



Food System Diversity: Toward a Relational Approach

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Abstract

Diversity is increasingly invoked as part of the search for more sustainable food futures, yet its meaning within food systems research remains uneven and often under-specified. Existing conceptualisations have made important contributions by mapping diversity across production systems, value chains, and support structures, but they tend to give less analytical weight to eaters, households, and everyday food practices. This special issue and the editorial argue that taking diversity seriously requires a more relational perspective, one that begins from eating and follows food system diversity across the interconnected domains of food practices, modes of organisation and coordination, ecological variation, and governance. Drawing on food systems thinking and foodscapes, we propose a conceptual map that shifts attention from diversity as classification to diversity as configuration. The contributions to this special issue show how diversity is lived on the table, organised through alternative and civic food networks, shaped by governance arrangements, and negotiated in experimental spaces such as living labs. Taken together, they suggest that diversity is not a set of separate compartments, but an interdependent and constitutive feature of more sustainable food systems.

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Introduction

The need to transform contemporary food systems is widely acknowledged. Food systems are deeply implicated in environmental degradation, biodiversity loss, and climate change, while continuing to produce highly uneven nutritional and social outcomes. International assessments have therefore called for food to be understood in more systemic terms, linking production, distribution, consumption, and their wider ecological and social effects (Ericksen, 2008; FAO and WHO, 2019; IPCC, 2019). Against this backdrop, diversity is increasingly invoked as part of the search for more sustainable and resilient food futures. Yet diversity is far from a self-evident category. In food systems debates, it is often mobilised in broad and affirmative terms, while its meaning remains diffuse. Diversity may refer to biological variation in farming systems, to the plurality of diets and food practices, to different forms of coordination and exchange along the food chain, or to the institutional conditions through which food systems are governed. Treating diversity simply as an inherently positive attribute, however, risks obscuring these differences and the distinct forms of change they imply (IPES-Food, 2016). A food systems perspective is useful precisely because it allows these dimensions of diversity to be considered together. The FAO and WHO's guiding principles on sustainable healthy diets explicitly connect environmental sustainability, health, and the need to adapt diets to local social, cultural, and economic contexts (FAO and WHO, 2019), while broader food systems scholarship has emphasised that sustainability depends on the relations between multiple actors, activities, and outcomes across the system (Ericksen, 2008). Seen in these terms, diversity is not a single property of food systems, but a relational question that cuts across production, distribution, consumption, and governance.

Conceptual efforts to map food system diversity have made an important contribution to sustainability transitions research. Among these, the review by Gaitán-Cremaschi et al. (2019) remains especially useful because it offers a structured framework for characterising diversity across agricultural production systems, value chains, and support structures, while relating different food system configurations to broader transition pathways. This conceptual mapping provides a useful overview; however, the strengths also point to their limits. Although Gaitán-Cremaschi et al. (2019) adopt a broad understanding of food systems, their framework is operationalised primarily through production systems, value chains, and supporting institutional arrangements. Consumption is acknowledged as part of the system, but remains less fully developed as a site of diversity in its own right. Households, eaters, and the everyday practices through which food is selected, prepared, shared, and valued tend therefore to remain in the background. That matters because food system diversity is not only organised upstream, along the chain, or through governance structures; it is also lived and negotiated in everyday contexts of eating (Ericksen, 2008; Gaitán-Cremaschi et al., 2019). The present special issue starts from the premise that taking diversity seriously requires extending existing conceptual maps rather than discarding them. If diversity is to be understood more fully, analysis cannot remain limited to agricultural production, supply-chain organisation, or institutional support structures alone. It also needs to attend to the practices and relations of everyday eating, to the situated conditions through which food becomes meaningful, and to the ways in which ecological, organisational, and political differences are mediated in ordinary life. Recent work on foodscapes is particularly useful here because it reinterprets the concept for food system analysis and food provisioning practices, foregrounding the socially embedded and place-based character of food relations (Fodor and Jalas, 2025). The contribution of foodscapes, as we argue below, lies not simply in directing attention to place, but in making more visible the relational configurations through which food system diversity is enacted.

The editorial therefore proposes a more relational conceptual map of food system diversity. Rather than approaching diversity only through production, coordination, and governance, the issue begins from eating, households, and food cultures, and then follows their connections to modes of organisation and coordination, ecological variation, and governance arrangements. In this sense, the special issue remains grounded in food systems thinking while widening the analytical lens to dimensions of diversity that are often acknowledged but insufficiently explored. The question is not simply whether diversity matters, but what forms of diversity



matter, where they emerge, and how they contribute to more sustainable food systems. What is at stake, then, is a shift from diversity as classification to diversity as configuration: from identifying different components of food systems to tracing how they are connected, mediated, and lived in practice. This special issue emerges from the FOODIVERSE project, a comparative European research collaboration examining the role of diversity in more sustainable and organic food systems. Bringing together case-based and comparative work across several countries, the project explored diversity at the level of eating practices and food cultures, modes of organisation and coordination, food governance, and living labs. The contributions gathered here build on these concerns while advancing different conceptual and empirical perspectives on food system diversity. They examine diversity as it appears in conventions of good food, in alternative and civic food networks, in governance arrangements, and in experimental spaces of transformation. One contribution also turns reflexively to the conditions of producing food systems knowledge itself, suggesting that taking diversity seriously may require greater attention to the plurality of research perspectives, disciplinary positions, and epistemic practices through which food systems are studied (Mahr et al., 2026).

Conceptualising food system diversity relationally

Food systems thinking and foodscapes

Food systems thinking provides a broader analytical frame for this special issue. One of its major contributions has been to move beyond sectoral or commodity-based understandings of food by insisting that food must be analysed through the interconnections between production, processing, distribution, access, consumption, and waste, as well as through the environmental, social, and economic outcomes that emerge from these relations (Ericksen, 2008; FAO and WHO, 2019). For debates on sustainability, this perspective remains indispensable. It makes clear that food-related problems do not arise in isolated parts of the system, but through the interaction of multiple actors, activities, and institutions. In doing so, it offers an important corrective to approaches that reduce food to agriculture, markets, or consumer choice alone. Yet the breadth that gives food systems thinking its strength can also become a source of abstraction. Because it is designed to grasp the complexity of the system as a whole, it does not always illuminate with equal clarity how food systems are lived, negotiated, and reproduced in everyday life. That matters especially when diversity is at stake. Where analysis remains focused on production systems, value chains, or governance structures, the practical organisation of eating, the meanings attached to food, and the situated conditions under which food becomes available, desirable, or possible can easily recede into the background. What is needed, then, is not a rejection of food systems thinking, but a perspective capable of making these dimensions more visible as constitutive rather than secondary.

This is where the notion of foodscapes becomes useful. Early foodscape research proposed the concept as a way of analysing how food, places, and people are interconnected, and how these relations shape food behaviour and food environments (Mikkelsen, 2011). More recent work has retained that concern with place while moving beyond a narrow reading of foodscapes as little more than a geography of food outlets or eating locations. Fodor and Jalas (2025), for example, explicitly reinterpret foodscapes as a way of framing food system analysis and food provisioning practices. In their account, foodscapes no longer appear as a descriptive supplement to food systems thinking, but as a way of understanding the situated organisation of food systems themselves. For the purposes of this special issue, the value of foodscapes lies less in its spatial vocabulary than in its relational one. Goodman's account of 'relational foodscapes' is particularly helpful in this regard. His argument that food scholarship has increasingly explored food as 'more-than-food' draws attention to visceral experience, politics, materiality, and cultural geography, and thereby shifts the focus away from food as a bounded object in its own right (Goodman, 2016). Foodscapes, in this reading, are not merely settings in which food appears. They are socio-material assemblages through which food becomes meaningful, embodied, and politically charged. Food is produced, distributed, accessed, trusted, valued, prepared, and shared through relations among bodies, infrastructures, institutions, cultural repertoires, and power structures.

Such a reading matters because it changes how the connections within food systems are understood. Production, provisioning, consumption, and governance no longer appear as separate layers that can simply be added together. What appears on the table is never only a matter of production or consumption; it is the outcome of relations extending across agricultural practices, supply arrangements, retail infrastructures, cultural meanings, household routines, policy conditions, and wider ecological constraints. A foodscapes perspective therefore reveals interdependence not only at the level of abstract system components, but also in experiential and material terms. Approaching foodscapes in this way also helps clarify how diversity is lived. Diversity does not present itself as a series of isolated properties, one ecological, one organisational, one cultural. Agrobiodiversity acquires social significance only insofar as it enters provisioning systems and food practices. Organisational diversity matters only insofar as it shapes what foods become available, credible, affordable, and desirable. In a similar way, diversity on the table is conditioned by infrastructures, institutions, and forms of coordination that enable some foods, practices, and relations while constraining others. What foodscapes brings into view, then, is the practical and relational work through which these dimensions come together in everyday arrangements, rather than remaining static attributes of separate system components.

A shift in perspective follows from this. Food system diversity is no longer approached primarily as a matter of classification, of identifying how many types of production systems, value chains, or governance arrangements coexist. The more pressing question becomes how such differences are connected, mediated, and lived in particular contexts. Foodscapes complements food systems thinking precisely by making more visible the pathways through which ecological, organisational, cultural, and political differences are translated into food realities. Recent assemblage-oriented work on food environments reinforces this point. López Cifuentes and Sonnino (2024), for instance, argue that assemblage thinking highlights the relational nature of food environments by shifting attention away from rigid and linear models towards dynamic, heterogeneous, and interdependent processes. Although not identical with foodscape research, this line of work supports the broader claim advanced here: that food systems are constituted through relations, and that transformation depends on understanding how those relations are assembled, stabilised, and disrupted in practice. Seen in these terms, foodscapes does not replace food systems thinking. What it offers is a way of extending it relationally, adding analytical sensitivity to the lived, socially embedded, and locally situated character of food systems diversity. For the present special issue, this is precisely where its usefulness lies. Foodscapes makes it possible to grasp more clearly how different forms of diversity are linked, negotiated, and enacted, and why food system diversity must be approached as more than a property of farming systems or value chains alone.

Diversity on the table: eating, households, and everyday practices

A first way in which food system diversity becomes visible is on the table and in everyday food practices. Beginning from eating shifts the analytical focus towards households, routines, tastes, competencies, and the social meanings through which food is selected, prepared, and shared. What is at stake here is not merely dietary diversity. Attention also falls on the ways in which food is embedded in cultural conventions, practical negotiations, and relations to producers, places, and environments. Such a starting point matters because eating is one of the sites where broader food system relations are translated into ordinary life. Food practices are shaped not only by availability and affordability, but also by routines of care, inherited habits, culinary skills, moral commitments, and shared understandings of what counts as good food. A focus on households and everyday practices therefore brings into view dimensions of food system diversity that are easily obscured in accounts centred mainly on production systems, value chains, or governance structures. Consumption, from this perspective, is not simply the endpoint of the system (Warde, 2005; Halkier, 2017). It is one of the sites through which food systems are reproduced, negotiated, and potentially transformed.

Approached in this way, diversity on the table cannot be reduced to consumer preference or dietary variety alone. Questions of value and justification also enter the picture. The contribution by Wahlen et al. (2026) is especially useful here because it shows that food choices are not organised by a single normative logic, but by



multiple and often competing worlds of justification. Drawing on French conventions theory and focus group data from Germany, Italy, and Norway, the paper identifies three dominant justificatory frameworks among engaged eaters across all three contexts: the Domestic World, grounded in tradition, trust, and relationships with known producers; the Green World, oriented towards ecological responsibility and sustainable sourcing; and the Inspired World, which foregrounds creativity, improvisation, and personal fulfilment in food practice. What matters especially is that these worlds do not describe fixed national cultures or stable social identities. They are context-dependent frameworks through which actors make sense of, and justify, everyday food choices; frameworks that can be invoked simultaneously, set against one another, or combined in response to the specific situation at hand.

This plurality is not merely additive. One of the most significant findings in Wahlen et al. (2026) is that the Inspired World frequently operates as a relational mediator between otherwise competing conventions. When Norwegian participants began baking flatbread at home using heritage grain from a local mill, they did not resolve the tension between industrial convenience and ecological commitment by simply choosing one over the other. Instead, the creative and sensory pleasure of the practice — the joy of making, the satisfaction of craft — allowed them to inhabit the Green and Domestic worlds simultaneously, reweaving those conventions into a new, personally meaningful configuration. Similar dynamics appear in the German data, where improvising meals from leftovers allowed participants to reconcile ecological awareness with practical constraints, and in the Italian material, where the cultivation of a home vegetable garden linked the Inspired World to both the Domestic and Green. Creativity, in these cases, is not a separate value layered on top of others. It is the mechanism through which different orders of worth are brought into productive tension and, sometimes, reconfigured into new food practices. This is what makes diversity on the table a matter of configuration rather than classification: the same three conventions — Domestic, Green, Inspired — are present across all three national contexts, yet the ways in which they are connected, mediated, and enacted in practice differ significantly. Italian participants wove the Inspired World into convivial and regionally embedded domestic traditions; German participants linked it explicitly to sustainability and waste reduction; Norwegian participants connected it to self-sufficiency and national food identity. The national comparison thus does not reveal three different food cultures so much as three different configurations of shared justificatory resources — a finding that supports the broader relational argument advanced in this special issue.

Diversity on the table is, then, better understood as biocultural rather than merely dietary. The concept of biocultural diversity draws attention to the interdependence of biological diversity and cultural diversity, and to the ways in which ecological resources, cultural repertoires, and socially transmitted forms of knowledge co-evolve in food practices (Barthel, Crumley and Svedin, 2013; Zimmerer et al., 2019). What appears on the table reflects more than market availability. It expresses the interplay of ecological conditions, inherited foodways, moral commitments, and the practical capacities through which households navigate everyday provisioning. Wahlen et al. (2026) give this abstract claim empirical texture: the Norwegian participant who forages for mushrooms, the Italian who tends a vegetable garden and preserves its harvest, the German who sources heritage grain from a mill she knows; each of these is not simply expressing a preference, but enacting a relationship between a body, a set of skills, a place, and a broader ecology. Biocultural diversity is not a background condition of food systems; it is reproduced or eroded through exactly these kinds of everyday practices. Yet the same data also reveal the limits of what everyday practice alone can sustain. Tensions running through the focus groups show that food system diversity is not simply ‘there’ to be enacted by motivated individuals. It is enabled or constrained by the infrastructural and organisational conditions within which people make their choices. The Norwegian participant committed to organic produce who reluctantly buys conventionally grown apples in winter because the organic variety available is unpalatable; the German consumer who reaches for supermarket-packaged tomatoes because time and distance make the farmers’ market inaccessible; the Italian participant who compromises convivial meat traditions against ecological unease without ever quite resolving the conflict — in each of these cases, the convention invoked and

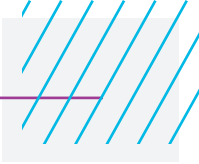
the compromise reached are conditioned by supply chain arrangements, retail infrastructures, and seasonal availability that lie well beyond the household.

Diversity on the table is therefore not produced at the table alone. It is an outcome of relations that extend across provisioning systems, organisational forms, and governance arrangements. Wahlen et al. make this visible by showing that what counts as good food is inseparable from the practical conditions under which different foods, skills, and relations become possible or impossible in the first place. This is where the relational connection to the wider food system becomes analytically necessary rather than merely additive. Diversity on the table cannot be separated from the place-based food relations and provisioning networks through which biological and cultural diversity are sustained or eroded. Plieninger et al. (2018) argue that place-based food networks can reinforce linkages between biological and cultural diversity in landscapes, showing that food practices, local ecologies, and social organisation are mutually constitutive rather than separate domains. Diversity on the table therefore points beyond the household without losing sight of the household as an analytical starting point. It reveals how ecological, cultural, and organisational differences become tangible in everyday life, and in doing so opens directly onto the next dimension considered in this special issue: the modes of organisation and coordination through which food circulates and through which particular forms of diversity are enabled, stabilised, or constrained.

Diversity in modes of organisation and coordination

The second dimension concerns diversity in modes of organisation and coordination. Food system diversity is not only shaped by what is produced or consumed, but also by the organisational forms through which food circulates. Short and long supply chains, alternative food networks, cooperatives, CSAs, and related initiatives structure what kinds of diversity can move through the system, under what conditions, and with what values attached to them. If diversity on the table reveals how food system differences are lived, diversity in modes of organisation and coordination reveals how those differences are structured, channelled, and stabilised — or destabilised — across the food system. The contemporary global food system is increasingly organised around long food chains, large-scale industrial production, and monocultural farming systems. Processes of concentration, monopolisation, and standardisation (Howard, 2016) lead to the disembedding of agriculture from local socio-ecological contexts, alongside the appropriation and devaluation of labour. The food regimes literature situates these political-economic arrangements within historical transformations in the organisation of production, distribution, and consumption shaped by capitalism, imperialism, and colonial histories (Friedmann and McMichael, 1989). From a food regimes perspective, modes of organisation and coordination are embedded in legislation, institutional dynamics, values, and norms that, in the contemporary food system, tend to privilege standardisation, concentration, and homogenisation. Yet this perspective does not ignore resistance, alternatives, and antagonisms to dominant modes of organisation. Rather, it highlights how dominant and alternative forms coexist, interact, and compete, and how collaboration, conflict, and contestation shape the possibilities for change (Roep and Wiskerke, 2012). It is through these dynamics that innovations emerge, niches expand, values shift, and transformations become possible.

The length and organisation of food chains are one of the fundamental determinants of what kinds of diversity can circulate within food systems. Globally extended chains demand a high level of standardisation at every stage of production, distribution, and consumption. They are compatible with regulations that favour harmonisation, with market logics based on calculability and measurement, and with infrastructures geared towards logistical efficiency and food safety control. At the same time, such forms of organisation often produce disconnection, power asymmetries, ecological externalities, and loss of quality. They can distance eaters from producers, weaken feedback loops between production and consumption, and reduce the scope for socially and ecologically embedded forms of coordination. As the focus group data in Wahlen et al. (2026) make visible, these organisational conditions are not external to everyday food practice: the Norwegian participant who cannot access the organic apple variety she prefers, or the German consumer constrained by supermarket logistics, is encountering the effects of organisational arrangements that extend far beyond



her household. Organisational diversity matters, then, not only as a feature of supply chains in the abstract, but as a condition that shapes what is available, credible, affordable, and desirable at the table. It is one of the mechanisms through which biocultural diversity is either sustained or eroded in practice.

This connection between organisational diversity and diversity in diets, food cultures, and ecological systems is central to understanding what is at stake in alternative food networks. The paper by Forno, Giovannini, and Kopczyńska (2026) provides a detailed account of how four AFNs across different European contexts — a food cooperative in Kraków, a CSA in Norway, a grain network in southwest England, and a food policy council in Trento — pursue food system transformation through diverse scaling strategies. The paper analyses these strategies — scaling deep, up, out, and through — and shows that they are not simply organisational or managerial techniques. They are expressions of the social relations through which each network is constituted. What the comparative analysis reveals is that different relational configurations within AFNs produce different transformative capacities. The Wawelska cooperative's primarily inward-facing model, organised around internal democratic processes and direct producer-consumer relationships, sustains deep cultural change within its membership but limits its capacity to reach beyond it. Nutrire Trento's multi-stakeholder architecture, which brings together local government, the university, farmers, and civil society in ongoing deliberation, enables a form of scaling through institutions that the more community-centred initiatives cannot easily achieve. The South West Grain Network's broad engagement with research institutions and allied organisations generates a different kind of reach again — one oriented towards reshaping the grain economy across a wider regional landscape.

The key analytical point here is not that some AFNs are more effective than others, but that the form of social organisation — who is connected to whom, through what kind of relationship, around what shared values — determines what kinds of diversity can be generated, sustained, and diffused. Organisational diversity is therefore not exhausted by the existence of alternatives as such. It also concerns the internal architectures of those alternatives, and the ways in which those architectures enable or foreclose different pathways of transformation. Forno et al. (2026) make this visible by showing that food democracy is not a property that AFNs either have or lack, but a set of ongoing practices enacted differently depending on the organisational form. Their significance lies not only in offering alternatives to dominant supply chains, but in reworking the social relations through which food is produced, distributed, and governed.

A further dimension of this relational argument becomes visible when the contribution of Forno et al. (2026) is read alongside the one by Stępnik and Kopczyńska (2026), which examines the same networks — Wawelska, Hadeland, South West Grain Network, and Nutrire Trento, together with the Ernährungsrat Gießen food policy council in Germany — from a different analytical angle. Where Forno et al. (2026) ask how these networks pursue food system transformation through scaling, Stępnik and Kopczyńska (2026) ask whether they can function as living labs: experimental spaces for co-creating and testing innovations in real-life settings. The fact that the same networks appear in both papers is not incidental. It illustrates precisely the configuration argument advanced in this special issue: what a network is, and what it can do, depends on which of its relations are foregrounded. Seen through the lens of scaling strategies, the cooperative and the CSA look like culture-changing, community-building initiatives with limited systemic reach. Seen through the lens of living lab capacity, those same initiatives reveal a different kind of resource: accumulated infrastructure — trust, local embeddedness, shared history, participatory governance — that formal organisations cannot easily replicate and that standardised innovation methodologies cannot substitute for. These are not two different descriptions of the same thing. They are two different configurations of the same material, made visible by following the networks across analytical frames.

Transition processes emerge when niche initiatives interact with dominant regimes, but while stable regimes tend to resist such innovations, increasing pressures from crises like climate change, biodiversity loss, and food insecurity can destabilise them and open pathways for change (Gaitán-Cremaschi et al., 2019). Understanding

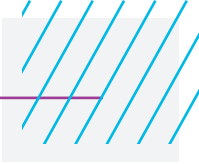
the relations between dominant and niche modes of organisation is therefore essential to grasping the potentials and barriers associated with diversifying the food system. Both Forno et al. (2026) and Stępnik and Kopczyńska (2026) show that this is not simply a question of scale or resources. It is a question of how relations are assembled within and between initiatives, how those relations are sustained under pressure, and what kinds of diversity — organisational, ecological, cultural — they are capable of carrying. Organisational diversity, from this perspective, becomes a key terrain on which food system transformation is pursued and on which the relational argument of this special issue is most directly enacted.

Governance, local food networks, and living labs

Governance forms the third dimension through which food system diversity can be understood. Rather than referring to a level above the food system, governance points to the rules, infrastructures, institutions, and policy arrangements through which values, practices, and forms of coordination are enabled, constrained, and negotiated. Diversity in governance is not simply a matter of legal or regulatory variation (Brunori, 2022). It also concerns the different ways in which institutional and social contexts shape the possibilities for diversified forms of production, distribution, and consumption. Such an understanding resonates with work on civic food networks and food democracy, which has long insisted that governance in food systems extends beyond public regulation to include participatory spaces in which food citizenship and collective coordination are enacted (Renting, Schermer and Rossi, 2012). Governance, in this sense, does not simply protect or constrain diversity from above. It participates in producing it, or foreclosing it, through the practical arrangements it stabilises and the relations it enables or disrupts.

Across Europe, these questions arise in particularly visible ways. Common frameworks relating to the internal market, food safety, labelling, and agricultural policy create a shared regulatory architecture, yet they do not generate uniform outcomes. National implementation, local institutional settings, land relations, market structures, and cultural histories all mediate how such frameworks operate in practice (Brunori, 2022). What matters, therefore, is not regulation in the abstract, but the concrete conditions under which different forms of diversity can be supported, marginalised, or rendered difficult to sustain. The current Common Agricultural Policy, although framed around environmental, social, and economic goals, leaves considerable room for divergent national pathways through its system of strategic plans (European Commission, 2023). Recent work on European food policy makes a similar point by showing that barriers to sustainable food systems are inseparable from the policy processes and institutional configurations through which agri-food transitions are governed (Galli et al., 2020). Governance does not merely set the rules within which food system actors operate. It is itself one of the sites where diversity is produced, contested, and transformed (Brunori, 2022). A sociological reading of governance pushes this argument further. What comes into view is not a static framework within which actors simply operate, but an ongoing process of coordination, contestation, and institutional becoming. Local food networks, short supply chains, and food policy initiatives illustrate this well. In such settings, actors do not only adapt to policy environments; they actively rework the social relations of food through collaboration, conflict, and negotiation. The contribution by Stępnik and Kopczyńska (2026) is particularly instructive here. Their comparative study of five food-related living labs — developed within established AFNs in Germany, Poland, Norway, Italy, and the United Kingdom — examines whether and how existing food networks can function as experimental spaces for food system transformation. The findings are nuanced in ways that matter for the governance argument. On one hand, the study shows that pre-existing food networks provide substantial resources for living lab processes: not primarily financial or formal organisational capacity, but accumulated infrastructure — trust built over years of collaboration, local embeddedness, participatory governance habits, and a durability that extends well beyond project funding cycles. These are precisely the resources that governance arrangements oriented towards standardised innovation tend to overlook, and that cannot be generated quickly or transferred between contexts.

On the other hand, Stępnik and Kopczyńska (2026) show that this same infrastructure can constrain the scope of living lab processes when external methodologies arrive with their own standardised toolkits and



predefined timelines. Nutrire Trento, for instance, had an established rhythm of monthly deliberative meetings that could not simply be reorganised around a project's innovation phases. The Wawelska cooperative's members tended to skip diagnostic phases and move directly to solutions, because their shared history and trust meant that certain problems were already legible and certain approaches already legitimate. These are not failures of implementation. They are expressions of the relational fabric that makes the networks function — and that standardised living lab methodologies, when applied without adaptation, risk disrupting rather than supporting. The implication is significant: the governance of experimental spaces for food system transformation depends not only on designing the right methods, but on understanding and working with the conditions that already exist. Imposing decontextualised frameworks can damage precisely what makes transformation possible. This finding connects directly to the argument developed in the preceding section about organisational diversity. The same networks that Forno et al. (2026) examine as vehicles of food democracy — carrying different architectures that produce different scaling capacities — appear in Stępnik and Kopczyńska as living lab infrastructures whose value lies in their accumulated history. Following these networks across both papers makes visible something that neither paper alone can show: that organisational diversity and governance diversity are not separate dimensions of food systems but are mutually constitutive. The infrastructure that enables a cooperative to practise deep scaling is the same infrastructure that makes it a productive but resistant site for experimental governance. What a network can do depends on what relations it has built, and what governance arrangements can achieve depends on whether they work with or against those relations.

The relevance of living labs for the governance argument lies precisely here. In the food system domain, living labs matter not only because they offer methods for co-creation or experimentation, but because they create real-life arenas in which heterogeneous actors, values, and institutional logics are brought into relation around concrete problems. They make diversity not only visible but actionable — or, when poorly designed, they make visible the conditions under which diversity is suppressed. Stępnik and Kopczyńska (2026) show that the most productive living lab processes were those in which researchers accepted the organic rhythms, values, and relational norms of the networks they worked within, rather than imposing external frameworks. This is governance as practice rather than governance as framework: attentive to the situated conditions through which transformation becomes possible or remains out of reach. A fourth and more reflexive dimension of the relational argument is added by Mahr, Stępnik, and Brunori (2026), whose collaborative autoethnography examines the dynamics of interdisciplinary collaboration within the FOODIVERSE research team itself. The paper might initially appear to stand apart from the food system concerns of the other contributions. Read more carefully, however, it enacts the same relational argument at the level of knowledge production. Drawing on field theory, boundary work, and situated knowledges, Mahr et al. (2026) show that interdisciplinary collaboration is shaped by asymmetries in disciplinary capital — in their case, the early dominance of legal expertise in a project that also required sociological and nutritional perspectives — and that these asymmetries produce affective insecurities, epistemic frictions, and silences that limit the diversity of perspectives that can actually circulate within the team. What allowed these conditions to shift was not methodological adjustment alone, but the deliberate cultivation of infrastructure: trust, psychological safety, and shared reflective practices that created space for different forms of knowledge to be heard and integrated. The paper's heuristic framework — built around subjectivity, documentation, data integration, and recursive dialogue — is in this sense a proposal for how relational conditions of knowledge production can be made more equitable and more diverse.

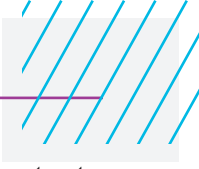
The parallel with the food system argument is direct and not merely metaphorical. Just as food system diversity depends on conditions — organisational forms that enable certain foods and practices to circulate, governance arrangements that support or foreclose certain modes of coordination — so too does the diversity of food systems knowledge depend on the conditions within which research teams work. Dominant disciplinary conventions can crowd out alternative perspectives in a research collaboration in much the same way that dominant supply chain logics crowd out biocultural diversity in food provisioning. And just as

transformation in food systems requires working actively on the conditions that enable diversity to endure, so too does transformation in research practice require attending to the affective and epistemic infrastructures through which collaboration becomes genuinely interdisciplinary. Mahr et al. do not merely reflect on their own experience; they extend the argument of the special issue from diversity in food systems to diversity in the production of food system knowledge itself. Taken together, the contributions to this special issue map a relational understanding of food system diversity across interconnected dimensions. Diversity on the table is not produced at the table alone; it is conditioned by provisioning systems, organisational forms, and governance arrangements that extend far beyond the household. Diversity in modes of organisation and coordination is not exhausted by the existence of alternatives; it depends on the internal architectures of those alternatives and the pathways of transformation they make possible. Diversity in governance is not a matter of regulatory variation alone; it is enacted through the practical conditions that make certain forms of experimentation, coordination, and participation viable or impossible. And diversity in knowledge production is not secured by assembling researchers from different disciplines; it requires the deliberate cultivation of conditions in which different forms of expertise can genuinely meet. What connects these dimensions is not a common theme but a common structure: in each case, diversity is not a property of isolated components but an outcome of relations — relations that can be assembled, sustained, disrupted, and reconfigured in practice.

Conclusion

Taken together, the contributions to this special issue offer a conceptual map of food system diversity that begins from eating and household contexts, but connects these to organisational, ecological, and governance dimensions in a more explicitly relational way. Rather than treating diversity as a singular or self-evident property of food systems, the issue proposes to understand how different forms of diversity are lived, mediated, institutionalised, and contested across multiple sites. Diversity appears in food practices and conventions of good food, in the organisational forms through which food circulates, in the institutional and political conditions that shape possibilities for action, and in the experimental spaces through which new food relations are tested and negotiated. Read together, the papers therefore do more than illuminate separate cases. They show that food system diversity is not located in one part of the system alone, but emerges through relations between everyday practices, provisioning arrangements, ecological variation, and governance processes. The contribution on biocultural diversity and good food conventions foregrounds the plurality of values and justifications through which 'good food' is negotiated in everyday life. The paper on Alternative Food Networks shows that diversity also depends on modes of organisation, scaling strategies, and democratic forms of coordination. The contribution on local food networks and living labs adds that transformative experimentation depends not only on innovation methods, but on pre-existing social, relational, and organisational infrastructures. The reflexive paper on collaborative autoethnography broadens this picture further by showing that taking diversity seriously may also require attention to the diversity of research perspectives, disciplinary positions, affective experiences, and epistemic practices through which food systems are studied. By foregrounding epistemic frictions, affective insecurity, and the relational work of collaboration, it extends the argument of the special issue from diversity in food systems to diversity in the production of food system knowledge itself.

What follows from this is a relational understanding of food system diversity. Diversity on the table, diversity in modes of organisation and coordination, agrobiodiversity, and diversity in governance are not separate compartments, but interdependent dimensions of food systems whose significance depends on how they are related in practice. Agrobiodiversity matters insofar as it enters provisioning systems and food practices; organisational diversity matters insofar as it shapes what foods become available, credible, affordable, and desirable; governance matters insofar as it creates, stabilises, or constrains the conditions under which different forms of diversity can endure and develop. The analytical shift proposed in this special issue is therefore a shift from diversity as classification to diversity as configuration. The question is no longer only how many kinds of production systems, value chains, or governance arrangements can be identified, but how ecological,

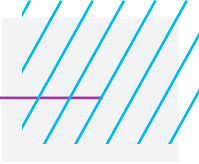


cultural, organisational, and institutional differences are connected, mediated, and lived in particular contexts. In that sense, the special issue does not replace food systems thinking with another framework. It extends it by making more visible its lived, socially embedded, and politically negotiated dimensions.

A further implication concerns research and knowledge production itself. If food system diversity is relational, then the study of food systems cannot be reduced to the simple juxtaposition of disciplinary viewpoints. The collaborative autoethnography paper suggests instead that interdisciplinarity is shaped by positionality, by unequal distributions of disciplinary capital, by translation work across epistemic boundaries, and by the relational infrastructures that make collaboration possible. That argument resonates with the wider claims advanced in this editorial. Just as diversity in food systems is enacted through relations, so too is the knowledge of food systems produced through situated and negotiated forms of inquiry. Future research could pursue these questions more systematically by examining how relations between ecological, organisational, cultural, and institutional forms of diversity vary across places, how they change over time, and how they are strengthened or weakened through collective forms of experimentation, governance, and knowledge production. The starting point established here, however, is clear: diversity is not an auxiliary feature of sustainable food systems, but one of their constitutive and relational conditions.

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