Impacting conventional foodways with food democracy: Diverse scaling strategies in Alternative Food Networks

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Abstract

Alternative Food Networks (AFNs) have received growing attention for their potential to promote sustainability, foster social innovation, and challenge dominant agri-food regimes. These value-driven initiatives offer both practical alternatives and critical responses to industrialised food systems, seeking to align food production and consumption with ecological, social, and ethical priorities. This paper examines four AFNs across different European contexts to explore how diverse scaling strategies – scaling deep, up, out, and through – are employed to expand their reach and influence. While often situated at the margins of conventional markets, AFNs serve as laboratories for experimenting with democratic governance and participatory organisational models. Through an analysis of their internal dynamics and external alliances, the paper shows how scaling efforts intersect with broader aims of food democracy, particularly in enhancing citizen agency and inclusivity. The findings underscore the importance of re-politicising food systems and building transformative pathways toward more just and sustainable food futures.

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Introduction

In recent years, alternative food networks (AFNs) have received increasing attention in both academic and public debate for their potential to promote more sustainable agricultural, social, and environmental practices. Criticisms of the industrial food regime emphasise its focus on efficiency and profit maximisation, often at the expense of equity and ecological sustainability (Goodman et al., 2012; Michel-Villarreal et al., 2019). In contrast, AFNs are generally associated with efforts to create more localised and transparent food systems based on ecological balance, social justice and community resilience (Brunori, 2007; Michel-Villarreal et al., 2019).

AFNs encompass a wide range of organisational models, from direct agreements between producers and consumers to more complex food microsystems involving multiple actors engaged in redefining food practices and governance. At the heart of many AFNs is the goal of shortening food chains by promoting direct links between producers and consumers at the local or regional level. This goal is typically pursued through two strategies: reducing the physical distance between production and consumption to decrease emissions and strengthen community ties (Renting et al., 2003; Sonnino, 2010), and minimising intermediaries to increase farmers' share of the final price, reduce exploitation and improve transparency (Goodman et al., 2012).

Although often celebrated as alternatives to the dominant agri-food system, AFNs (also known as short food chains, civic food networks, or local food networks) have sparked debate over their broader social impacts. The local and limited size of short food chains is widely recognised as a distinctive feature (Marsden et al., 2000). At the same time, the sustainability values and transformative ambitions that underpin many AFNs drive them to expand the scope and scale of their activities (Tregear, 2011). As a result, they adopt different strategies to address challenges that extend beyond their immediate operational scope. However, expanding the reach of short food chains and engaging more producers and consumers often proves difficult. Key obstacles include economic and logistical constraints, inadequate infrastructure, limited market access, regulatory barriers, and established consumer preferences (Brunori et al., 2012). Small producers may also lack the resources or knowledge necessary to participate effectively in larger networks (Ilbery and Maye, 2005). Furthermore, consumer education is essential to changing purchasing habits, and resistance from conventional intermediaries can exacerbate these challenges (Goodman et al., 2012).

This article examines the different expansion strategies used by AFNs, and their role in promoting inclusiveness and democratic participation in the governance of food production and consumption. A central question guides the analysis: how do the strategies adopted by AFNs improve inclusiveness, empower citizens, and promote greater democratic control over food choices, production, and distribution? To answer this question, the study examines four cases in Europe, each reflecting a distinct AFN model and a different approach to governance and food production, as detailed below. The article is structured as follows. The next section introduces the two key concepts that guide the analysis, food democracy and scalability strategies, highlighting their relevance and the limited attention paid to their intersection in AFN research. This is followed by the methodology and an overview of the four case studies. The subsequent sections present empirical findings and discuss how AFNs engage in different forms of scalability while promoting democratic and emancipatory goals within food systems.

Key concepts: food democracy and scaling in AFNs

Food democracy as a transformative concept in AFNs

The term food democracy was first introduced by Lang (1999), who describes it as a "set of demands from below", emphasising its role as a counterforce to the dominant food policy shaped by two centuries of industrialisation and globalisation. In his formulation, food democracy seeks to reclaim control over food systems, advocating for food that is adequate, affordable, safe, humane, and culturally appropriate; in short, a

response to the pressures exerted by the neoliberal agri-food regime. Hassanein (2003) further refines this concept, framing food democracy as a pragmatic tool for achieving incremental change towards sustainable agriculture and food systems. More broadly, food democracy can be understood as a counter-concept to the highly centralised, industrialised, and power-concentrated food governance regime. It calls for a redistribution of power, promoting diversification, relocalisation, and embeddedness as strategies to resist, or at least mitigate, the neoliberal forces driving the global food industry (Bornemann and Weiland, 2019; Fernandez-Wulff, 2019). In this framework, food becomes a deeply political issue (Hassanein, 2003), with the potential to challenge existing power structures and advocate for more participatory and transparent food systems.

However, the discourse on food democracy is not monolithic. It is typically framed through two principal, and at times opposing, lenses: a liberal vision and a substantive, or radical, one (Leitheiser and Vezzoni, 2024). The liberal perspective is consumer-centric, emphasising the role of individuals as consumer-citizens who drive change through their purchasing choices. Within this framework, challenging the food system is viewed as a predominantly passive, market-based activity, centred on supporting ethical brands or making informed decisions. Proponents contend that such consumer choices can collectively shape markets and corporate conduct, thereby advancing sustainability and social responsibility (Behringer and Feindt, 2019; Dekeyser et al., 2018; Moragues-Faus, 2017). By contrast, the substantive vision aligns with food sovereignty, stressing the right of civil society to shape the political processes that govern food systems. This perspective highlights direct action, community empowerment, and participation in policy reform. It posits that meaningful change requires structural transformation, moving beyond reliance on consumer behaviour alone. Ultimately, these two perspectives, market-based individual action versus collective political engagement, exemplify the complexity of food democracy and the diverse strategies required to address contemporary food-system challenges.

Bornemann and Weiland (2019) argue that food democracy can manifest at three levels: individual, community, and societal. At the individual level, food democracy might involve personal choices such as adopting a plant-based diet, consuming seasonal products, or cultivating a home garden. At the community level, local food initiatives, AFNs, farmers' markets, and other organisational structures can facilitate collective action and foster local food sovereignty. The societal level encompasses broader actions, such as advocacy, involvement in food movements, and participation in food policy councils or other forms of civic engagement in public policy (Goodman et al., 2012; Welsh & MacRae, 1998, cited by Bornemann and Weiland, 2019).

Hassanein (2008) identifies several interrelated practices through which citizens can be empowered within the food system. Collaboration among diverse actors is the foundation for building collective responsibility and sustainability coalitions. Knowledge building, through re-skilling and critical education about the industrialisation of agriculture, enables citizens to challenge corporate control. Debate and dialogue cultivate spaces for reflection on food values and shared visions. These processes ultimately enhance community efficacy, allowing citizens to co-create food policies and improve access to healthy food. Underpinning all these dimensions is an orientation to the common good, expressed in efforts to make quality food accessible to all.

Overall, food democracy provides AFNs with both a normative orientation and a practical framework for action. It calls for a redistribution of power in the food system through participatory decision-making, civic engagement, and the re-embedding of food practices in local ecological and social contexts. For AFNs, pursuing food democracy therefore means fostering inclusivity, transparency, and collective agency – all principles that guide how food is produced, distributed, and governed. Yet, applying these principles requires a balance between the multiple dimensions of sustainability: ecological integrity, economic viability, and social justice. A critical challenge emerging from the literature concerns how AFNs can strengthen their environmental ambitions without compromising social inclusion, particularly amid critiques of elitism and exclusivity (Sieveking, 2019). These tensions highlight the importance of examining how different scaling strategies affect the depth and breadth of food democracy in practice.

Scaling strategies in AFNs

Scholars have classified AFN scaling strategies into distinct types and distinguished their defining characteristics to clarify how these networks expand their influence. Westley et al. (2014) make a foundational distinction between "scaling up" and "scaling out." Scaling up refers to systemic change at the institutional level by addressing the root causes of social problems within broader institutional frameworks. This might include influencing food policies, regulations, or market structures to create more inclusive and sustainable food systems. Scaling out, by contrast, emphasises the replication and diffusion of innovations across wider geographic areas and networks, enabling successful models to reach more people and communities and laying the groundwork for larger-scale systemic changes. According to Westley, scaling out often precedes scaling up, as the diffusion of ideas creates the foundation for institutional transformation.

Building on this distinction, Hermans et al. (2016) introduce the concepts of outscaling and upscaling in the context of grassroots innovations. Outscaling focuses on spreading innovations across networks and geographic boundaries, often through replication or adaptation in different contexts. This expands the scale of influence and broadens participation in AFNs. Upscaling, by contrast, is concerned with influencing institutional and political frameworks. It aims to transform governance structures, such as aligning innovations with existing policies or creating new political frameworks that support AFNs' goals. Hermans et al. highlight two main upscaling strategies: transforming institutional structures, or embedding innovations within existing systems to achieve ambitious, long-term goals.

Moore et al. (2015) introduce a third strategy: deep scaling, which focuses on cultural transformation. Deep scaling involves changing underlying societal beliefs, values, and norms, ensuring that innovations have a lasting societal impact beyond simple replication or policy change. For AFNs, this means fostering cultural shifts in food consumption, production, and governance, emphasising principles such as sustainability, fairness, and community empowerment. Deep scaling complements both outscaling and upscaling by ensuring that food system innovations resonate with people's values and contribute to broader societal change.

Marradi and Mulder (2022) propose a multidirectional approach to scaling, arguing that transformative change requires a synergy between expanding geographic reach, influencing institutions, and transforming cultural norms. This comprehensive view helps AFNs navigate the complexities of growth while safeguarding their foundational values. Similarly, Loorbach et al. (2020) identify five mechanisms for scaling innovations: growth, replication, partnership, instrumentalisation, and embedding. These mechanisms highlight different strategies, from expanding initiatives to partnering with like-minded organisations and embedding innovations within existing systems to ensure their long-term viability.

It is evident from these discussions that the scalability of AFNs involves both a vertical dimension (changing how large numbers of people think and act) and a horizontal dimension (replicating organisational models across different contexts). Gliessman (2016) illustrates this by emphasising the importance of reconnecting growers and consumers through agroecology and AFNs, highlighting the need for incremental stages of transformation towards sustainable food systems. Anderson et al. (2021), in turn, stress the significance of political and cultural shifts in scaling sustainable agriculture, arguing that technical, political, and social dimensions are interconnected and must be addressed simultaneously.

Laamanen et al. (2023) introduce the concept of scaling through, which focuses on the role of social movements in democratic processes such as participatory forums and citizens' assemblies. This is particularly relevant for AFNs, which often engage with democratic innovations like food policy councils or local food forums to influence decision-making and ensure that food systems are more inclusive and participatory. Scaling through enables AFNs to operate not only as market-based alternatives but also as political actors engaged in shaping food governance at various levels.

This theoretical framework sets the stage for a more detailed exploration of how scaling strategies are implemented in practice. In sum, scaling within AFNs should not be understood merely as quantitative growth or organisational expansion, but as a qualitative process of consolidating and diffusing democratic, sustainable, and inclusive practices. The challenge for AFNs is to broaden their reach and systemic influence without reproducing the same power asymmetries and market dynamics they aim to transform. Approached in this way, scaling becomes an expression of food democracy in practice: a means of deepening participation, strengthening local ecological relations, and ensuring that transformative values are sustained as initiatives evolve and connect across contexts.

In the following section, after outlining the methods employed in this study, we will analyse four case studies, each one representing a distinct type of AFN, reflecting varying approaches to scaling and offering valuable insights into the practical challenges and opportunities these networks face.

Methodology

This study employs a qualitative design to investigate the operational dynamics of four AFNs across different European contexts, examined within the FOOdIVERSE project. Building on this work, the article examines their scalability strategies and contributions to food democracy. A maximum variation case selection approach (Flyvbjerg, 2006) was adopted to capture a broad spectrum of organisational forms and contextual conditions. By intentionally selecting diverse cases, this strategy enriches the study's explanatory potential, allowing patterns to emerge that might not be visible in more homogeneous samples. Flyvbjerg emphasises that such an approach helps explore generalisable insights across a spectrum of situations, providing a solid basis for understanding complex phenomena like AFNs.

The research was strategically focused on the relational dynamics within and beyond these networks, aiming to explore how various types of AFNs manage power differentials, facilitate resource exchanges, and foster inclusiveness. The analysis sought to unravel the complex interplay between governance models, organisational structures, and external contextual factors that shape the operations of AFNs. Special attention was given to AFNs' capacity to create distinct value chains and engage with different forms of governance, highlighting how they influence local food systems.

The study in the framework of FOOdIVERSE was aimed at identifying how contextual factors either enabled or constrained the activities of AFNs, by exploring critical elements such as organisational structures, coordination strategies, and the effectiveness of networks in achieving their goals. Data collection in all four contexts followed a standard outline (see Appendix), which researchers systematically filled out through a combination of participant observation and in-depth formal and informal interviews with key stakeholders. Additionally, the research involved a detailed mapping of each AFN's relational network, illustrating interactions and partnerships with external stakeholders. These interactions were categorised by nature, including joint campaigns, information sharing, collaborative projects, and funding relationships. With input from key informants, a graphical representation of these relationships was created, visually capturing the network of collaborations that influence each AFN's reach and impact. This approach provided valuable insights into the internal dynamics, coordination mechanisms, and strategic tactics employed by each AFN within its specific local context.

The qualitative analysis was further complemented by secondary data on the agroecological contexts in which these networks operate. This secondary data provided additional layers of understanding about how local environmental, economic, and social factors impact the governance and scalability of AFNs. The use of maximum variation cases enabled the analysis to reveal how diverse operational contexts and organisational models affect AFN scaling strategies and their overall impact, offering a nuanced understanding of the challenges and opportunities they face. The empirical data were collected from January 2021 to December 2023 across four locations: Kraków (Poland), Oslo (Norway), the South-West of England, and Trento (Italy).

The multilateral agreement between each network and its respective research team was signed in written form at the very beginning of the collaboration. Additionally, interviews with individuals were preceded by their explicit consent to participate.

Situating the four case studies

Wawelska, established in 2012 in Kraków, is a member-driven cooperative sourcing organic food directly from local farmers. It is characterised by democratic governance, with working groups and committees overseeing key operations, including sourcing, distribution, and education. While decision-making is formally inclusive, a core group often assumes operational responsibility due to availability and experience. The cooperative maintains a largely inward-facing model, prioritising autonomy and internal coordination over broader external partnerships.

Hadeland CSA, based in Jevnaker in Norway since 2016, offers members shares in local farm produce, promoting direct engagement with sustainable agriculture. Governance involves regular meetings of the members and the core group. The membership, composed mainly of educated, upper-middle-class individuals, participates in educational events and workshops. The CSA maintains local partnerships with producers and institutions, and engages in outreach through schools and community fairs to promote food awareness and civic integration.

The South West Grain Network (SWGN), founded in 2019 and operating across SouthWest England, is a multi-stakeholder initiative focused on sustainable grain economies, biodiversity, and inclusive governance. It operates under sociocratic principles with active member participation through working groups and regular meetings. The network collaborates with research institutions, allied organisations, and other grain initiatives, engaging in broader sustainability dialogues and aiming to shape food systems beyond its immediate activities. Nutrire Trento, established in 2017, is a collaborative initiative co-led by the municipality and the University of Trento, functioning as a Food Policy Council for the city of Trento. It operates through a structured yet informal framework that promotes inclusive participation and deliberative decision-making. Regular meetings bring together representatives from across the local food system. Externally, the initiative engages with national and international food governance networks, contributing to wider sustainability transitions.

Analysing scaling pathways in AFNs

The analysis of the four case studies – Wawelska Food Cooperative, Hadeland CSA, South West Grain Network, and Nutrire Trento – reveals diverse approaches to scaling within AFNs, each shaped by unique organisational models and contextual factors.

The Wawelska Food Cooperative mainly adopts a scaling deep strategy to change cultural norms around food consumption and sustainability. A key example of this is their initiative to cut down on packaging by offering reusable options for fresh products like dumplings. This action shows the cooperative's dedication to sustainability and motivates both members and suppliers to follow more eco-friendly practices. Introducing new solutions within the cooperative involves all members, and the innovation develops through internal negotiations and experimentation. Although the process is inclusive and democratic, it still needs leadership from individuals or small groups of members. As a result, informal governance structures may form, despite the cooperative's ongoing efforts to keep its sociocratic, inclusive model.

Operating independently of public institutions and avoiding formal policy making, the cooperative concentrates on internal democratic processes rather than external political influence. Its model has some influence on AFNs in Kraków and elsewhere in Poland, although indirectly. Wawelska's operational model, specific practices, and declared values offer inspiration and practical solutions, thus broadening the alternative food landscape. Direct collaboration with small-scale local food producers demonstrates the model's effectiveness

and empowers both consumers and producers to actively transform the local food system. Overall, the Wawelska Food Cooperative illustrates a dynamic relationship between scaling strategies and democratic principles. Its focus on deep scaling encourages internal cultural changes and participatory decision-making, laying a foundation for potential expansion. However, its occasional engagement with external institutions and formal political processes highlights a nuanced approach that prioritises autonomy and internal democracy over wider institutional integration.

The strategy of scaling deep is also the one used most by the Hadeland CSA, which focuses on building close relationships between producers and consumers and promoting the consumption of local organic food. This approach aims to encourage members to adopt more sustainable eating habits by changing their consumption patterns. The CSA's core activities emphasise improving food preservation techniques and maintaining high-quality standards while managing the complexities of integrating new products, such as fish and flour, without straying from its core identity. Currently, the CSA's efforts are directed towards maintaining its existing operations and engaging with its members rather than pursuing broader scaling-up initiatives. The organisation prioritises internal development and community engagement, organising local fairs and strengthening ties with educational institutions such as schools and kindergartens to expand its local influence. This focus on deep scaling is evident in its commitment to sustaining and enhancing internal practices and fostering a strong community network. Externally, the CSA's approach to scaling out is influenced by the Øverland CSA model, which has inspired the creation of similar organisations and contributed to the broader alternative food network. Despite its success in building local partnerships and operational efficiency, Hadeland CSA maintains limited involvement in shaping local food policies, highlighting its preference for focusing on internal operations over political activism. One member farm has however taken a stand against residential development on farmland, thus highlighting a willingness to engage with broader issues when they intersect with the CSA's core values.

The South West Grain Network (SWGN) presents a complementary example, combining deep scaling with other scaling strategies. Its commitment to promoting biodiversity and sustainable agriculture is reinforced by an inclusive sociocratic governance model – a governance framework that distributes authority through consent-based decision making, clearly defined roles, and iterative deliberation – to foster high levels of internal coordination and strategic growth. The network operates through regular meetings and has established working groups that address various aspects of its operations, including communication, governance, and supply chain logistics. This internal structure supports the network's efforts to enhance food sustainability and cultivate a more people-friendly grain economy. SWGN's goal of transforming the traditional grain market into a more equitable and sustainable system involves not only deepening its internal practices but also expanding its influence externally. The network's initiatives, such as the development of a new Cann Mill project and the creation of an online map, illustrate its commitment to scaling up by increasing public presence and engaging in collaborative projects. These efforts signify a move towards formalising its structure and securing additional funding, enabling further expansion and refinement of its practices. The network's scaling strategy also includes fostering strong relationships with academic institutions, allied organisations, and other grain networks. This broad engagement helps SWGN share knowledge, collaborate on joint projects, and advocate for changes in the grain economy. The support from research organisations and the presence of a funded coordinator are crucial enabling factors that drive the network's activities and goals. However, challenges such as financial pressures, legal barriers to seed sharing, and limited human capacity due to the voluntary nature of much of the network's work, pose significant obstacles.

Nutrire Trento exemplifies a multifaceted approach to scaling, including the four scaling strategies with a significant emphasis on scaling through and out. Initially promoted by the Municipality and the University of Trento, this initiative functions as a Food Policy Council (FPC) dedicated to addressing critical food paradoxes such as hunger versus obesity, food versus fuel, and waste versus starvation. By involving a diverse array of stakeholders (including farmers, consumers, civil society groups, and researchers), Nutrire Trento seeks to

enhance local food quality and ensure fair remuneration within the food chain. Internally, the initiative operates with a core group of 20-30 active members who employ a deliberative decision-making process supported by the municipality and the University, which play pivotal roles despite occasional disruptions in their meeting schedule. The creation of a digital platform and the establishment of a CSA are key components of their scaling-up strategy. These efforts aim to broaden their influence by enhancing transparency, facilitating collaboration, and increasing public engagement in sustainable food practices. Externally, Nutrire Trento is actively engaged with broader networking initiatives, including the Milan Urban Food Policy Pact and the Italian Network for Local Food Policies. This engagement allows for the exchange of best practices and collaborative learning, further expanding the FPC's reach and impact. Scaling-out efforts include attempts to replicate its model in other cities, such as Rovereto, and participation in European projects like Surfit, which aims to replicate the Nutrire Trento model in different regions. The initiative's scaling-through approach focuses on co-creating local food policies that align with sustainability and social inclusion goals. However, challenges persist, including power asymmetries among stakeholders, administrative constraints, and restrictive legislation, which have occasionally impeded progress (Giovannini and Forno, 2023).

Table 1. Overview of Scaling Dimensions Across Case Studies

	Wawelska Food Cooperative (Poland)	**Hadeland CSA (Norway)**	**South West Grain Network (UK)**	**Nutrire Trento (Italy)**
Scaling deep	Improve internal practices (e.g. reusable packaging systems)	Adopt more sustainable eating habits by changing consumption patterns.	Promote biodiversity and sustainable agricultural practices through sociocracy.	Promote educational projects for the public and schools.
Scaling up	Increase members' involvement and expand the network.	Organise local fairs and strengthen ties with educational institutions.	Increase public presence and engage in collaborative projects	Implement a digital platform and CSA, and promote events for the public
Scaling out	Indirect impact on the foundation of a new cooperative modelled after Wawelska and other kinds of short food chains.	Inspiration from the Øverland CSA model, which has influenced the creation of similar organisations	Indirect impact on the creation of other grain networks	Involvement in broader food policy networks (Milan Urban Food Policy Pact and other Italian cities)
Scaling through	Limited (focus on internal democratic processes)	Limited (resource constraints: focus primarily on internal operations)	Foster strong relationships with academic institutions.	Engage in institutional transformation through multi-stakeholder engagement.

In summary, the case studies demonstrate that different AFNs pursue scaling strategies in ways that reflect their core values of inclusivity, sustainability, and democratic governance. Each network follows a distinctive path, shaped by its organisational model, objectives, and specific contextual challenges (Table 1). The analysis highlights that scaling within AFNs is complex and multidimensional, requiring a careful balance between

growth and the preservation of foundational principles. Rather than being uniform or linear, successful scaling is context-sensitive, depending on the alignment of internal capacities, governance structures, and external engagement strategies. Crucially, the cases show that the expansion of AFNs is not only quantitative but also qualitative, deeply embedded in democratic practices, sustainability commitments, and the ability to navigate complex social and institutional environments.

Discussion: scaling food democracy

To frame the discussion, we return to the study's core question: how do AFNs enhance inclusiveness, empower citizens, and strengthen democratic control over food systems? Examining four AFNs reveals diverse scaling strategies and their alignment with food democracy principles (Hassanein, 2003). Each network adopts distinct approaches to inclusion, participatory governance, and systemic transformation, showing how AFNs operationalise food democracy through decision making, collaborative problem solving, inclusive governance, and engagement with institutional and policy processes. The analysis highlights each network's contributions while noting limitations to their transformative potential (Levkoe, 2011; Johnston et al., 2009).

Scaling deep is prominent in the Wawelska Food Cooperative and Hadeland CSA, reflecting a commitment to cultural transformation. The Wawelska Cooperative reshapes everyday practices – such as packaging use, meal routines, and shopping habits – by reducing single-use packaging and promoting sustainable consumption. These changes enhance inclusiveness through shared decision making, empower citizens by giving them agency over daily practices, and strengthen democratic control by embedding collective responsibility into the food system. Hadeland CSA fosters close producer-consumer connections and promotes the consumption of local and organic food. Involving members in farm operations and governance enhances inclusiveness, empowers citizens to participate actively in food production, and strengthens democratic control by creating direct links between producers and consumers. Both cases embed sustainability and inclusivity into daily life, fostering democratic agency and enabling value-driven collective action.

Scaling through is well exemplified by Nutrire Trento, which focuses on institutional transformation. Its work on local food policy and stakeholder engagement demonstrates a commitment to broader governance structures (Sage, 2014). By fostering collaboration among government, academia, and civil society, Nutrire Trento promotes a more inclusive and equitable food system (Levkoe, 2011). This approach strengthens governance and public participation, addresses political dimensions, and challenges traditional power structures. By giving small-scale producers a voice and recognising their right to co-design local food systems, Nutrire Trento embodies a strong procedural and substantive commitment to food democracy, extending beyond internal community building to collective institutional influence.

Scaling through is less common among AFNs centred on the organisation of food provisioning practices , such as food cooperatives and CSAs. This limitation stems from internal governance structures and the broader institutional and social context. Community-based initiatives often engage minimally with stronger institutional actors, limiting their capacity to influence systemic governance. Informal, bottom-up democratic practices are difficult to translate into broader institutional impact (Fonte, 2013). Alliances, umbrella organisations, or strategic partnerships can help overcome these barriers and scale food democracy beyond the local level.

Scaling out and scaling up also face challenges. Scaling out, or replicating successful models across contexts, is hindered by resource constraints and difficulties adapting to local conditions. Hadeland CSA and Wawelska Cooperative have both faced limits in replicating their models widely. Scaling up, or extending influence to broader policy and systemic change, is constrained by the limited engagement of institutional actors and the difficulty of translating internal democratic practices into systemic impact. Alliances or partnerships can help AFNs scale up their democratic influence.

In summary, AFNs are effective in scaling deep and, to some extent, scaling up culturally and institutionally,

but less so in scaling out or through. Although all types of AFN challenge the liberal, consumer- and market-based model of food democracy, they rarely influence the political processes governing food systems. Only some have developed effective channels to address institutional and legislative barriers, which is crucial for resource mobilisation. Consequently, their enactment of food democracy remains partial – strong in ethical consumption and community governance, but weaker in structural transformation. They can implement the substantive model of food democracy only on a limited scale.

These limitations arise from a combination of internal and external factors. AFNs usually develop sociocratic, egalitarian, flat governance structures based on voluntary member engagement (Levkoe, 2011). Locally embedded, informal-economy models are challenging to translate and implement across contexts. At the same time, bottom-up initiatives struggle to gain the institutional representation needed to scale up or scale through. Limited resources – material, social, and knowledge-based – often constrain their ability to expand or influence systemic governance. To establish themselves as effective proponents of local, small-scale, direct food chains, AFNs need to develop alliances, umbrella organisations, or institutional partnerships.

The potential and barriers of AFNs in implementing various forms of scaling directly shape their role in the democratisation of the food system. Each case illustrates a different pathway toward food democracy, shaped by organisational structure, local context, and available resources. AFNs with limited capacity to scale up, out, or through focus on maintaining core functions and strengthening their internal community, whereas those with stronger ties to broader food system actors can influence local policies more effectively. However, even these face challenges in ensuring fair representation of marginalised or socially fragmented actors, such as individual consumers, minorities, and disadvantaged populations (Sage, 2014). In this sense, food democracy should be understood not as a static condition but as a continuous, context-dependent process of negotiation and inclusion. A comprehensive approach that addresses these challenges is essential for advancing food democracy and ensuring that scaling efforts align with the principles of inclusiveness, sustainability, and participatory governance.

Conclusion

The analysis of four AFNs provides key insights into how scaling strategies support food democracy, while revealing common challenges in successfully applying its principles. These cases confirm that localised food systems do not automatically ensure social or environmental sustainability and may sometimes reinforce inequality as they are perceived as elitist and less accessible to low-income consumers (Guthman, 2008; Allen, 2008).

Across the cases, deep scaling emerges as a central strategy. Wawelska Cooperative's reduction of packaging and Hadeland CSA's direct producer-consumer engagement illustrate how deep scaling drives cultural and behavioural shifts toward sustainability. These internal transformations enhance inclusiveness, empower citizens, and strengthen democratic control by embedding collective responsibility and community norms into everyday practices.

Scaling out and scaling through are more evident in Nutrire Trento and the South West Grain Network (SWGN). Nutrire Trento's local food policy work and stakeholder engagement, alongside SWGN's promotion of biodiversity and institutional collaborations, demonstrate how these strategies can influence broader food governance structures. Both initiatives, however, face obstacles: SWGN contends with financial pressures and legal constraints, while Nutrire Trento must navigate power imbalances and administrative barriers that limit the expansion of its policy initiatives.

By connecting food democracy to the multidimensional framework of scaling – deep, up, out, and through – this study shows how organisational structures and contextual factors shape AFNs' capacity to democratise food

systems. While strategies for scaling deep and upeffectively drive cultural and institutional change, limitations in scaling out and through restrict systemic impact.

Advancing food democracy, therefore, requires addressing structural and resource constraints, building alliances, and fostering inclusive participation across multiple levels. A holistic approach that aligns diverse scaling strategies with explicit democratic commitments is essential for AFNs to strengthen equity, sustainability, and justice within food systems.

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Appendix: Outline for in-depth case-study analysis

Modes of internal organisation:

Where are the meetings held?
How often do members/participants meet?
How and by whom are the decisions taken?
How many people are involved in the initiative? Among them, how many people participate in the meetings?
Are members individuals or organisations or both? **Please mention them** with their webpage (if they have one) in case they are organisations.
Is membership informal or formal?
How do people/organisations access/take part in the initiative? (i.e. is there exclusivity in the access or not?)
What kinds of people are involved in this initiative in terms of socio-economic status (gender, age, origins, education, economic conditions)?
Modes of external coordination:
Do the initiatives interact with other organisations? To which sector(s) do these organisations belong (third sector/public/for profit oganisations?). **Please list them** with their webpage (in case they have one).
What are the most frequent interactions? What is the puropose of interaction? (Joint campaigns, exchange of information, events, projects, etc.).
Are they part of an umbrella organisation?
Do they receive any funding? Is so, by whom?
Draw a diagram (or ask your interviewee to draw it) illustrating relations at Point 2 above:
put the selected initiative at the centre (draw a small circle);
put the organisations (other circles) with more frequent relations closest to the central circle, while the others will be more distant;
draw lines between the circles: yellow if the relation is based on the exchange of information, red for joint campaigns (advocacy), blue for joint projects, green if it is based on funding (you can draw more than one colored line if needed and add colors if other types of relations are concerned).

Scaling strategies:

What are the main strategies implemented to meet the initiative's objectives? Please list these strategies in a table according to the types of scaling reported below:
Scaling deep: initiatives that mainly occur internally in the initiative in order to enable a change in eating practices (e.g. selection of local producers, initiatives discussing seasonality, food waste, animal welfare)
Scaling up: initiatives organised for an external audience (e.g. seminars, events, cooking shows, campaigns)
Scaling out: initiatives aimed at favoring the replication of the organisation (when the organisation supports and accompanies the foundation of a similar organisation)
Scaling through: strategies oriented towards influencing local food policies or building bottom-up food governance structures (e.g. establishing a local food council).
Capacity to meet the initiative's objectives *considering: a) goals b) enabling factors; c) hurdles*):
What are the main objectives of the initiative?
What are the main enabling factors/hurdles for meeting these objectives?
Expected deliverables:
Analysis of the initiative's modes of organisation and coordination in different local food systems
Identification of scaling strategies for food system diversification
identification of best practices and innovation spaces for food system transformation.