



## Alternative Food Networks from the Institutional Perspective

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### Abstract

This article analyses the internal diversity and dynamics of Polish Alternative Food Networks (AFNs), using the concept of institutions and their impact on collective action as a theoretical tool. Emphasis is put on four dimensions of AFNs' internal diversity: meanings, association models, control mechanisms, and actions. The analysis is based on empirical material collected from nationwide qualitative studies conducted in six AFNs selected through purposive sampling. While adhering to a similar system of values focused on individual health, family and profit, the networks differ from one another in terms of the prevalent models of relationships, supervision, and activity. They appear to share certain motives and values in their market-oriented or own security-oriented actions and strategies, and show an inclination to use formal tools. In parallel, they reveal differences in their levels of focus on building internal relationships, which also emerge as the primary factor determining the potential and activity of the studied initiatives.

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### DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

The data presented in this study are available on request from the corresponding author. The data are not publicly available due to data management.

### AUTHOR CONTRIBUTIONS

Conceptualisation: [RS]; Methodology: [RS&WG]; Formal analysis and investigation: [RS&WG]; Writing - original draft preparation: RS&WG; Writing - review and editing: [RS&WG]; Funding acquisition: [WG&RS]; Resources: [WG&RS]; Supervision: [RS&WG].

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## Introduction

Problems and tensions related to the industrialisation of global food systems evoke a variety of responses (Benton 2019; Isett & Miller 2017; SAPEA 2020). The growing complexity of the modern world includes both individual and collective actions aimed at working out an alternative to the prevalent food system (Tregear 2011; Zoll et al. 2018). In this regard, the term Alternative Food Networks (AFNs) denotes the collective actions of various forms that either complement or stand in opposition to the industrial food system as a concept (Corsi 2018; Forsell & Lankowski 2015; Ribeiro 2021). AFNs can be defined as a coalition of actors looking for alternative methods of allocating resources and changing the management in food distribution chains (Manganelli 2019). They engage in collective actions because they believe in their effectiveness in achieving individual or socialised goals (Olson 1965).

The aim of our article is to analyse the internal diversification of AFNs with a view to identifying how different institutional arrangements affect the organisation of the networks. Paradoxically, despite being recognised for their diversity (Goodman et al. 2013), AFNs tend to be studied through the prism of initiatives with a similar organisational framework (Michal-Villarreal et al. 2018). This may create the impression of uniformisation and reduced diversity among AFNs even though, by definition, they rely on local contexts and conditions. AFNs are also frequently considered in terms of normative functions and the role they could play in the transformation of the food system (e.g. Lohest et al. 2019; Pellicer-Sifres 2017). This paper focuses on the internal differentiation and complexity of AFNs. Specifically, it seeks to answer two questions:

- How do AFNs differ in terms of the operation and effectiveness of their institutions?
- How are the actions of the studied AFNs influenced by their internal institutional arrangements?

Institutions, defined as the rules that humans use in collective-action situations (Alston 2018; Ostrom 1986, 1993, 2005; Poteete et al. 2009), have been analysed in the context of AFNs only occasionally (e.g. Duncan 2017; Manganelli 2019). This paper is intended to fill the lacuna in the present research literature and contribute to the ongoing discussion of AFNs operating in 'marginal areas' (Goszczyński et al. 2019; Fendrychová & Jehlicka 2018; Sovova 2017; Jehlicka et al. 2021; Kopczyńska 2020), that is, in countries less frequently present in the debate on AFNs. In parallel, a new universal approach is proposed where AFNs are studied through the institutions formed and operating within the networks. Therefore, rather than analyse AFNs through their normative potential, our paper seeks to discuss new perspectives in the study of alternative food initiatives (Leitner 2020; Tregear 2011).

## Institutions

### *AFNs: Institutional arrangements*

The term 'alternative' in AFNs reflects the deliberate positioning and attempts to distinguish individual food-related practices from the prevalent agri-food regime. While operating in a variety of forms, AFNs have one thing in common: compared to long supply chains, they enable a more direct connection between producers and consumers, providing for new social relationships and institutional arrangements (Grivins et al. 2017). Originally, AFNs were frequently defined as 'alternative' largely because of the food they provided (Goodman et al. 2014; Poças Ribeiro et al. 2021). However, while food products of similar qualities e.g., fresh, local, and hand-made, are currently available in large retail chains, the essence of AFNs, at least at their very foundations, lies in the relationships and methods involved in building them (Corsi et al. 2018).

AFNs carry a promise (Grivins et al. 2017) of embedded ties between producers and buyers, whereby the act of purchase does not come down merely to the exchange of cash for goods. Given their lower levels of market embeddedness (marketness), AFNs seek 'groundedness' in social relationships, which translates into their greater interest in values other than those that are purely economic. As alternative initiatives differ in their approach to actors' engagement, values, motivation, and operational model (Duncan & Pascucci 2017; Zoll et al. 2018), generalisations about the rules, norms, and institutions established and developed within



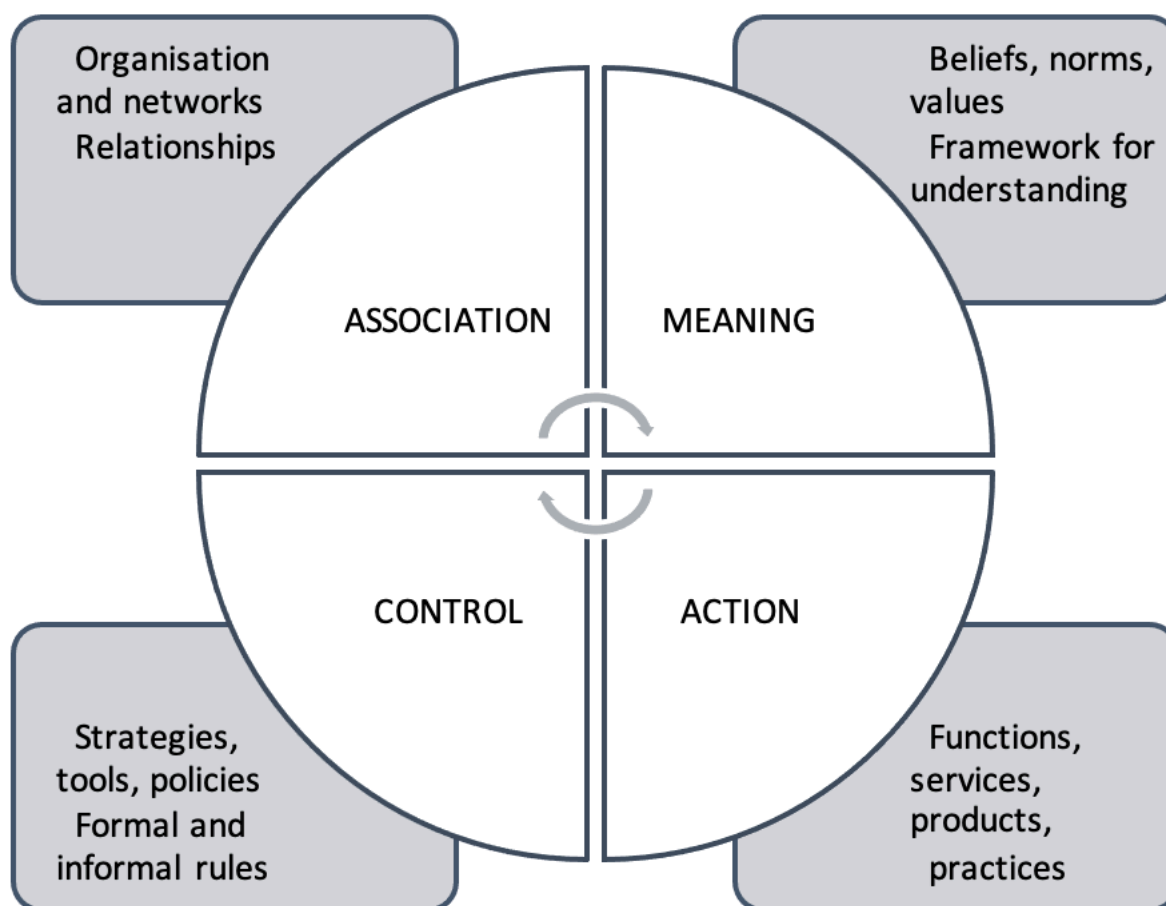
individual networks cannot easily be made. AFNs can be classified based on the logic of operation and the characteristics of the network-organising institution (formal/informal, public/private, profit-based/non-profit) (Poças Ribeiro et al. 2021). Depending on the founding entity, the literature also divides AFNs into six types: consumer-led, third-sector-led, business platforms, farmer-led, public-led, and community-led. In terms of the theory of organisational relationships (Duncan & Pascucci 2017), AFNs can be labelled as isomorphic or polymorphic. While the former reflects the organisational forms preferred by the dominant food system, the latter organise themselves around the variously defined community and democratic relationships, adapting to the organisational forms of industrial networks, albeit only to a limited degree.

Regardless of the definition, AFNs have collaboration at their core, and institutions provide the mechanisms to enable this. Applicable in collective-action situations, institutions can be viewed as rules derived from cultural values, legal regulations, market conditions, and political and social processes (Healey 2006; Hodgson 2006). Successful institutions are those that provide for effective performance while reducing the free rider problem (Ostrom 2011). Institutions and collective actions are broad concepts that can be viewed from a variety of perspectives (Hagedorn 2008; Poteete et al. 2009). Researchers of alternative networks focus on different aspects such as rules determining collective actions (Dufeu et al. 2020), informal institutions based on norms, values and practices (Hodgson 2006), as well as context-shaped morality defining the values of collective actions (Grodzicki 2015). An analysis of AFNs can cover a variety of elements, including the norms that govern their actions, the applicable regulatory systems and infrastructure of institutions, as well as the values and motivations that drive their members (Lemeilleur&Sermege 2020). As a result, institutions are perceived here as complex and well-embedded constructs operating in certain political, economic, and social contexts (Whaley 2018).

The perspective proposed in this article focuses on AFNs and institutions as instruments of change (Vermeulen et al. 2008; Woodhill 2010). One of the functions of institutions is to promote and enhance cooperation, thereby generating collective benefits. Institutions create incentives, both negative and positive, for individuals and groups to act in a particular way (Woodhill 2010), which in turn contributes to the continued existence of institutions. Their functions tend to be self-reinforcing (Hindriks & Guala 2018). The proposed analytical framework should allow us to describe the shape and diversity of AFNs along with their characteristic potential for collective action. The problem is that there is no generally accepted framework for analysing institutions. When developing the foundation for our operationalisation concept, we opted for a modified version of Jim Woodhill's matrix (Figure 1), which he prepared as part of his work for the Institute of Development Studies (Woodhill 2010). It assumes that the development of innovative elements in a given system (capacity development) is possible only when its institutional (internal) arrangements are changed (Woodhill 2010), necessarily taking into account the applicable social norms, governance mechanisms and organisational processes. Importantly for our operationalisation model of institutions, this approach highlights the role that internal elements play in the development of the innovative potential of initiatives such as AFNs. In other words, the networks become important not only for their external form but also because of how they incorporate specific values and political and market mechanisms into their structure, combining them with the ways in which they organise their activities and the tools they use.

The four analysed areas—meanings, associations, control, and actions—correspond to the four basic functions of the institution and its arrangement:

1. Institutions as ways of making meaning of our lives and the social and natural world we inhabit.
2. Institutions as the associations we make to work together to achieve social, economic, and political objectives.
3. Institutions as the basis for control over what individuals and organisations should or can do.
4. Institutions as recurring actions carried out by individuals or organisations in their social, economic, and political life (Woodhill 2010).

**Figure 1: Four dimensions of institutions (adapted)**

Source: Vermeulen et al. 2008, Woodhill 2010 (modified)

This approach allows us to recognise non-formal rules and draw attention to the role of the social context and factors as incentives for actors to act in a specific way (Ostrom 1986, 2003, 2005; Poteete et al. 2009; Whaley 2018). The respective elements of the analytical framework interact with one another, and the shape of AFNs is forged at their intersection and through their relationships. The meaning that people attribute to a given phenomenon inspires them to take action. As a result, specific organisational arrangements are formed (association), which require the development of the corresponding regulatory mechanisms (control). The activity of every initiative (network) will depend on how these four elements are shaped and structured and how they coexist with and complement one another. At the same time, it should be emphasised that this is a flexible framework. Given their dynamic nature, institutions in alternative networks can be incomplete and characterised by different levels of control over daily occurrences, different (frequently overlapping) types of institutional order, and different interpretations of rules by different actors who are guided by distinctive values and may react to various rules differently (Niederle et al. 2020). The framework proposed for the analysis of alternative networks focuses on the diversity of individual elements and their combinations, their impact on the institutional order of AFNs, and the activity of the initiatives included in our study.

The operationalisation of the four dimensions of the institution is presented below in terms of AFNs and their activity.

- I. Meanings: Their construction is based on beliefs and values represented by AFN members regarding the broadly defined food system. This article focuses on the values and motifs related to food and involvement in the network. AFN members share a critical view of the dominant food system and its anonymity (Jaklin et al. 2015). The value and the meaning behind the network's goods and actions are frequently founded on relationships (Renting & Marsden 2003; Sage 2003) which tend to be negotiated (Śpiewak 2016). The ideological foundations are derived from the language of the theory of sustainable development,



relocation, and resilience (Grivins 2017; Treager 2011). They highlight reduced environmental costs, efforts towards social and economic justice, and the sustainability and embeddedness of AFNs. The common denominator for most AFNs includes concepts such as locality, food quality, and trust (Ilbery et al. 2005; Thorsøe 2016; Whatmore et al. 2003). More radical AFNs refer to anarchist or anti-capitalist concepts (Jaklin 2015; Whatmore 2003 et al.). In view of the above, the debate on the goals and values of AFNs seems to revolve around the tension between idealism and pragmatism (Ribeiro 2021).

2. **Association:** An element of interest in this dimension is the organisational structure of the network with its formal and informal relationships among its actors, both individual and collective (Ribeiro 2021). The network's shape and potential depend partially on the combinations and models of relationships among actors and with the external world, development policies, or public stakeholders.
3. **Control:** This dimension prompts the exploration of the formal and informal rules and tools used to ensure the network's operation. Such regulations vary widely, depending on the network type, aims and objectives, and the context (Grivinis 2017). Duncan & Passcuci (2017) argue that, in terms of organisational relationships, AFNs can be divided into two types: isomorphic and polymorphic. The former opt for formalised mechanisms of control, such as adherence to formal standards, rules of participation, the use of quality labels and brands which, to a certain degree, reflect the prevalent food system institutions. The latter, described as socialised or informal AFNs, are organised around community values (shared values, knowledge). Hence, the organisational forms of polymorphic AFNs differ from those we know from the corporate food regime (Adler 2001; Duncan 2020).
4. **Actions:** This area covers a wide range of activities related to both AFNs' day-to-day operations and the pursuit of aims and objectives. These practices are sometimes described as innovative and alternative to conventional networks (Forsell & Lankowski 2017) or, on the contrary, as practices well-established in the dominant food system (Grivins et al. 2017).

These four dimensions can be related to Woodhill's concept (Woodhill 2010), corresponding to the social, organisational, political, and market-oriented aspects of AFNs' operations. Their analysis should allow us to identify connections between the respective elements of institutions, and to understand their impact on the shape and operation of AFNs.

#### *The context of institutions within Polish AFNs*

As noted above, institutions are rules of the game that are based on cultural values, legal principles, market conditions, and social and political processes. Food and food-related actions form a lens through which the most important social issues, such as power, work, health, social classes, economy, and past experiences, are reflected. Research shows that 'socialist modernisation, combined with mass industrialisation and urbanisation – and the subsequent transition from the centrally planned economy to a free market system – have defined the context for Polish AFNs for many years, resulting in a post-transformation model' (Goszczyński & Knieć 2011). The socialist economy, with shortage as its immanent feature, created a parallel informal food system based on the complex relationships of exchange, connections, and 'handling things' (Wedel 2007), all of which can be perceived as alternative practices (Klein et al. 2014).

Poland, like many Central and Eastern European (CEE) countries, underwent economic transformation from a centrally planned economy to a market economy in the late 1980s and early 1990s. In terms of consumption, it was a transition from a collectivist and, at the same time, shortage economy (Kornai 1980) to an economy of abundance characterised by highly individualised attitudes and aversion to anything collective. 'The novelty of the free market in food that suddenly provided consumers with plenty of variety and foreign brands, along with the convenience of supermarkets, made it natural for consumers from the former Soviet bloc to embrace the conventional food system as modern, attractive, and desirable' (Bilewicz & Śpiewak 2018). Currently, discount shops, supermarkets, and hypermarkets are the most popular places to shop, while open-air markets—once popular in socialism—are losing importance (Polacy na zakupach 2018). As the number of people involved in agricultural production continues to decrease (FDPA 2020), the tradition of informal food networks between the rural and urban areas is disappearing, resulting in a rising interest in larger shops

and therefore, long (global) food supply chains. However, not all researchers agree with this pessimistic vision. Some point to the tradition of informal short supply food chains still present in this part of Europe (Jehlicka 2021; Smith & Jehlicka 2013; Visser et al. 2019), describing them as a manifestation of an 'invisible' alternative (Goszczynski et al. 2021) or 'quiet sustainability' (Smith & Jehlicka 2013). As a result, the Polish foodscape stretches between commercial networks, typical of capitalism, and the invisible ones embedded in the past and either slowly fading or being reduced to short-supply niches. Another factor that influences the shape of AFNs in Poland is the structure of local agriculture, which was collectivised to a lesser extent than agriculture in other Soviet Bloc countries. This allowed smaller subsistence or semi-subsistence farms to survive the times of 'real socialism'. While the average size of farms in Poland continues to be lower than in most countries of the European Union (EU), large monoculture farming is on the rise (Halamska 2020).

The operation and durability of various forms of AFNs is also largely affected by social conditions. In Poland, social relationships are based on a tradition of bonding social capital, which is grounded in close social connections, frequently blood relations (Zarycki 2013). Family and family happiness are considered the most important values in life by as many as 80% of Poles (CBOS 2020), a statistic that has not changed for years, with health, peace, and tranquillity ranking second. On the one hand, this concern for health filters through Polish consumers' declared interest in purchasing food from sustainable food systems (although this is still niche), despite higher prices compared to conventional food products (Jeźdral et al. 2020). On the other hand, the need for convenience and saving time discourages people from looking for alternative ways to buy food.

The relatively low levels of bridging social capital in Poland translates into low levels of trust and faith in public institutions (European Social Survey 2020-2022), which hinders the development of collective action and the preservation of common goods, whether material or other. This fact is confirmed by a relatively low percentage of Poles joining civic organisations (CBOS 2020). The still vivid memory of forced collaboration on the conditions of real socialism, particularly in rural areas (Möllers et al. 2018), continues to fuel people's relative reluctance to engage in joint projects such as cooperatives. Consequently, the state apparatus of control continues to expand along with the formal institutions of agriculture and food trade. Not only is it over-represented in Poland, it is also characterised by an extremely bureaucratic approach to its functions (Śpiewak 2020).

The collision of postmodernity and the past is also visible in the shape and nature of Polish AFNs. While they derive their operational patterns from the practices of the past or from global examples, they must function in a society where strong family bonds do not necessarily translate into involvement in civic actions. This means they look alike but are not the same. Their relationships with the state are also difficult as the authorities may support certain food-related initiatives politically, but operationally they prefer to concentrate on control and production standards. Undoubtedly, as in any other country, the shape and characteristics of Polish society leave a mark on the operation of institutions within AFNs. This effect is clearly reflected in the diversity of Polish AFNs. Depending on whether they are predominantly structured on the global or local models of operation, they can be divided into three categories: imitations, mixed, and embedded (Goszczynski et al. 2019). The Polish foodscape offers examples of copied activities such as CSA or urban gardening, as well as daily and largely invisible practices related to allotments and food self-processing. This picture is further complemented with initiatives such as local tourism brands, amalgams of new organisational models, frequently mediated through the public sector, and more or less successful attempts at a shift towards tradition. In combination, they attest to the diversity and dynamics of Polish AFNs, both of which also emerge in the analysis of AFNs' institutional arrangements.

## **Methodology**

Following the research procedure, the field studies were conducted in six non-randomly selected Polish AFNs. A heterogeneous algorithm was applied with the selected networks differing from one another in terms of:

- Location: The procedure of purposive sampling allowed us to select networks from all over Poland to



- reflect regional diversity.
- Socio-economic characteristics: The selected networks represented both open initiatives—accessible to everyone—and more elite ones.
- The specificity of dominant actors: Our study makes a distinction between AFNs managed by consumers, activists linked to non-governmental organisations (NGOs), and those typical of producers.

This selection made it possible to reach highly diversified initiatives with different histories, types of actors' involvement, and institutional arrangements:

**Table 1. Main characteristics of the analysed Polish AFNs**

Case	D o m i - nant ac- tors	Socio-eco- n o m i c character- istics	Location	Description
Frymark Farmers' Market	Producers	Élite	Central Poland (region: Kuyavian-Pomeranian)	A market for foodies in the city of Bydgoszcz. It has evolved into the most prominent local market for high-quality food. It attracts the Bydgoszcz elite and members of the middle and creative class. The sellers include small local producers and larger corporate-run businesses of 'high-quality food'. The food sold relates both to rural traditions and urban health trends.
Allotments in Białystok	Mixed	Egalitarian	Eastern Poland (region: Podlaskie)	Rooted in the city landscape. Allotment holders include elderly people who have been cultivating the land for years. They are often former employees of local industries. The second group of owners are young people who have chosen this space mostly for pleasure. For older owners, cultivating the plot is one of the most significant practices around which their social life is oriented.
Kitchen Incubator in the Local Action Group 'Gościniec 4 Żywiółów' [hereinafter: LAG '4 Żywióły']	Producers	Egalitarian	Southern Poland (region: Lesser Poland)	A local NGO associated with the local action group. It was established to preserve local culinary traditions and promote rural areas. The incubator seeks to connect small producers with wealthier buyers (e.g. through food baskets).
The Healthy Bytów Purchase Group	Consumers	Egalitarian	Northern Poland (region: Pomeranian)	An initiative started by consumers who wish to have access to high-quality food in a small town. This is a bottom-up action under construction. The leaders established the operating procedures themselves, developed relationships among members, and set up a quality control system. Apart from ensuring access to food, the purchase group plays an essential social role, creating space for individuals excluded from traditional communities.
The Dobrze Consumer Cooperative	Consumers	Élite	Central Poland (region: Capital City of Warsaw)	One of the oldest Polish consumer cooperatives. An initiative relating to progressive and political values. The consumers/members are Warsaw residents. The initiative's activities are organised around two cooperative shops and additional actions such as workshops or field trips.
The Wine Makers' Association of the Vistula River Gorge in Małopolska	Producers	Élite	Southern Poland (region: Lesser Poland)	One of the first undertakings to expand the appeal of wine in Poland (on an unofficial basis). This is an association of wine makers from Central Poland, established to promote and enhance the competences of members and their products. One of the association's key projects is the Janowiec Wine Festival, a periodic event bringing together Polish wine lovers and local producers.

Source: Own study

A total of 75 low-structured individual in-depth interviews were conducted with regards to the motivation, values, history, actions, and perspectives associated with AFNs. The researchers used an open-ended approach (Kvale 2007) to encourage the respondents to talk about the role of food in their life. In each network, surveys were conducted with consumers, producers, and people forming the broadly defined institutional environment (e.g. local government).

Following the adopted analytical procedure, the interview transcripts were entered into the CAQDAS programme where they were subjected to text retrieval, code assignment, code clarification, code agreement between researchers, assignment of variables, and code-variables-text analysis. Semi-open (Lewins & Silver 2014) and iterative coding was applied in the following steps:

- Initial/deductive coding: Based on the theory of institutions, four descriptive codes – meanings, associations, control, actions – were assigned by one of our analysts.
- Pattern/inductive coding: The clarifying of the codes was performed by a team of two analysts who worked on the said four descriptive codes, omitting the ones that emerged rarely in the interviews. The analytical Level II coding resided in pattern coding (Miles & Huberman 1994). As the transcripts were read, new analytical categories were inductively assigned to each of the four principal codes. These categories were derived from the interpretation of phenomena identified in the transcripts.

The specific categories defined for the main codes and applied in the analysis included:

1. Meanings: Analysing the values and meanings characteristic of the studied AFNs, we decided to focus on the aspects most frequently indicated by the respondents—health, family, fear of risks related to modernity, business, and fashion—as well as the relatively rarely expressed concern for the natural environment.
2. Associations: In an attempt to account for a variety of AFNs, we identified four relationship types emerging at the intersection of aims/objectives and contexts: i) market-based, shaped by the processes of food production, sale, and purchase; ii) bureaucratic, based on the formal rules adopted by development programmes; iii) community-based, with contacts organised with the network and community; and iv) civic-based, with the network seeking to also establish relationships other than economic ones, with citizens not involved in its actions.
3. Control: Two types of AFN regulation mechanisms were distinguished. The first, formal, consisted primarily of codified and written rules, norms, and regulations. The second, informal, was based on ad-hoc rules agreed in daily, informal, face-to-face interactions.
4. Actions: Actions were divided into commodity-oriented or relationship-oriented. While the former included all the operations dedicated to sales chains, increased volumes and profits, etc., the latter revolved around communication, network development, building a community, and acting for the common good, including outside the network.

One limitation of our study may be the heterogeneous nature of the cases. We studied various examples of AFNs and there is a risk that the sample selection may have influenced the internal diversity of the initiatives. This was expected to be remedied by the operationalisation and codes prepared for the analysis of the four dimensions of institutions. Our objective was not to compare the different types of networks but to analyse the institutional arrangements that could be identified in AFNs' functioning and the effect they would have on the activity of the networks. In the research process, we relied on the general and analytical types of codes developed to reduce the significance of differences in the formal structure of the individual networks. In other words, our codes and analyses focused on the AFNs' differentiation due to their background, the relationships between consumers and producers, and the nature of general development policies or market impacts, rather than the particular categories dictated by the particularity of each network.

Given the nature of the study and the research questions, we opted for a schematic—quantitative and graphical—analysis of qualitative data. Each subcode category was analysed using a cross tabulation to compare the cases against the statistics for the subcodes. The routine procedures were further enriched with a narrative to present examples of the processes observed in the survey. The generalisations assumed throughout the study were of an analytical nature and resulted from the juxtaposition of data with the adopted operationalisation (Maxwell & Chmiel 2014). Our goal was to obtain the case transferability. As statistical and empirical generalisations cannot be made, we would like to establish whether the results of our study are transferable to other AFNs, including those operating outside of Poland.





## Results

### Meanings

The system of values and motives represented by the institutions within the studied AFNs did not entirely correspond to the image of progressive values emerging from the selected theoretical and research works (Goodman et al. 2014). Meanings referring to environmental protection, locality, sustainable development, and fair trade could only be found in a few interviews. The most prevalent values among producers and consumers were those related to business, fear of modernity, health, and passions.

**Table 2: Main motivation of producers (N=188)**

Meanings	CASES						
	LAG '4 Żywioty'	Allotments	Frymark Farmer, Market	Dobrze Coopera- tive	Wine Makers' Association	Healthy Bytów	Total
Tradition and patri- otism	0	11%	4%	0	3%	17%	7%
Family	22%	<b>27%</b>	21%	8%	14%	9%	16%
Health	0	<b>23%</b>	17%	25%	7%	13%	13%
Fashion and life- style	11%	5%	8%	0	21%	17%	12%
Fear of modernity	11%	17%	17%	<b>42%</b>	3%	<b>22%</b>	16%
Business	<b>44%</b>	11%	<b>29%</b>	25%	<b>28%</b>	13%	<b>26%</b>
Passion	12%	6%	4%	0	<b>24%</b>	9%	10%

Source: Own research, N – the number of coded fragments

**Table 3: Main motivation of consumers (N=240)**

Meanings	LAG '4 Żywioty'	Allot- ments	Frymark Farmers' Market	Dobrze Coopera- tive	Wine Makers' Association	Healthy Bytów	Total
Environment	21%	0%	20%	15%	0%	12%	15%
Civic values	0%	0%	11%	20%	0%	16%	13%
Health	14%	17%	20%	20%	33%	<b>28%</b>	<b>21%</b>
Fear of modernity	21%	0%	17%	20%	0%	16%	17%
Family	21%	<b>67%</b>	14%	18%	0%	12%	18%
Fashion and lifestyle	21%	17%	17%	8%	<b>67%</b>	16%	17%
Passion	12%	6%	4%	0	<b>24%</b>	9%	10%

Source: Own research, N – the number of coded fragments

The studied AFNs proved to be quite diversified with regard to the normative foundations of their institutions and actions. References to values related to locality, natural environment or sustainable development were very rare among producers. In the strongly embedded local and traditional initiative of the allotments, the respondents' references clearly oscillated between family and health. Producers associated with the LAG '4 Żywioty', established as part of the EU LEADER programme, evidently favoured the market economy values. Similar, albeit slightly differently articulated motives were represented by the Wine Makers' Association (business and lifestyle) and the Frymark Farmers' Market (business). Interestingly, producers linked with the Dobrze Cooperative and the slightly similar Healthy Bytów Purchase Group turned out to be somewhat different from their counterparts. Their reference system of values, meanings, and symbols revolved around the fear of modernity. In the case of consumers, we were surprised by the uneven distribution of codes referring to family values. Family references could be found in all AFNs excluding the Wine Makers' Association; however, they were particularly prevalent in the deeply embedded and highly traditional initiative of the allotments. For producers, too, the family was a landmark. In the case of this group, an additional element was their business orientation, complemented by the fear of modernity.

In this sense, activity in the AFN institutions is perceived as a possibility of ensuring the protection of one's own economic stability and health, and those of one's loved ones. This triad of symbols related to family, health, and fear is expressed even more among consumers. In fact, references to the civic values associated with lifestyle and natural environment were found only in networks representing a more progressive attitude, such as the Dobrze Cooperative and Healthy Bytów.

Our analysis of the meanings of institutional arrangements in Polish AFNs revealed that, above all, the fear of modernity and its risks is what brings actors together around these institutions as a common symbol. Industrial food is treated by respondents as artificial and therefore detrimental to health. This translates into attempts to keep their bodies and families safe in an increasingly complex world. What distinguishes producers from consumers is their evidently business-oriented attitude. To most of them, being active in an institution such as an AFN is primarily a possible means of additional income. This is hardly surprising, as AFNs attract smaller producers looking for a chance to survive in the market. However, it seems to us that such a strong business focus results in producers' limited activity within the network. In fact, in all the studied cases, this group was found to be involved mainly economically, which tended to cause an institutional imbalance. Without their network-building and integrational involvement, the need arises for a stronger role of consumers or leaders associated with NGOs. However, the value system of consumers is strongly oriented to their own and their families' well-being, which may hinder collective actions intended to serve other purposes. Even if values such as sustainable development, environmental protection, and citizenship do emerge, they are merely in addition to the dominant individualised narrative.

As a result, tension may be observed between the traditional, Polish or more broadly Eastern European symbols and practices of obtaining food, and patterns borrowed from initiatives developed primarily in the countries of the global North (Goszczynski et al. 2019). Traditional network institutions, such as allotments, function in a completely different manner. Their ingrained practices attract people who are evidently more attached to values such as family well-being and hobbies, rather than economic incentives which, in their case, are practically absent. Being involved in food production fills them with a sense of agency, helps organise time, and makes them engaged in the social infrastructure of the allotments. At the other end of the scale are the urban-middle-class-targeted and consumer-oriented networks such as the Dobrze Cooperative and Healthy Bytów. This is where references to sustainability appear (Smith & Jehlicka 2013) and where the most salient values related to individual safety are enriched with references to environmental protection, fair trade, and civic relationships. Between these two types, there is a highly diversified category of networks such as the Wine Makers' Association, LAG '4 Żywioty', or the Frymark Farmers' Market. In their case, the core system of the network's values is defined by leaders from business and NGOs. These AFNs are essentially focused on the economic development of producers, networks, and local areas. Since they are producer-oriented, they



do not assign an active role to consumers, other than shopping for food.

*Associations*

In the analysis of the next institutional element of AFNs, we have sought to define the general logic behind their work organisation, the nature of relationships among actors, and relationship-building models. As a result, four basic types of association were identified, based on references made in the interviews with respect to the market, the logic of public policies and bureaucracy, the narrowly defined network community, and the broadly defined idea of citizenship. The study revealed a significant diversity of networks.

**Table 4: Association models identified in the AFNs (N=203)**

Association model	LAG '4 Żywioty'	Allotments	Frymark Farmers' Market	Dobrze Co-operative	Wine Makers' Association	Healthy Bytów	Total
Civic-based	0%	0%	0%	48%	0%	44%	21%
Community-based	0%	40%	17%	24%	8%	39%	23%
Bureaucratic	50%	60%	0%	0%	31%	6%	19%
Market-based	50%	0%	83%	29%	62%	11%	37%

Source: Own research, N – the number of coded fragments

Depending on the network's genesis – a top-down initiative for the purposes of the EU programmes ('4 Żywioty'), public policies (allotments), producers' (Frymark Farmers' Market, Wine Makers' Association), or consumers' initiatives (Healthy Bytów, Dobrze Cooperative) – large differences became visible in the dominant association model. Typically, bureaucratic relationships and work organisation models prevailed in the LAG '4 Żywioty' where the activity and involvement of individual leaders was confronted with the specific requirements of the support programmes (LEADER, Norwegian Funds) and the members representing local governments. Their highly institutionalised approach to the network organisation and its internal relationships were further consolidated. On the one hand, this left much less space for spontaneity and autotelic interactions but, on the other hand, it made the network more transparent. The allotments proved to be a particularly interesting case with their formal legally prescribed organisation model entirely permeated by the spirit of community. As a mixed type of AFN, they relied on bureaucratic mechanisms which, however, were intertwined with the history and tradition of the community.

The study sample also revealed two typically market-oriented initiatives. The aim of both the Frymark Farmers' Market and the Wine Makers' Association is to create an economic space for local products. In the former initiative, producers organised in a way that prevented the competitive copying strategy and thus internal rivalry, which requires an organisational effort and efficient management by leaders to resolve disputes and uphold the rules of competition. Interestingly, although organised by two leaders whose main and clearly articulated objective was to find a market opening for the sale of their products, Frymark is also a bottom-up initiative that operates according to pre-agreed and negotiated bottom-up rules. This contributes to the network's greater durability and resilience in challenging times, such as location changes, periods of limited consumer interest, and the COVID-19 pandemic. Frymark's form of association stands in contrast to the latter and more formalised type, the Wine Makers' Association, whose organisational structure is much more bureaucratic and therefore dependent on hierarchical relationships within the Association.

A different picture of associations emerges in AFNs such as the Dobrze Cooperative and informal groups of

consumers such as Healthy Bytów. Concentrated in urban areas (a city and a town, respectively), they were developed around middle-class activists and people interested exclusively in buying food. With their market relationships pushed to the background, the networks prefer to rely on relationships with active consumers who share the general idea of citizenship and alternative forms of capitalism (Dobrze Cooperative) or a small community (Healthy Bytów). The latter seems to be a particularly interesting case. Established in a provincial town, it revolves around the activity of women from larger cities and representatives of the creative class. To them, the AFN is not only a place of access to fresh food but also one where they can build strong relationships and find their place in a new community. Along with allotments, this is another type of AFN with the strongest associations derived from the authentic grassroots passion of those involved. For example, researchers noted that the Bytów activists would meet at informal breakfasts to decide together about the future of the network and its actions. Accounting for all class-related and bureaucratic differences, their behaviour was most reminiscent of relationships observed among the allotment holders.

Despite references to citizenship and—to a certain extent—community, the associations in networks such as the Dobrze Cooperative function in an entirely different way. Relationships are more codified, the work organisation is better, and everyone has a role assigned to them according to a clear division into employees, activists, regular members, and buyers. Aware of the fact that such a strict codification can make their institution appear overtly constrained or rigid, the Cooperative's members approach the community with discount actions for local seniors and dedicated educational campaigns. In a sense, the typical association form of this case reveals a general dilemma faced by all developing AFNs. While increasing the efficiency which is necessary at a certain stage for the institution's development and survival, the codification and organisation of work leads to the loosening of the association, replacing strong direct relationships with more heterogeneous and more detached contacts.

Interestingly, the market-, community- and civic-based associations proved to be largely interconnected. The analytical procedure indicated that two diametrically different types of work organisation and relationships or, more generally, a model of association can be distinguished. The first is typical of networks operating in a highly bureaucratic environment of local government, EU programmes, and traditional and new public policies. This is where the initiatives that emerged with the third and fourth pillars of the Common Agricultural Policy (CAP) and the fashion for promoting local food in local development policies occupy a particular place (Goszczyński & Knieć 2011). The operation of their institutions was supported by partners with abundant resources (local governments, public institutions) but which enforced very formal relationships, methods of operation, and organisation. At the other extreme are the grassroots initiatives based on the activity of consumers or producers and characterised by lower levels of bureaucracy, greater organisational flexibility, and a focus on economic efficiency (producers' networks) or community and citizenship (consumer-oriented networks). Initiatives traditionally present in the Polish foodscape fall within the space between these two types: the allotments represent a combination of the bureaucratic logic and highly formalised institutions with the grassroots activity of the allotment holders.

To sum up this section, it is worth pointing out that while the meanings were similar for all the studied networks, they differed significantly in terms of association. The direction of actions, members' activity, work intensity, communication methods, and the impact on members seem to depend on the extent to which they originate from the actors or the specific norms and regulations. In other words, even the most modern public policy alone cannot breathe energy into bureaucratic initiatives.

### *Control*

The next step in our analysis was to explore the dominant control mechanisms. The tools applied by the AFNs were divided into formal—regulations, rules, and written norms—and informal i.e., based on direct relationships among those involved.



**Table 5: Control model for the studied AFNs (N=203)**

Control	LAG '4 Żywioty'	Allotments	Frymark Farmers' Market	Dobrze Co-operative	Wine Makers' Association	Healthy Bytów	Total
Informal rules	50%	33%	71%	30%	0%	55%	43%
Formal rules	50%	67%	29%	70%	100%	46%	57%

Source: Own research, N – the number of coded fragments

Each network stands for different types of principles and rules for supporting its actions. LAG '4 Żywioty' is financed under the EU LEADER programme, and therefore operates within a precisely defined formal framework instituted by extrinsic forces. This was reflected in the number of references made to formal rules, most of which were imposed from the outside rather than worked out within the network. '4 Żywioty' must comply with both the regulations of the LEADER programme and the innumerable restrictions regarding food processing and selling. However, the network is also deeply nested in the informal relationships of rural communities, as indicated by half the respondents' references pertaining to informal rules such as 'getting along to find a way' and 'spontaneously keeping the network afloat'. This AFN is largely based on a charismatic leader as the driving force behind the project. Given her extensive experience in leadership, the network receives the benefit of informal rules as a break from the formality of the programme-managing institutions and local governments, to ensure control and work organisation.

In contrast, the Wine Makers' Association represents a type whose durability depends solely on the pre-established formal rules. As a producers' initiative that is market-oriented (see associations), it clearly adheres to formal rules because its primary objective is to have its appellation acknowledged in administrative terms, with its products evaluated and recognised as luxury goods. The AFN members make significant investments in their vineyards, and they require precise rules and procedures of operation within the network to make sure that their money is used effectively and yields the expected return in the long term. As the Association's members, mostly men, are representatives of the middle or upper classes, with a business background, they are accustomed to procedures and formalities, which intensifies their propensity to formal conduct. Another producers' network, the Frymark Farmers' Market, offers even more indications of informal rules at play. As a leader-based network, it relies heavily on the experience and performance of two people and continues to operate largely because of their decisions, most of which are taken informally. The formal organisation takes over in the case of the entry of new member-producers and conflict situations.

Another interesting example is the Dobrze Consumer Cooperative. As a bottom-up and ideologically driven project based on social trust, it could be expected to prioritise informal actions. Nevertheless, our analysis shows that the network's operation depends more on formal rather than informal rules as shown, for example, by a list of obligatory documents (on-call regulations, rules of association, assortment criteria, etc.) enumerated on the Cooperative's website. The formal rules are given preference also because the Cooperative is interested in maintaining a flat organisational structure. To this end, a formal framework is needed that can be referred to when necessary. Some of the procedures result from the requirements that must be met by an institution employing (several) people full-time. Healthy Bytów, while similar in terms of organisation and ideology, features reversed proportions compared to the Cooperative, with the advantage of informal rules. This reversal in the frequency of references could be a function of time and scale. Although the dynamics of changes over time were not the subject of our study, the respondents indicated that with time, the Dobrze Cooperative had to grow 'layers of formal rules' as the number of its members increased. As Healthy Bytów, still in its infancy, is relatively small, there is little emphasis on formal rules to support the

network. Moreover, this AFN operates in a small town where informal rules and contacts make it easier to keep the network operational, compared to those in larger agglomerations such as the Dobrze Cooperative. Finally, allotments prove to be an interesting case. As part of a larger structure, the Polish Allotment Federation (Polski Związek Działkowców, PZD)—an institution that has existed for 120 years—this network is well-embedded both locally and institutionally, and has a powerful bureaucratic background. Nevertheless, it relies on informal rules that allow the studied AFN (as one of 5,000 allotment associations) to function efficiently. Most of its members are elderly people, representatives of the working class who live in the area and have both the time and knowledge to cultivate their allotment gardens. Their similar biographies and years of knowing one another gave rise to the informal customary institutions. However, their operation is regulated by a set of formal and precisely defined rules (e.g. regarding the size of buildings permitted on the plots) that have been in place for years.

### Actions

The last element in the institutional analysis of the AFNs is actions undertaken within the network. Our focus was not on the activity of individual producers or consumers but on collective actions. Two types were distinguished: relations-oriented and commodity-oriented. The former described actions aimed at the development of internal relationships and were not directly related to the AFNs' sales or economic aspects. They included, for example, the preservation of tradition, environmental protection, fair trade, and sustainable development. The latter (commodity-oriented) were intended to increase the efficiency of sales, profit, and market availability of products. As such, they concentrated on the network and on food treated as a commodity in the producer-consumer market exchange. The studied AFNs proved to be largely diversified in this respect as well.

**Table 6: Action model for cases (N=98)**

	<b>LAG '4 Żywioły'</b>	<b>Allot- ments</b>	<b>Frymark Farmers' Market</b>	<b>Dobrze Co- operative</b>	<b>Wine Mak- ers' Associ- ation</b>	<b>Healthy Bytów</b>	<b>Total</b>
Commodity-oriented	83%	20%	78%	54%	56%	33%	53%
Relations oriented	17%	80%	22%	46%	44%	67%	47%

Source: Own research, N – the number of coded fragments

Most commodity-oriented actions were found in the LAG '4 Żywioły'. As an institution established under the EU programmes, this AFN must comply with many formalities and clear the accounts for the grant provider. Therefore, it puts emphasis on the product, brand development, and actions that demonstrate measurable effectiveness. The network itself operates in an area with relatively few local food producers offering a limited choice of products. Perhaps this explains the network's focus on the kitchen incubator that is to transfer some of the production costs to the AFN. Economic activity is the primary expectation of both the incubator and the producers. However, the actions of the latter are highly individualised with own economic gain as a priority.

The differences between the Frymark Farmers' Market and the Wine Makers' Association are interesting. As producers' networks, both are focused on sales and development. On the one hand, the alternative actions of the latter revolve around producer and consumer education, winemaker training, and product promotion, with producers being aware of the delayed benefits of investing time and energy in the organisation of the Polish Wine Festival in Janowiec, an élite annual event targeted at wealthier consumers. On the other hand, Frymark was established as a place where small farmers, food processors, and organisers could make



money. Its community-based actions include, primarily, the organisation of weekly green markets, producer coordination, communication, conflict management, brand building, and brand promotion.

At the other extreme are the networks whose alternative actions are mostly community-based. This type of action is particularly visible in the case of allotments. People involved in this network are primarily interested in contact with nature, the joy of physical work on their small plots of land, and socialising with people who have similar needs. Material profit is of no significance. As a result, allotments have proved to be, by far, the most strongly embedded network following a familiar pattern of action and combining collective action with a sense of ownership which is so important to allotment holders. It is also an initiative that connects elderly people with similar backgrounds and approaches to recreational activities. The network is their way of having access not only to food but also to integration and a form of community. During the study, we had the opportunity to observe a relatively large event, a festive garden party dedicated to and celebrated within the community of allotment holders. It was one of the few examples of community-based actions free of any economic intentions.

Network-oriented actions also predominated in Healthy Bytów and the Dobrze Cooperative, whose members devote a lot of effort to contacting and selecting the producers and working with food, for example through culinary workshops. Both networks were found to be the most democratic, representing a flattened management structure that strongly emphasises community decision making, with food quality not necessarily confirmed by official certificates (e.g. organic label) but on a discretionary basis, through direct contact with producers and negotiations. However, community-based actions were more prevalent in Healthy Bytów than in the Dobrze Cooperative. As a small and relatively new network, the former is still at the development stage, still working out its rules. As mentioned above, it operates in a small town where people know one another, have more time than in a large city, and are more willing to spend time socialising and integrating. In contrast, the Cooperative is an interesting example of sustainability-oriented actions, representing a focus on both: network organisation and community actions. This dualism results from the Cooperative's size: unlike Healthy Bytów, it is a quite large organisation that employs people. It therefore requires a certain level of formal structure to maintain financial liquidity and an organisational system.

## Summary and discussion

The results of our analysis of institutional arrangements in Polish AFNs were nothing short of a surprise to us. What we initially expected from the studied networks was a high level of similarity. This assumption proved true only in one institutional dimension: meanings. Despite certain differences, all AFNs operate within similar symbols and meanings, focusing on the individual wellbeing of producers and consumers. The values represented by the network actors are shared by all AFNs included in the study. Regardless of the network type, the dominant motives are individual and family health and safety, typical of Polish society and other societies in general (consumers), and economic gains due to new market opportunities that arise from active participation in alternative initiatives (producers). Polish AFNs also seem to share a vision of development that is essentially focused on keeping the network operational. This may be the result of a relatively short period of operation in most of the analysed cases.

This similarity notwithstanding, the studied networks differ profoundly in the organisation of actions, applicable rules, levels of formalisation, and relationship models. Depending on the nature of the network and its founders' motives (networks established for the purposes of support programmes in producers' or consumers' interests), AFNs differ in terms of the internal structure, flexibility of internal mechanisms, and commitment of their members. Initiatives closely connected to public funding seem to be particularly problematic as their relationships are largely governed by bureaucracy and strict (often formal) mechanisms of control. Initiatives related to urban consumers feature the highest levels of flexibility. Other interesting examples of the strongly embedded and highly traditional AFNs, combining sustainability with the bottom-up approach found in well-established institutions, include the allotments and food producers selling their

products directly at green markets.

The table below summarises the AFNs in terms of the prevalent category (with most references) in the respective institutional dimensions.

**Table 7: The dominant types of institutional arrangements in the analysed AFNs**

	<b>Led by</b>	<b>Meanings</b>	<b>Association</b>	<b>Control</b>	<b>Actions</b>
<b>Wine Makers' Association</b>	Producers	Business	Market	Formal	Mixed
<b>Allotments</b>	Mixed	Fear of modernity	Bureaucratic	Formal	Relations
<b>LAG '4 Żywioty'</b>	Officials	Business	Bureaucratic	Mixed	Commodity
<b>Frymark Green Market</b>	Producers	Business	Market	Informal	Commodity
<b>Healthy Bytów</b>	Consumers	Mixed	Civic	Informal	Relations
<b>Dobrze Cooperative</b>	Consumers	Fear of modernity	Civic	Formal	Relations

Source: Own study

As a result, what emerges in the operation of the studied AFNs as particular with regard to internal institutions is their different model of action and organisation. References to progressive values or horizontal forms of micro-democracy within networks are rare. Instead, AFNs tend to be based on individualised motives, management through leadership, and forms of action that are stretched between the past, transformation, and modernity. The formal model of control through public institutions or formalised actors such as NGOs or enterprises further completes this picture, with the latter having a significant effect on people engaged in AFNs and their potential to act. Three distinctive networks (Dobrze Cooperative, Healthy Bytów, and the Allotments) found it easier to initiate joint activities, owing to their focus on relationship-building actions. This finding is important because it shows that, despite differences, putting emphasis on the development of internal relationships (the very foundation of joint actions) can have a positive effect on the potential of the network. This can be achieved even in networks with similar, individualised values or operating in the conditions of unified, formal rules and policies or market impacts. To sum up, we believe that the key element to the institutional arrangements is for networks to focus their internal activities on building relationships among the actors involved. This is what allows AFNs to work together, while the external factors, particularly the financial ones, do not have a significant impact on their long-term existence.

The aims of this article were not limited only to Poland. In the study of the networks, a theoretical and methodological framework that differed slightly from the most common ones was proposed. Our analysis method, focused on studying institutions operating within AFNs, allowed us to look at these networks in a new way to see their functioning and appreciate their internal diversity. While our study offers some insight into the community types and the institutional organisation of Polish AFNs, a similar analysis of networks operating in other cultural contexts seems advisable to verify our research method and establish how universal or unique the institutional arrangements regulating the operation of AFNs are. In summary, our research is a voice in the debate on the relationship between AFNs' institutions—defined as rules used in collective-action situations—and the style of their actions, including those related to collective action. The question of the relationship between the types of studied networks and the actual potential of institutions within them requires further examination. For example, it would be relevant to look at how far they allow for the inclusion of those who are usually excluded, or the modification of consumption attitudes, and whether they truly provide for an organisational or operational alternative to the dominant food system regime. The function of institutions is to promote cooperation and thereby generate cooperative benefits. Therefore, achieving the goals of both producers and consumers, as well as the durability of the network, emerge as a measure against which one can assess how well the institutions analysed in this article deliver on their tasks.





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