustainable farming is the object of growing societal and institutional attention, for it is considered indispensable in the transition towards a more human and environmentally-friendly mode of food production in the light of the incumbent food and climate crisis. This recognition is finding its way into the sphere of public opinion and is reflected in the discourse of representative institutions at various levels. Supra-national organizations and national governments are indeed becoming increasingly receptive towards issues of food sovereignty and related family farming protection, but it is at the local level that the most vibrant energies about food re-socialization and re-territorialization are detectable. It is especially in large urban centers that agriculture is being charged with a more rounded role as the provider of precious services to the collectivity. In the last years this process accelerated, as noted by the peri-urban farmer ITA24, who personally witnessed the evolution of the political weight of farming within the city context:

> "There's been a pretty radical change in the last ten-fifteen years, in the relation between agriculture and the rest of society. Agriculture has been re-discovered as a subject and actor of territorial development. Not just from the point of view of food production, but also social, ludic, mental, you name it. [...] It's been an overnight change. In the 80s when were going to complain, the then-mayor used to say 'you have to put up with it, because agriculture has to disappear from Milan'. Now the mayor says that the agriculture of Milan is a value that we have to preserve. [...] There's been a change also among simple people. Migrants in the 50s and 60s were escaping the countryside, so having it [*farmland*] in the city was a sign of poverty for them, they were not moved to pity if it was asphalted" (ITA24, 65, male)

The system of exchange created by the re-connection of producers and consumers, concretized in the archipelago of short supply chains and alternative food networks my research has been looking at, is still an ensemble of chaotic forces, attempting to create context-dependent solutions but at the same time dispersing energies in a multiplicity of directions. Its evolution, therefore, is hardly foreseeable. What is arguable is that in order to channel such energies into a more systematized development pathway, it will be crucial to simultaneously act on two levers, affecting the spheres of consumer culture and public policies.

An effort to educate consumers on food (in general), locality and sustainable food production (in particular) is required to increase the base of social support to small-scale farms, which this research has demonstrated to be one of the pivotal elements kindling farm-level innovation. In this sense, the work of AFNs in both countries – although with different priorities – is already furthering the agenda of cultural change, since they transmit knowledge about food, food producers, and issues affecting the food system and agriculture; and try to foster among their members a sense of belonging to a community that is committed to procuring good food while establishing a fairer economy. If AFNs are able to overcome their operational constraints and motivational shortcomings (related to volunteerism and pragmatic inabilities to meet producers' needs), their contribution to the democratization of the food system will be more substantial.

On the other hand, policy interventions are necessary in order to increase the

market power of weak supply chain subjects such as small-scale producers, and at the same time raise public awareness about food and endogenous rural development. Policies at the national level might be directed towards adjusting public regulations to the size and needs of small-scale producers, to controlling the business behavior of supermarkets and other large food chain actors and, in general, to promoting forms of protection for the benefit of the small-scale farming segment. Urban food policies, instead, are particularly promising because they can envisage concrete local-level instruments to foster the development of a resilient local food system. Many fields of interventions are possible, among which is the introduction of elements of governance to perform a better management of public spaces for the realization of local food markets and the promotion of local production, and the steering of public food procurement to support local and sustainable producers. AFNs, at the urban level, should be systematically included in the normative and regulatory design of local authorities, because their nature and activity are synergic to the urban food policies' objective of building a strong, resilient and sustainable local food system.

My research tried to portray as wide a picture of the alternative farming economy in the areas of Milan and Manchester as possible, while at the same time striving for maximum detail. By employing qualitative methods I tried to provide a thick description of farmers' subjectivities, struggles, entrepreneurialism and relations, interpreting the phenomena occurring in their world on the basis of the rich information I gathered. The limitations inherent in not having at my disposal an extensive base of data clearly impede any type of generalization. Nevertheless, the insights provided by my 39 interviewees and the information gathered during several months of ethnographic investigation allowed an analysis that aspires to be an original contribution to the debate about food, farming and, more broadly, the well-being of humans and the planet. This work is dedicated to farmers, in the hope that in the years to come our society will devote an increased attention to agriculture, a sector in which there is little money, but there are big hearts:

> "Non si diventa ricchi con l'agricoltura, però è molto bello farla[81]" (ITA5, 32, male).

[81] One doesn't get rich with agriculture, but farming is beautiful.

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Annexes

Annex 1. Interview track

General data to begin

1. Age
2. Education
3. Farm production
4. Farm size
5. Year of establishment
6. Members of family/Employees involved
7. Political orientation
   a. Brexit opinion (for English interviewees)

Biographical question: ***Tell me your story, how did you get into farming and for what reasons?***

Analytical dimensions to cover:

Personal history and company history

8. Walk of life leading to be a farmer:
   a. Chronological Dimension (when)
   b. Choice / Obligation (family inheritance)
   c. In what circumstances have the key decisions been taken (breaking points / revelations)
   d. Developing agricultural expertise. How?
   e. What are the motivations behind key choices?
   f. Changes: what were they and how were they managed?
   g. Obstacles / incentives
   h. What are the moments when you feel satisfied?

i. What are the moments when you feel dissatisfied or have some thoughts? What do you think in these moments? What makes you soothe and move forward?

9. Family

a. Composition and relationship with agriculture

b. How do family affects life and working choices (resistance / incentives)?

10. Friendships

a. What kind of social life?

b. Are friends related to agriculture?

c. Where and how frequently do you see them?

11. Are you active in movements, associations, organizations dealing with agriculture, land, food?

12. Use of new technologies

a. Owning a computer: personal or shared (corporate or family)

b. Frequency and reasons for internet usage

c. Owning and using a smartphone: to go to the internet? Used to work?

Company data

13. Turnover

a. Last 5 years

b. 2008 crisis / austerity

14. Hectares cultivated / number of livestock / number of bottles produced

15. Employees

a. Number

b. Type of contract

c. Family work yes / no

d. Seasonal workers yes / no

e. Nationality of employees

16. Type of production

a. Horticulture

b. Animal husbandry / dairy

c. Cereals

d. Other

e. Specialized vs mixed production

17. Transformation yes / no

18. Certifications (official or 'alternative')

19. Prices (comparison with supermarket prices)

20. Means of production [land, buildings, machinery, etc.]: property, rent, share, other title

21. Formal membership to networks (networks of companies, cooperatives, memberships to associations or groups of companies, etc.)

Work and business: practices

22. Work organization in the company

- **a.** Labour division (who does what and why)
- **b.** Routine (typical day)
- **c.** How do you manage your sales channels (organization)
- **d.** Promotion / visibility: how do you do that?
- **e.** How do you get information? How often? Through which channels?
  - b.i. About the AFNs you participate in
  - b.ii. On agriculture-related issues (techniques, updates, decisions on what to produce)
  - b.iii. About economy-related issues (unions, laws and regulations, subsidies)
- **f.** How do you update (technically)

23. Working practices

- **a.** Cultivation / breeding practices
- **b.** Processing (if any)
- **c.** Supply-chain closedness (external inputs +downstream processes)
- **d.** Agro-ecology and sustainability practices
- **e.** Waste: how much product is wasted because it is non-standard or unsellable?

24. Change and resistance in practices

- **a.** Reasons
- **b.** Innovation

25. Network conditioning on practices (any sort of adaptation needed to participate in the network?)

26. Logics of action [what inspires specific choices and how this is influenced by contingencies]

a. Diversification / multifunctionality (agritourism, educational farm, events, etc.)

b. Management of seasonality and production variability

c. Commercial strategy in the different sales channels

27. Fundamental, indispensable things (you wouldn't ever renounce) & binding unavoidable obligations (you would give up, but you can't)

a. Imagine having to deal with a compromise, about all the things you do on your job what you would never give up?

b. What parts of your work you would instead eliminate, which are in conflict with your principles?

28. If you had a land extension 10 times the current:

a. Would you produce the same things?

b. Would you sell them in the same way?

To the outside: contexts, ties and networks

29. Networks

a. Networks definition

i. Collaborations, partnerships [ties with other players]

ii. Relationships with conventional players (supermarkets? Wholesalers?) [network boundaries]

iii. Do your colleagues have relationships with the conventional chain?

b. Judgment on conventional chain and channels: is its existence indispensable?

c. How did you enter the network?

i. History

ii. How have you come to know of it?

iii. Key people

d. Relationships with [significant episodes / moments of crash, argument or crisis / moments of confirmation that the choice is right]:

i. AFNs (the ones you serve and the ones you don't serve)

ii. Associations / Organizations / Movements

e. Events: are they being organized? Where? Do you attend? Who's going to these events?

30. Customers

a. Can you describe them? What are their purchasing routines?

b. What kind of relationship do you have with them? Is it more direct than in the past?

c. Clients selection: is there any type of customer you are not interested in reaching?

- **d.** What's the perfect client? What's the worse client?
- **e.** How do you acquire knowledge on consumers?
- **f.** Do you modify your practices to meet customers' needs?
- **g.** How do you think you are seen by your customers? [reputation]
- **h.** How can their routines be re-configured (reducing dependence on supermarkets)?

31. Other farmers and producers

- **a.** Who are your competitors?
- **b.** Do you collaborate with other producers?
- **c.** What kind of relationship you have with your competitors and collaborators?
- **d.** Is there something you appreciate and something you dislike about them (behavior, strategies, personal issues)?
- **e.** How do you think you are seen by your competitors and collaborators [reputation]

32. Reputation: what do you think is your reputation overall?

Alternativeness and innovation

33. Do you consider yourself alternative? What's the meaning of this label?

34. Advantages / Disadvantages of the alternative economy

- **a.** Opportunities you can exploit
- **b.** Margins: difference with conventional channels
- **c.** Obstacles / difficulties

35. Problems of agriculture

- **a.** What are they?
- **b.** No more profitable? No more attractive? Dominated by big corporations?
- **c.** Cost-price squeeze: did you suffer it? Also now?
- **d.** Effect of economic crisis and austerity
- **e.** Expected effects of Brexit (for English interviewees)
- **f.** What can be done to address these problems?
- **g.** Will a productivist mode of production continue to exist?
- **h.** If the alternative channels you cater to were to suddenly disappear, what would you do? Could you still be on business?

36. Environmental problems

- **a.** What's the current situation?

b. Is environment really compromised?

c. What can farmers do?

37. Innovation

a. Do you feel innovative?

b. If yes, what is the innovation? If no, why do many people believe it is?

c. Do we need innovation in the way we produce, sell and consume food?

System

38. Autonomy/emancipation from market forces [re-establish conditions of control over the management of one's own business]

a. What do you think? Is it important?

b. Do you feel free(r)?

39. Does the system somehow hinder your activities and your development? What do you do to overcome such problems?

40. Other economic players (wider context)

a. Other organizations that have a role in your business (which haven't been mentioned yet)

b. Financing operations

c.i. How do you realize it?

c.ii. Have they changed since you entered an AFNs?

41. Regulation, policies and incentives

a. Judgment on regulation schemes (national)

b. Judgment on CAP: what did it represent for you so far?

c. Do you receive public subsidies?

The city

42. Manchester/Milan (and other urban centers)

a. What's Manchester/Milan for you?

b. Do you go to Manchester/Milan frequently for working or leisure/personal purposes?

c. Do you have friends or relatives in Manchester?

d. Advantages/ Disadvantages of being close to Manchester?

e. If you were located more distant to Manchester, do you think you could be running the business in the same way?

a. Urban food policy: If you could control the City or the County council, what would you do to help the local farming sector?

b. How do citizens perceive the countryside? What do they think and how do they live it?

Future

43. Personal future

a. Medium-long run personal objectives. How do you see yourself in the future?.

b. Will your business be handed-down? Is it a problem for you? Are you training someone for that?

44. Future of farmers

a. What will it be?

b. Will this farming style (local and environmentally-sound) spread? Are there obstacle to overcome?

45. Future of alternative networks

a. How will they develop?

b. Is this a viable road towards sustainability? Will they cause a substantial change? Is it sufficient or we need something else?

46. Future of local food system

a. Does it make sense to talk about a local food system?

b. Will we be able to realize it?

Annex 2. Coding scheme for data analysis

ALTERNATIVENESS

- ALTERNATIVENESS AND ANTI-SYSTEM IDEOLOGY
- ALTERNATIVENESS VS PRAGMATISM
- AUTONOMY
- DE-COMMODIFICATION
- HYBRIDITY
- POLITICAL ORIENTATION
- VALUE-INSPIRED PRAGMATISM
  - VALUES

COMMERCIAL AND RELATIONAL INNOVATION

- AFNS (REPRESENTATION AND PERSONAL EXPERIENCE)
- CAUTIOUS ENTREPRENEURSHIP
- COLLABORATION/COMPETITION
- COMMERCIAL STRATEGIES
- CONVENTIONAL SALES CHANNELS
- CUSTOMERS (REPRESENTATION AND RELATIONSHIP)
- DIRECT SALES CHANNELS
- MULTIFUNCTIONALITY
- NETWORKS IN THE ALTERNATIVE ECONOMY
- NEW ‘ONLINE’ AFNS
- NEW TECHNOLOGIES
- RELATIONAL SKILLS
- SCALING-UP AND EXPANSION PROJECTS

SOCIAL NETWORKS

FARM BUSINESS DATA

DE-INDUSTRIALIZATION AND DOWN-SHIFTING

FARM DATA (ECONOMIC AND STRUCTURE)

LABOR ORGANIZATION

LAND ACCESS

ORGANIC AND ECOLOGY

PRICES

QUALITY

LOCALITY AND 'URBAN EFFECT'

CITY (MILAN/MANCHESTER)

EFFECTS OF LOCATION

REPRESENTATION OF 'LOCAL'

URBAN FOOD POLICY

PERSONAL PROFILE AND SOCIAL TRAJECTORY

BIOGRAPHY

FUTURE PLANS AND EXPECTATIONS

MOTIVATIONS

ROLE OF FAMILY

SATISFACTION

TECHNICAL SKILLS

REPRESENTATION OF FOOD SYSTEM PROBLEMS

CHANGES IN CONSUMER TRENDS

PROBLEMS OF THE AGRICULTURAL SECTOR

REGULATION/POLICIES/SUBSIDIES

UNIONS AND FARMERS' ORGANIZATION

WEAKNESSES OF THEIR BUSINESS