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Alternative Food Systems: Using Space, Time, Integration and Rules as Narratives for Sustainability Transitions

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Abstract

Considering the urgent need to make food systems more sustainable, alternative food systems (AFSs) are seen as starting points for sustainability transitions in the wider agro-food arena. AFSs include a wide array of food systems that are different from and more sustainable than the ‘conventional’ or ‘industrial’ ones. However, the literature often employs the term ‘AFS’ without further differentiation – we propose that by developing intuitive categories to describe AFSs, we can create more powerful narratives to support AFSs with transformative potential.

This review proposes a novel categorisation of AFSs derived from an overview of their history and movements that shaped them. We propose to categorise AFS along four systemic attributes: space, time, integration and rules. It should be highlighted that these attributes are not mutually exclusive. The space attribute refers to the fact that AFSs tend to be more small-scaled, localised and horizontally integrated – examples include community-supported agriculture, farmers’ markets, farm food outlets, box schemes, farm to school programs, or local public procurement initiatives. A second attribute is time; emerging AFSs have put an emphasis on giving food enough time to grow, to be prepared with care and to be enjoyed in a social experience (e.g. the Slow Food Movement). A third attribute is integration; a broad family of AFSs (e.g. organic and biodynamic agriculture) were inspired by the science of agroecology – thus attempting to increase the integration of agroecosystem elements. A fourth defining attribute of AFSs is the attempt to change the rules and institutions that govern the interaction of value chain actors. Some initiatives (e.g. Fairtrade) have focused on the adaptation of trade linkages towards social justice and empowerment. Others, such as the food sovereignty movement promoted by La Via Campesina and local food cooperatives, are more radical and transformative.

We believe that referring to space, time, integration and rules, offers a unique opportunity to create simple, compelling narratives for promoting transition in food systems. Such narratives are needed to guide strategic support for initiatives with genuine transformative potential and/or ambition. We propose to explicitly test the proposed narratives in a multidisciplinary and trans-disciplinary setting.

Keywords: Agroecology, alternative food systems, food sovereignty, local food systems, organic farming, slow food, sustainability transitions