

## Article

# Alternative Food Networks and Short Food Supply Chains: A Systematic Literature Review Based on a Case Study Approach

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**Abstract:** Alternative food networks (AFNs) are commonly defined by attributes of local production and short supply chains, which integrate dimensions of spatial and social proximity. This new form of food chain is emerging as a response to the crisis in conventional agribusiness. This article presents a systematic review of the academic literature on the alternative food network and short supply chain in order to understand the main elements and topics explored in the empirical studies conducted from 2014 to 2021. This review only considers research using a single or multiple case study approaches. The Scopus and Web of Science databases were used for the literature search. The identification and eligibility processes were performed following the Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Review and Meta Analysis (PRISMA) method. Six core topics were identified: motivation of actors; collaborative governance; social relations and trust; sustainability; boundary negotiation; and resilience. Most of the studies were developed in European countries. The results show that motivation to join the AFN and sustainability are the more explored topics, followed by the study of the different models of governance that characterize the AFN. In addition, the connection between different actors emerges, in a transversal manner, as an important pillar of AFNs. AFN features may change depending on social-economical, cultural, and geographical factors. There is therefore a need to explore other forms of AFNs; future research should conduct cross-analysis on AFNs in different countries and socio-economic contexts.



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**Keywords:** alternative food network; short food supply chain; systematic literature review; case study

## 1. Introduction

The current food system has been revealed to be unsustainable, inequitable, and unhealthy, highlighting the urgency of transforming it into a more just and sustainable one. The current conventional food regime is rooted in a large-scale, agribusiness corporation-led, highly mechanized, and industrialized production and processing system, with increasing use of monocultures, fertilizers, and pesticides, and characterized by a long supply chain [1,2].

This pattern has caused several negative health, social, economic, and environmental impacts that today represent major challenges that must be addressed at the global, national, and local levels. As the literature and data show [3–5], agricultural production has become a major driver of anthropogenic impact on the ecosystem. It is responsible for about a quarter of the world's greenhouse gas emissions, the exploitation of natural resources, and the depletion of biodiversity [6]. The consequences in social and economic dimensions are no less serious. Industrialization and globalization of agribusiness have led to increased inequalities in food availability and worsening socio-economic conditions for farmers, with negative consequences for the welfare of rural population. As of 2015, 80 percent of the world's extreme poor and 75 percent of the world's moderate poor lived in rural areas [7]. In addition, the current food regimen is associated with increasing gender inequality [8] and

the rise of malnutrition-related health diseases [9]. The United Nations [5] and international organizations have called for a “profound change” in the food system, with the need for improved food system sustainability along all three dimensions: economic, social, and environmental [5,10]. In this context, characterised by an increasing geographical, cognitive, and social distance between food production and consumption, alternative food networks (AFNs) have emerged as a model of resistance to the dis-embeddedness of the corporate-dominated agri-food system [11]. They enact a process of re-embedding food production, distribution, and consumption [2], to re-socialize [12–14] and re-localize food [15], and to promote local, fair, and quality food. These new forms can contribute to transforming the food system into a more sustainable one [16]. In the last decades, the Global North has been characterised by an increasing differentiation of agricultural initiatives within unconventional food markets [17,18]. This has led to difficulties in providing a unique definition for all the different initiatives falling under the umbrella of AFNs [19,20]. A summarised definition considers AFNs as all those forms of food production and consumption that differ from the mainstream and conventional food systems [11,21]. Various labels have been attributed to these alternative experiences besides that of alternative food networks [2,18,22], such as short food chains [19,23], civic food networks [24,25], or more recently, territorial food networks [26]. The short food supply chain was defined in the EU regulation as “a supply chain involving a limited number of economic operators committed to cooperation, local economic development, and close geographical and social relations between producers, processors, and consumers” [27].

One of the key characteristics of AFNs is local production and short distribution, which are characterized by the absence or sparse use of intermediaries between food consumers and producers [28,29].

Short supply chains incorporate aspects of geographic, spatial, economic, organizational, institutional, and social proximity [28,30–32]. Proximity leads to changes in the way food markets distribute value as opposed to the logic of industrial production; it can contribute to the reconstruction of the relationship between food producers and consumers and the design of new forms of social association and market governance [24,33].

AFNs are diverse and can encompass different forms, from isolated experiments to interconnected community-based endeavours [24,33,34]. The “alternativeness” of these new forms depends on the values conveyed, the goals of the initiative, and the level of radical orientation to conventional market principles [22,35]. They can embody bottom-up organizations driven by ethical and moral values or simply serve as brief market channels. Depending on the extent to which alternative initiatives differ from and oppose conventional market principles, they are termed “weaker” or “stronger” [22]. The initiation of AFNs may stem from consumers, producers, or a collaboration between both, thus operating as individual or collective practices [20,33,34], and can be totally business-oriented practices or totally social-oriented practices [36]. In academic literature, AFNs have been categorized based on various factors, such as their time and space extension [37], the level of commitment demonstrated by producers and consumers [38], the number of intermediaries involved [39], and organizational logic and economic models [40]. Despite the extensive literature on alternative food networks [13,16,41,42], this article aims to provide a systematic review of the academic literature to give an overview of which aspects and topics of AFNs have been explored so far, the types of AFNs studied, and the geographical distribution of researchers, considering only case studies.

The present review is the first to consider only articles using a single or multiple case study approach. By analysing only case studies, it is possible to provide an in-depth and multi-faceted investigation of the issues [43,44].

The selected articles are categorized into six categories identified based on the topic core of studies and the main research trend of previous literature: actor motivation; collaborative governance; social relations and trust; sustainability; boundary negotiation; and resilience. The results are discussed based on each category. An overview of the types of AFNs examined and the worldwide distribution of studies is provided. The article

is structured as follows: Section 2 provides an overview of the process followed to conduct the Systematic Literature Review (SLR) and the methodology adopted. Section 3 presents the main findings of the literature review. Section 4 contains the discussion and concluding remarks.

## 2. Materials and Methods

A systematic review of the literature was conducted in order to identify and analyse relevant articles for the study. This methodology is recognized as a powerful tool for evaluating, summarizing, and disseminating evidence about a given research topic through a transparent review process that seeks to minimize bias and make the process easily replicable [45].

The review was performed following the Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Review and MetaAnalysis (PRISMA) method [46]. The PRISMA methodology provides a guideline checklist with 17 items, which is considered an essential component to conducting a systematic review and contributes to the quality assurance of the review process, its replicability, and reporting [46,47]. In addition, this method provides a flow chart showing the process of identifying, screening, determining eligibility, and including articles for analysis [48].

As the literature suggests [48,49], once the research questions were identified, a review protocol was developed that defined the search strategy, article inclusion and exclusion criteria, quality assessment, screening procedure, data extraction, and reporting strategies. The review protocol is important to limit bias in systematic reviews.

### 2.1. Search Strategy and Identification Process

Two databases, Web of Science (WoS) and Scopus-Elsevier, were used to conduct a literature search on the topics under investigation.

These two databases have been recognized as containing high-quality peer-reviewed publications as they identified the largest and most multidisciplinary number of papers [18,50,51]. A search string involving a combination of three keywords was identified and then applied to both databases to identify articles for the analysis. The keywords “Alternative Food Network” or “Short Food Supply Chain” and “Case Study\*” were used and limited to the title, abstract, and keywords. Moreover, the search was restricted to only English-language documents, and the document type was limited to “article”. Hence, book chapters, project reports, working papers, and other similar documents were excluded. Table 1 shows the final string used in Scopus and the Web of Science (WoS). The literature search was conducted in January 2022 and was limited to the years post-2013, which was deemed an appropriate year to identify recent trends in the fields. Articles published in January 2022 were not included. A total of 206 papers were identified, 103 in each database.

**Table 1.** Final search string used in the study.

Database	Search String	No. of Results
Scopus	(TITLE-ABS-KEY (“Alternative Food Network*” OR “Short food supply chain*”) AND TITLE-ABS-KEY (“Case Stud*”)) AND (LIMIT-TO (PUBYEAR, 2021) OR LIMIT-TO (PUBYEAR, 2020) OR LIMIT-TO (PUBYEAR, 2019) OR LIMIT-TO (PUBYEAR, 2018) OR LIMIT-TO (PUBYEAR, 2017) OR LIMIT-TO (PUBYEAR, 2016) OR LIMIT-TO (PUBYEAR, 2015) OR LIMIT-TO (PUBYEAR, 2014)) AND (LIMIT-TO (DOCTYPE, “ar”)) AND (LIMIT-TO (LANGUAGE, “English”))	103



(a) articles that used a case study approach; (b) articles focused on the case study of one or more AFNs or SFSCs; (c) articles in English. In the screening stage, articles were selected based on title and abstract information to assess the pertinence of the papers. Not relevant papers or those not meeting the criteria outlined were dropped. A review of the abstracts resulted in the exclusion of 59 articles. Two papers were not retrieved. After this stage, 63 were assessed for eligibility.

In the eligibility stage, each paper was further evaluated based on the content and information in the full text. Articles not using a case study approach as well as those not specifically focused on AFN or SFSC were removed. Thus, the final sample consisted of 34 studies.

### 2.3. Data Extraction

At this point, the following questions guide the analysis of the selected research articles: (a) What field faced the empirical study on AFN and SFSC? (b) In which country were the studies carried out? (c) Which type of AFN has been investigated?

The selected research articles were organized into an Excel table containing all relevant information to address the research questions [53]. Data extracted from the articles and reported in the Excel table are: (1) Title; (2) Authors; (3) Year; (4) Country/Countries; (5) Main Topic; (6) Second topic; (7) Type/Types of AFN; (8) Number of Case Studies investigated. The Excel table allowed better management of the dataset and simplified the analysis of the results.

## 3. Results

The results were presented in two sections. Information regarding the main topic, author(s), year of publication, number of case studies, countries targeted, and types of AFN addressed are presented in Section 3.1. A deeper analysis of the main topics identified in the sample is provided in Section 3.2.

### 3.1. Overview of Selected Paper

The papers were categorized based on the main topic investigated. Six categories were identified.

- Actors' motivations;
- Collaborative governance;
- Sustainability;
- Social ties and trust;
- Boundary negotiations;
- Resilience.

Table 2 provides a comprehensive overview of the topics investigated. The boundaries between the selected categories are often blurred, so several articles could analyse more than one topic. To illustrate, an article whose main topic is economic sustainability might also contain information on motivations for joining an alternative food network [54–57]. In this case, the article falls into more than one category.

**Table 2.** Main Topic investigated.

Main Topic	Frequency	References
Actors' motivations	11	[54–64]
Sustainability	9	[54–57,65–69]
Collaborative Governance	8	[36,69–75]
Social ties and trust	8	[25,54,63,76–80]
Boundary negotiation	3	[72,81,82]
Resilience	2	[83,84]

In the reviewed literature, the most investigated topics are actors’ motivations and sustainability, followed by sustainability, collaborative governance, and social ties and trust.

Actors’ motivation includes all articles that study the motivation of consumers and/or producers to join AFN. Sustainability includes all studies that focus on one or more of the three dimensions of sustainability (environmental, social, and economic sustainability). Collaborative governance includes all articles focused on the analysis of new modes of participative and horizontal governance experimented with AFNs. Articles that fall under the category of social relations and trust focus on the role of these elements in the sustainability of AFNs. A small number of studies focus on boundary negotiation in AFN and resilience, highlighting the need for further investigation of these issues.

Concerning the publication trend, Figure 2 presents an overview of publications from 2014 to 2021, showing a positive trend in the number of articles published in these years. This demonstrates a growing interest in AFNs.

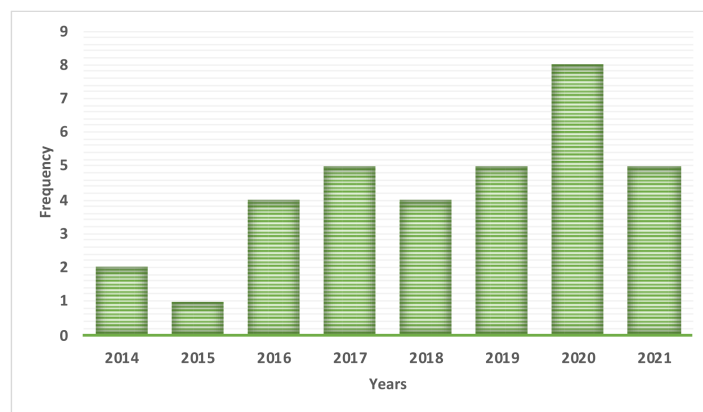


Figure 2. Number of articles per year of publication (source: our elaboration).

Figure 3 provides an overview of the number of case studies targeted in each article. Out of 34 articles, 15 used a single case study approach, while the other 19 used a multiple case study approach, focusing their research on two or more AFNs. The maximum number of AFNs investigated in the same article is 48 [66].

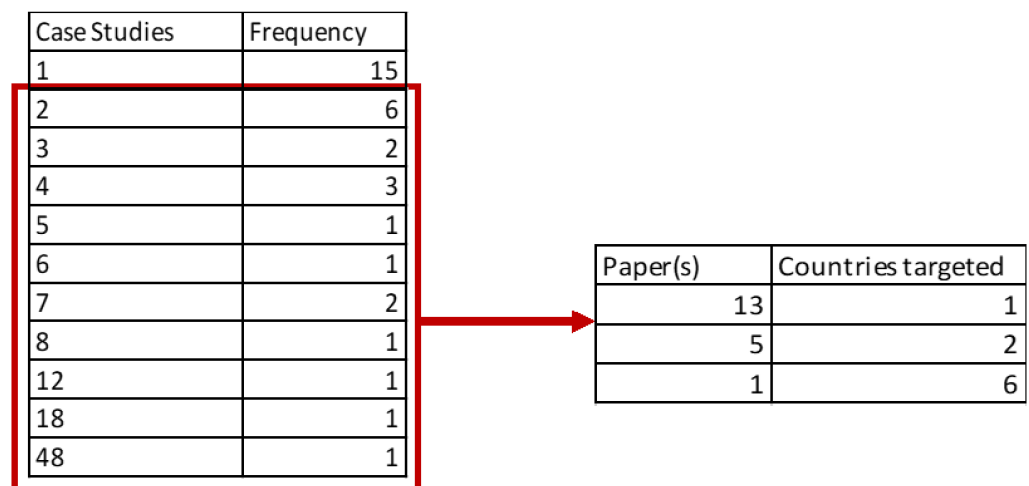


Figure 3. Number of case studies used in the examined papers (source: our elaboration).

In more detail, Figure 3 highlights in red 19 papers using a multiple case study approach, of which 13 articles focused on different case studies located in the same country, five papers focused on multiple case studies located in two different countries, and one paper addressed six case studies targeting six different European countries. The rest of the 15 papers, as mentioned above, focused on a single case study, each covering a single

country. Figure 4 shows the regional distribution of these case studies. As can be observed, research efforts are overwhelmingly concentrated in Europe (66% of the study), followed by Latin America (18%), North America (7%), East Asia (7%), and Oceania (2%). Studies on African countries are not present in our sample.

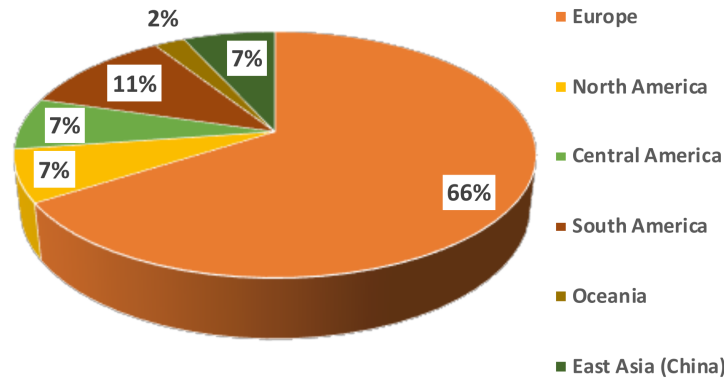


Figure 4. Distribution of studies across regions (source: our elaboration).

The complete distribution of studies worldwide is presented in Figure 5. As the figure shows, among the European regions, most studies covered Italy (9) and the United Kingdom (4), while among the Latin American regions, only three countries (Brazil, Mexico, and Bolivia) were covered: Brazil (4 studies), Mexico (3), and Bolivia (1). The same number of studies concerned the United States (3) and China (3). In recent years, due to food safety scandals and the COVID-2019 pandemic, there has been a growing distrust in the overall quality of food among the middle class [77,85,86]. The growing demand by Chinese consumers for safe, environmentally friendly, and organic food has led to an increasing number of direct sales and alternative food networks, resembling European and North American models such as Community Supported Agriculture (CSA) and farmers' markets [77,87].

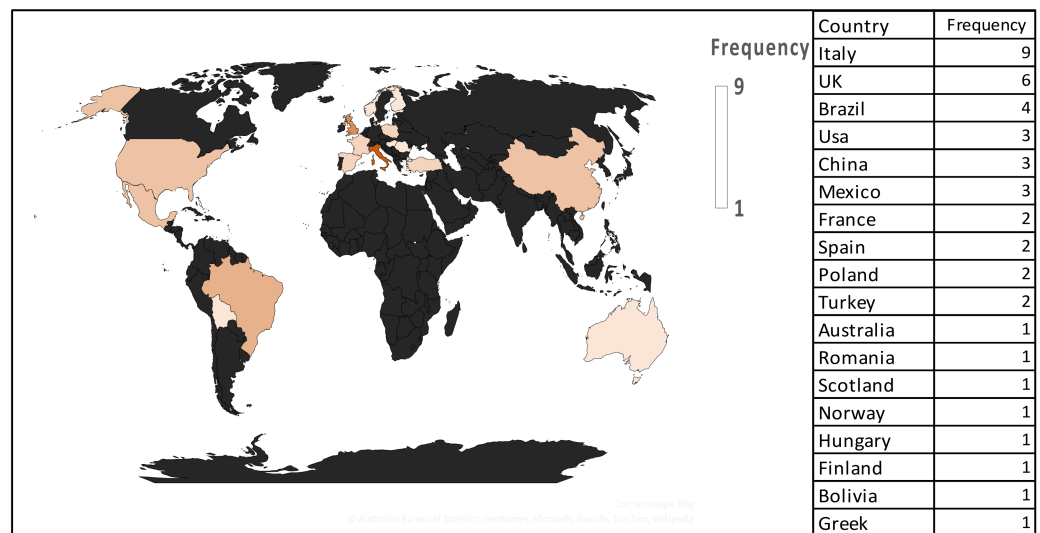


Figure 5. Worldwide distribution (source: own elaboration).

As part of the analysis, the different types of AFNs investigated in each case study and each article were examined (Table 3).

**Table 3.** Types of AFNs surveyed in the selected articles.

AFN	N. of Case Study	Article(s)
Direct Sale	49	2
Farmers' market	15	10
Community Garden	12	4
Community Support Agriculture (CSA)	12	7
Cooperative	10	4
Consumer Group	6	1
Box Scheme	5	3
Food community network	4	1
Community farm	3	1
Slow Food	3	3
E-commerce	3	1
Solidarity Purchasing Groups (SPGs)	3	3
Commercial community garden	3	1
Food Hub	2	1
Marketplace	2	2
Food Collective	2	1
Fish Shop	2	1
Organic Market	2	2
Consumers' cooperative	2	2
Farm Shop	2	1
Local Shop	2	2
Central Market	1	1
Open-air market	1	1
Direct selling and box scheme	1	1
Eco-museum	1	1
Wine Association	1	1
Hybrid form (Farmers' market and food buying group)	1	1
Local food distribution scheme	1	1
Organized Groups of Supply and Demand	1	1
B2B helps match Consumers-Producers	1	1
Community food growing project	1	1
University Community Group	1	1
Small city farm	1	1

Summing up all case studies, 156 AFNs were analysed in 34 articles. Out of 156, 34 different organisational activities classified as AFNs were analysed.

Out of 156 case studies, 49 investigated farmers direct selling. This is followed by farmers' markets in 15 case studies, community gardens in 12 case studies, and community-supported agriculture (CSA) in 12 case studies. Other case studies include ten cooperatives, six consumer groups, and five box schemes.

As far as the AFNs covered in the articles are concerned, the most studied AFN is farmers' market (ten articles), followed by CSA (seven articles), cooperative and community garden (four articles each). Other types of AFN were used in less than three articles in our sample. For example, box schemes, slow food markets, and solidarity purchasing groups were used in three articles each. Other less common AFNs were used in only one article in our sample (e.g., university community group, eco-museum, etc.).

### 3.2. Actors' Motivation

Motivations can be diverse and changeable depending on the country, the context, socio-demographic profiles, and the type of alternative initiative [54,58,88]. The reasons for joining an AFN initiative can be categorised according to the three main dimensions of sustainability and can be driven by individual reasons of personal well-being, social values relating to community well-being, or socio-political motives [59,62,89]. This review has analysed: (a) the consumers' motivations to buy or join AFN [54,59,62,64], (b) the producers' motivations to sell their products through alternative channels [54–57,60,62,63],



and (c) people's motivations to participate in more community-based experiences [58,61]. Some articles deal with both consumers' and producers' motivations [54,62].

### 3.2.1. Consumers' Motivation

Knowing consumers' motivations for choosing AFNs, allows farmers to anticipate changing market dynamics and influence local farm strategies [54]. Support for local agriculture and local products, environmental sustainability, purchasing quality goods at fair prices, transparency, and knowledge of the food's origin seem to be the most common reasons for consumers to purchase from alternative supply chains [54,59,62]. Further motivations are related to animal welfare [54,62], reduction of food waste and emissions [54] and social interaction with local farmers [54,62]. Williams et al. (2015) [62], surveying the consumers' motivations to attend a Slow Food fair, found that mainly individualistic reasons such as product quality, healthfulness, and self-care, as well as taste, influence consumer choices. According to the study of Pascucci et al. (2016) [32,39] participation in alternative food networks is influenced by both the values of individual participants and transactional conditions [64]. The authors [64] analyse participation in a purchasing group located in Palermo, focusing on transactional values, showing how AFN can be a successful business model for consumers who "spend" more time and resources in credence transactions than others, no matter their values or socio-economic conditions.

### 3.2.2. Producers' Motivation

The need to capture a larger portion of the added value was recognized as one of the main motivations for producers to sell into alternative channels [54,60]. The shortening of the chain led to the absence of intermediaries and the possibility for the producer to be a price-maker, recovering part of the value dispersed along the conventional chain [34,38,55,57]. Other economic motivations include better brand positioning opportunities and access to niche markets [60]. Souza et al. (2020) [63], analysing different Brazilian companies selling through box schemes, found that one of the reasons for switching from traditional channels to box schemes was initially related to market failure, such as a lack of quality products, high costs, or poor shop quality in a conventional chain. Instead, environmental and social motivations emerge as the main reasons among Slow Food producers [62].

Non-economic reasons include networking opportunities, reconnecting with consumers, and the desire to offer healthier products [54,56]. Saulters et al. (2018) [56], in a study on fairness by interviewing owners of alternative businesses (grocery shops, food hubs, and cooperatives), identified motivations mainly related to increased access to local food, fair pricing, and sustainability of the food system [39].

### 3.2.3. Participation in Community-Based Initiatives

The motivations for city dwellers to participate in a community initiative—such as a CSA or community garden—can be manifold and change according to different socio-economic characteristics [58]. The study of Partalidou et al. (2016) [61], focusing on a community garden in northern Greece, finds that the strongest motivation for city residents applying for a community garden was the need for healthy, fresh food, followed by two other different priorities: the need to address financial insecurity and the need to stay healthy. These motivations also emerge from the study of Barte et al. (2017) [58], but with a different weight about the geographical and socio-economic contexts in which these practices are located. Comparing two community gardens located in two different Scottish neighbourhoods, characterised by different socio-economic conditions, the authors found that context and cultural capital influence motivations to engage in a community garden. People from the "affluent" districts were mostly driven by a desire to adopt healthy and sustainable lifestyles. In contrast, people from the most "vulnerable" neighbourhood engaged in a community garden to meet the basic needs of life: coping with economic insecurity and escaping the context of the environment in which they live.

### 3.3. Sustainability

Out of 34, nine address one or more dimensions of the sustainability of alternative food networks. From an economic perspective, shortening the supply chain allows farmers to capture some of the value lost along the conventional supply chain [54,55,69]. The added value obtained by producers is an element found in all studies that also focus on the economic dimension [54–57,66,67,69].

The study conducted by Testa et al. (2020) [57] compared two profitability scenarios for an Italian small organic farm: the first considers a sale strategy based on both traditional and 40% alternative channels, while the second analyses a strategy based only on traditional organic sales channels, finding that selling also through alternative channels led to a 76% increase in profits. This is mainly due to the absence of intermediaries along the supply chain and the increased consumer willingness to pay for organic and local products.

Turner et al. (2016) [67], focusing on assessing the different dimensions of sustainability of the Bolivian farmers' market, emphasize the market's positive impact on many peasant economies, women's economic empowerment, rural development, and producer employment. Similar results were found by Bellante et al. (2017) [69]. The authors analysed the economic and non-economic benefits of joining a farmers' market in Mexico. In addition to the price premium, they found a network of solidarity and exchange between producers and consumers involved in the market, with positive impacts on the community, family economies, women's empowerment, and knowledge exchange. Positive impacts have also been found on the diets of producers and consumers through increased product diversification [67,69]. The study by Saulters et al. (2018) [56] shows how equity is realised within the food system through the development of alternative food structures. De Bernardi et al. (2018) [65] show how AFNs can raise awareness of sustainable behaviours and values among their members. From a labour perspective, Watson (2020) [68] analysed labour relations within a CSA (Community Supported Agriculture) highlighting how the organisation of work among members contrasts with the alienating concept of capitalist labour.

Regarding the environmental sustainability of AFNs, Turner et al. (2016) [67] found positive impacts of the farmers' market on local biocultural heritage and biodiversity. Rover et al. (2020) [66], focusing on organic AFNs, found significant positive impacts on agrobiodiversity.

### 3.4. Collaborative Governance

Out of 34 articles, eight analyse different forms of collaboration between producers and consumers in the governance of alternative food networks. AFNs can emerge from the interaction between producers, consumers, local actors, and agricultural or non-agricultural specialists [71,72]. The involvement of consumers in decision-making processes is a form of empowerment at a microlevel [75], where social relations are embedded in the economic and market dimensions. Collaborative governance encourages citizen participation, space reappropriation, and democratic citizenship practices [36].

Ajates et al. (2021) [70] show how modes of governance with a high level of social capital reduce the risk of co-opting this practice into a conventional system. The integration of actors with different interests and solutions leads to dynamic governance rules and mechanisms resulting from collective and diverse inputs, not without challenges and coordination problems [72,73].

In the case study of SPG investigated by Chiffolleau (2019) [72], the opportunity for consumers to participate in the activity of producers led to increasingly diversified demand and irregular purchase volumes from members, creating difficulties for the collective project and leading to the adoption of stricter rules.

A similar problem has been found by Smeds (2014) [79] who stated that the power dynamics between consumers and producers were unequal. Producers, for fear of losing customers, are strongly influenced by their demands, with the risk of a "self-exploitation" [79]. The governance processes and mechanisms of seven AFNs in Turkey were analysed by Kursal et al. (2020) [73] using a collaborative governance framework. The results identify

that the main elements of tension in the collaborative governance of AFNs based on voluntary and informal organisational structures are the lack of active or voluntary participants willing to take responsibility, the lack of communication between actors, the lack of a shared purpose, and the involvement of an increasing number of different consumers. Similar challenges were found in the study of Mert-Cakal et al. (2021) [75] comparing four CSA collaborative decision-making processes, which discovered a low level of engagement among people involved in CSA.

These challenges decrease when this cooperation is guided and facilitated by the participants' shared social values and political activism for justice and food sovereignty, as well as when the relationship between consumers and actors is based on trust, transparency, and reciprocity [71]. Modes of governance can be changed based on the AFN's characteristics [74]. Miralles et al. (2017) [74] conducted a comparative study of 18 AFNs, identifying five models of sharing economies with distinct governance mechanisms. The authors claim that the presence of bureaucratic mechanisms and rules seems to be correlated with the specific origins and size of their organisations. Hybrid models (which combine some bureaucratic elements with informal mechanisms based on trust and transparency) entail a larger number of participants, which are harder to regulate only based on trust and reciprocity principles [53].

One insight emerging in some studies about AFN collaborative governance is the peer-to-peer form of controlling the reliability of the products, named the Participatory Guarantee System (PGS) [69,71]. PGS are forms of collective practices based on mutual control of production methods. Although their structure may vary, PGSs are generally based on locally agreed-upon certification standards and rely on volunteers to conduct site visits and verify organic production practices [69]. Consumers and producers are often responsible for controlling and monitoring compliance with production rules and product standards. The participatory approach is based on trust and reciprocity between consumers and producers [69,71]. Social interaction and participation nurture trust and reciprocity, facilitating the creation of a common sense of responsibility among members (producers and co-producers) for a common goal [71]. The study by Bellante et al. (2017) [69], focusing on the farmers' markets in Chiapas, argues for the importance and economic benefits of these PGS for small farmers in the Global South. In fact, in the Global South, obtaining 'fair' or 'organic' certification is highly unequal for small-scale producers due to the high costs and irrelevance of such certifications in their local markets. Therefore, access to this niche market presents significant barriers for small producers [90,91]. PGS helps small farmers overcome these market barriers by generating premium prices for organic products without costly certifications and getting organic recognition [69].

### 3.5. Social Ties and Trust

Out of 34 articles, eight explore the role of social ties and trust. Of the eight articles, five focus more on the role of social ties and three on the analysis of trust, but these two concepts can be considered related.

Morrell et al. (2018) [78] analysed the role of social and personal relationships between the owner, the fishermen, and the community in Vermont's starfish market. The development of interpersonal connections was crucial for shifting consumers' purchasing motivations to focus more on transparency, price, and quality, as well as for enhancing a sense of belonging and community. Smeds et al. (2014) [79] showed how relationships became the central purpose of a Box Scheme network and a CSA in Romania. Both forms were initiated to build relationships, community, and solidarity among the participants. Social ties can be built and manifested also in virtual space; social media allows the process of reconnection that occurs in person due to geographic proximity to take place online [25]. Geographical proximity is no longer the only essential element for building ties in the age of technology; social media (Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram) and different innovation tools mean that online communication has the potential to create social connections that were initially possible only face to face [25,63].

The reconnection process that characterises the AFN should not be taken for granted and can be influenced by the context in which the food network emerges [66,77]. The study of Goszczynski et al. (2019) [80] shows how in a Polish CSA, social relation was not relevant. CSA was quickly transformed by the dominant market system, becoming a simple direct sales model in which it becomes difficult to build stronger relationships due to multiple factors related to Polish history and culture and the economic and cultural pressures of the market-oriented transformation process.

Relations between consumers and producers need to be based on trust. De Souza (2020) [63] found that a high level of trust is associated with more online shopping and less concern about financial transactions. The construction of trust is influenced by a country's history and configuration [54,77]. Vitterso et al. (2019) [54] show that consumers' concepts of trust changed in the 12 case studies analysed, located in different European countries. In countries where there is a general distrust in institutions or towards institutional regulation, such as food safety regulation, consumer trust must be built with greater effort [54]. In contrast, in countries with high levels of trust in people and institutions, consumers show a high level of generalised and impersonal trust without the need to build a strong direct link with producers [54]. Ji et al. (2020) and Martindale et al. (2021) [76,77], analysing several case studies located in China, a country characterised by low levels of interpersonal trust in institutions [76] show that trust is not only a direct consequence of the closer relationship between consumers and producers but needs to be built with greater effort than in other countries [76,77].

### 3.6. Boundary Negotiation

Three papers in the sample addressed the concept of boundary negotiation in AFNs. Boundary negotiation refers to the negotiation with a conventional system of the values and mechanisms that characterise AFNs as networks grow and have to survive under capitalist logic.

The boundaries of AFNs cannot be clearly defined, as they share elements with the conventional system while maintaining characteristics of alternativity. The sociopolitical context and market regime in which this AFN operates have shaped the boundaries of AFNs. Moral, geographical, market, and power configuration of boundaries can be easily negotiated [82], being boundaries based on both subjective (what is local? what is ethical?) and objective elements (e.g., market force). Networks are the result of the moral, geographical, market regime, and ecological negotiations between the organization and all participants [81,82]. This negotiation of boundaries seems necessary to allow food niches to survive within the "capitalist logic", especially when more actors are involved in the network. This is even truer when there is no strong leadership or well-defined rules [82]. Chiffolleau et al. (2019) [72] finds a certain decline of civic and solidarity covenant in a solidarity purchasing group and a return more to market logic, due to the large and diverse number of people involved and their specific needs. The study of Lundsrom et al. (2019) [81] shows how the cooperative emerged as an alternative to the industrial system, eventually adopting the method of feeding, producing, and slaughtering animals according to conventional practices.

### 3.7. Resilience

Few works in the literature have considered the application of the concept of resilience to the study of the short food supply chain [92], and this is also reflected in the present review where only two articles focus on the concept of the resilience of AFNs. Although some elements of resilience transcend the long-short supply chain dichotomy, alternative food networks [83] have demonstrated contributions to the efficiency of the food system in the face of various challenges [84]. The decentralized and non-hierarchical structure of AFNs seems to be a crucial factor in their resilience capacity, as it allows them to adapt to local needs and respond to changes in the environment [84]. The close relationship between AFNs and their surrounding communities has created a sense of ownership and

investment, contributing to the stability and longevity of these networks [83,84]. The study of Atalan-Helicke et al. (2021) [84] focusing on the resilience of two Turkish AFNs, found also how the connection between actors and the dialogue between producers and consumers, and the solidarity issue were elements that are further enabled the AFNs to possess high levels of resilience during the COVID-Pandemic. Elements that also return in the Michel-Villarreal et al. (2021) [83] study. Characteristics such as connectivity between actors, the collaboration between external and internal actors, information exchange, and flexibility in fulfilment and procurement contribute to improving the five aspects of resilience capabilities surveyed in the paper [83].

Both studies [83,84] highlight the key role of technology as a resilience factor, playing an important role in improving connections between actors, helping communication and information levels, increasing visibility and coordination, and rapidly redesigning the supply chain.

#### 4. Discussion and Conclusions

This work aimed to provide an overview of which topics and issues of AFNs have been explored by empirical studies. To do this, a systematic literature review method was adopted including only articles using a case study approach.

The first findings that emerged from the current review concern the fact that 44% of the selected articles (15 out of 34) use a single case study approach, while 56% use a multiple-case study approach. Most of those using a multiple-case approach focused on a single country, while fewer studies considered more than one country, confirming that comparison between countries is still limited [40]. In line with the literature, most of the research in the study focused on Global North, particularly in Europe [16,18]. At a worldwide level, the most covered countries were Italy, the United Kingdom, and Brazil, followed by the U.S. and China. A wide variety of AFNs has been analysed. A total of 33 different AFNs were identified. Farmers' market is the most studied type of AFN, present in ten articles, followed by CSA. This is in line with the findings of some literature founding that farmers' markets and CSA are some of the most studied forms of AFN [18]. Summing up all the case studies, 156 case studies were identified.

By conducting an SLR, we obtained a comprehensive overview of research trends on AFNs. Six different categories were identified based on the topics covered in the literature: motivation of actors; collaborative governance; sustainability; social relations and trust; boundary negotiation and resilience. The boundaries between these categories are often blurred, thus different articles may transversely address elements from other categories. Actors' motivation and sustainability, followed by collaborative governance modes, are the most explored topics. Contrarily, the dynamics of boundary negotiation and resilience are the least explored.

A common element that emerged from all the articles in this review is the importance of social interaction among different actors in the sustainability of AFNs. The reconnection process between consumers and producers occurs in place due to geographical proximity, but also can be developed in the virtual space of the internet and social media and can partially compensate for the lack of geographical proximity [25,32]. Social proximity helps build trust and transparency among actors and promotes collaborative forms of governance and social innovation, as well as influences consumer's and producer's behavior towards sustainable choices. The proximity between actors is recognized as one of the elements of the resilience of alternative business within food systems, as it helps to bridge information gaps and flexibility in fulfilment, as well as improve the efficiency of the distribution of local food supplies [83,84]. This confirms the capacity of short food chain to improve food system resilience [92]. At the same time, the interaction between producers and consumers characterizes the hybridization of AFNs, which become the result of a negotiation between the people involved, the sociopolitical context, and the market regime in which they operate. Therefore, these hybridizations bring challenges to the governance of AFNs, leading to a negotiation of their rules and the values for which they were born [72,81]. These challenges

can be reduced if actors strongly share similar political and social values [71], or if there is strong leadership or well-defined rules [82].

However, an important element to emphasise is that features of alternative networks, such as also social dimension, differ depending on the sociocultural and economic context in which they are developed [54,58,80,88]. Studies that used a cross-analysis from two different contexts argue how some features, that are supposed to characterize AFNs, change depending on social-economical, cultural, and geographical factors, resulting that AFNs may respond to different needs. AFNs across countries are not an imitation and copy of models and activities arising in other social and cultural contexts but are transformed when transferred to another region [80]. Thus, the social and cultural elements considering the background of AFN cannot be taken for granted across contexts [59]. This is also true for trust building, which emerges as not only a direct consequence of the closer relationship between consumer and producer [54,77] but also depends on the country's history and culture [54,77]. Equally, motivations in participating in an AFN, tend to be related to "individual well-being" or "community well-being" in more favourable contexts, while it may be about meeting basic needs in a more "vulnerable" context [58].

In conclusion, this work provides evidence of the wide heterogeneity of AFNs and the transdisciplinary nature of how they are investigated. This heterogeneity confirms the difficulty to give a unique definition of AFNs and highlights the fact that each of them is the result of different factors and follows different paths. An important element to consider for future research is to explore how the outcomes found in our research results of motivation, social relations, governance, and so on, change by region and culture. It should be important to broaden the scope of AFN research beyond the Global North and Western EU countries, and to incorporate the influence of cultural, historical, and socio-economic factors on AFN development. Cross-country analysis in different socio-economic and cultural contexts could provide information into how the characteristics of similar AFN models change across contexts. In addition, future research should investigate more in-depth the concept of boundary negotiation, thus the dynamic and reshaping of alternative business across time, as more different people are involved and the resilience of short chain [83]. Finally, the future direction of research could be to study alternative food networks in relation to the ecosystem services they provide. Therefore, considering the appropriate methodological techniques, research should focus on what and how different forms of AFNs provide ecosystem services (e.g., cultural services, protection services, regulatory services, etc.).

The present study has different limitations. All the articles analysed were written in English, thus excluding articles in other languages, which could include a significant amount of literature. Moreover, only two databases were used for the selection of articles and non-scientific literature such as gray literature, reports and reviews were not considered, excluding other important literature. In addition, by considering only articles using a case study approach, several possible research topics were excluded from the analysis. Finally, AFNs included in the study, encompass a diverse range of business models, without this review providing a categorization of them, and are embedded in different contexts. As such, the findings of this review cannot be generalized to a specific type of AFN. Future research should be focused on the comparative analysis of similar AFN models.

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