

Alternative food systems: using space, time, integration and rules as narratives for sustainability transitions

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Abstract

Alternative food systems (AFSs) are seen as starting points for sustainability transitions in the wider agro-food arena. They include a wide array of food systems that are different from the 'conventional' or 'industrial' ones. However, the literature often employs the term 'AFS' without further differentiation. This review proposes a novel categorization of AFSs along four systemic attributes: space, time, integration and rules. The space attribute refers to the fact that AFSs tend to be more small-scaled, localized and horizontally integrated (e.g. community-supported agriculture, farmers' markets, box schemes). 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), inspired by the science of agroecology, attempt 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 (e.g. Fairtrade, food sovereignty movement, food cooperatives). We propose that by developing intuitive categories to describe AFSs, we can create more powerful narratives to support AFSs with transformative potential. The proposed narratives should be tested in a multidisciplinary and transdisciplinary setting.

Keywords: *Alternative food systems, Sustainability transitions, Local food systems, Slow Food, Agroecology, Organic farming, Food sovereignty.*



Source: <http://www.sustainablecitiesinstitute.org/topics/food-system>

Introduction

The term 'alternative food system' is widely used to refer to food systems that are different from the 'conventional' and 'industrial' ones and that are supposed to be more sustainable. Typically, alternative food systems (AFSs) have attempted to go into opposition against the vertically integrated, highly organized industrial food system. AFS initiatives to a large extent have also been triggered by the many problems associated with 'industrial' food. Abrahams (2007) defined AFS as "... food supply that, in part or in fully, contests or opposes the dominance of the conventional food networks...". Jarosz (2008) proposed a set of characteristics that many AFS have in common: short distances between producers and consumers; smaller farming scale or a holistic approach to food production; alternative institutions such as food cooperatives, farmers' markets, and Community-Supported Agriculture (CSA) and local food-to-school linkages. Beyond claims of socio-economic fairness and ecologically sound production, AFS also promise access to fresh, tasty food from a trusted source (Freidberg & Goldstein, 2011). Based on these characteristics, we structure our review of AFS along the following attributes: space (local vs. global), time (just-in-time vs. the-time-it-takes), integration and holism (systemic vs. specialized), and rules (cooperation vs. exchange).

Attributes of alternative food systems:



Space: local food systems (e.g. community-supported agriculture, farmers' markets, box schemes)



Time: Slow Food



Integration: agroecology, organic agriculture



Rules: Fairtrade, food sovereignty, food co-ops

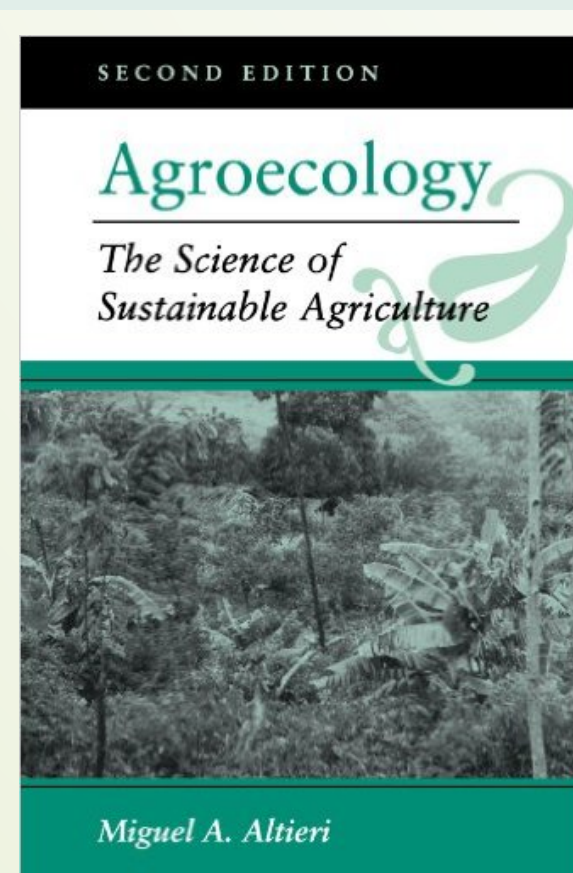
Space attribute: local food systems

Local food systems (LFS) aim to reduce the distance between producer and consumer, relying on fewer intermediaries and using direct marketing strategies. Examples of LFS include CSA, farmers' markets, farm food outlets, box schemes and farm to school programs. The main characteristic of LFS is the face-to-face contact between food system actors, which potentially increases trust and accountability. LFS can thus create socio-economic benefits as they recreate a sense of connectedness in communities and may stabilize local economies by supporting local businesses and smaller scale farms. LFS can also reduce the environmental footprint of food systems by reducing food miles.

Typical expressions of LFS are *farmers' markets*. Group purchasing associations similar to the Japanese *teikei* ('putting the producer face on the product') exist nowadays in several European countries. Another type of LFS are CSA schemes that are now mostly started by farmers who seek to stabilize their livelihoods. *Public procurement initiatives* can also be considered LFS as most of these initiatives promote the sourcing of local agro-food products as a means to support the local rural economy. Finally, *urban food systems* as well as initiatives to reduce *food losses and waste* (e.g. *food banks*) are increasingly gaining attention and being put high on the policy agenda.



Source: <http://vccfarmersmarkets.com>



Source: <https://www.amazon.com>



Source: https://ec.europa.eu/agriculture/organic/or-ganic-farming_en



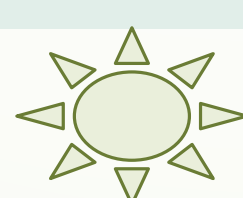
Source: <https://www.eurofoodbank.org>



Source: <http://www.slowfoodbergamo.it>

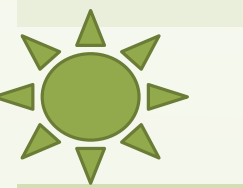


Source: <http://www.marketfreshcsa.com>



Time attribute: Slow Food

Slow Food was initiated by Carlo Petrini and a group of activists in the 1980s to defend regional traditions, good food, gastronomic pleasure and a slow pace of life. Officially, Slow Food was founded in 1989 in Paris. Slow Food proposes that food is tied to many other aspects of life, including culture, politics, agriculture and the environment. It has grown into a global movement involving millions of people in over 160 countries, working to ensure everyone has access to good, clean and fair food. Slow Food initiatives include projects (e.g. Ark of Taste, Slow Food Presidia, Slow Food Convivia, 10000 Gardens in Africa, Earth Markets), campaigns (e.g. Slow Fish, Slow Meat), networks (e.g. Slow Food Youth Network, Terra Madre, Indigenous Terra Madre) as well as a University of Gastronomic Sciences in Italy.



Rules attribute: Food sovereignty, Fairtrade and food cooperatives

Food sovereignty is a common theme of initiatives that aim to transform food systems towards social justice. It is largely rooted in peasant movements that have joined forces in the umbrella organization La Via Campesina. Food sovereignty has gained prominence over the past several years and is now on the agenda of actors ranging from local food policy councils to intergovernmental forums. It is, however, also a national policy objective of many governments.

While food sovereignty can be seen as a call for deeper transformation of food systems, *Fairtrade* is rather an adaptation of the rules governing relations between producers, intermediaries and consumers. In Fairtrade value chains, producers should have greater control over the trade of their produce and thus yield fairer prices.

Cooperative food systems can cover both the farmer end (cf. farming cooperatives) and the consumer end (cf. consumer cooperatives). Consumer cooperatives (cf. food co-ops) represent a form of citizen engagement with food production. CSA as well as other box schemes can be described as "cooperative local food systems" thus having simultaneously space and rules as twin-narratives.

Integration attribute: agroecology and organic agriculture

The principles of *agroecology* inspired a broad family of ecologically minded systems that include organic agriculture as well as biodynamic agriculture, permaculture, and sustainable agriculture. *Organic agriculture* (OA) has been recognized to increase the sustainability of food systems. It is a holistic view of farming that attempts to create integrated socially, environmentally and economically viable agroecosystems. Beyond the farm, OA is considered a step towards an alternative food system and has been expanding rapidly in the last years. While organic farming, as well as other agro-ecological forms of agriculture, can be practiced independently from governance mechanisms and markets, certification is a necessary means to transmit attribute information to the consumer.

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Conclusions and Outlook

Referring to space, time, integration and rules, offers the opportunity to create simple, compelling narratives for promoting change in food systems. Such narratives are needed to guide strategic support for initiatives with genuine transformative potential. An ideal sustainable food system should have all space, speed, integration and rules dimensions. We propose to test the proposed categorisation in different settings in order to unlock the potential of AFSs in fostering sustainability transitions in the wide agro-food arena.

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Source: <http://www.pfc.coop/in-the-store/departments>



Source: <http://www.familyfarmersunited.org/via-campesina>



Source: <http://wfto.com>

