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Editorial: Sustainable food networks: chains of values and food transitions

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Editorial on the Research Topic

Sustainable food networks: chains of values and food transitions

Sustainable Food Networks (SFNs) are developing alternative value chain arrangements that drive agroecological transitions and reshape food systems in urban and rural territories. These networks challenge the hegemonic corporate food system by promoting localized, fair, and inclusive food supply models. However, despite their potential, they have received limited attention through the lens of economic geography and related interdisciplinary perspectives. Urban agriculture and agri-food systems, broadly defined to include interactions across peri-urban and rural territories, offer key contexts for the development of SFNs (Zimmerer et al., 2021).

This Research Topic addresses comprehensive research on SFNs with specific objectives: identifying various SFN initiatives across different territories, evaluating their spatial dimensions at the regional, national, and global scales, and assessing policies that can enhance the social, economic, and environmental sustainability of food value chains. The research questions guiding this Research Topic included: How are alternative values disseminated within SFNs? What critical elements enable these values to have a broader impact? What role do networks and public policies play in developing and expanding SFNs? How do territorial conditions influence the performance of SFNs? Additionally, the articles aim to understand how SFNs compete with hegemonic value chains and the potential role of bottom-up governance processes in supporting and strengthening these alternative networks.

This Research Topic includes two manuscripts that explored consumer engagement and values within SFNs. The study by Sanchez-Hernández examined “hybridization” in Spanish SFNs, finding that members’ values of environmental protection, health, and local development legitimize the adoption of mainstream practices, fostering resilience but potentially limiting transformative potential. Lamarque et al. addressed the gap in understanding the values and symbolic incentives behind participation in sustainable food initiatives through a meta-ethnographic review, analyzing the social, political, personal, material, and ethical reasons for engagement from a constructivist lens, considering identity and social dynamics as core elements.

Three manuscripts studied the role of SFNs in scaling sustainable food. Savels et al. characterized Community Supported Agriculture in Flanders using the TAPE framework, revealing their advanced agroecological nature and positive sustainability outcomes, while noting challenges in animal integration and labor. Belletti et al. analyzed the governance of Tuscan Farmers' Markets, proposing a multi-level and hybrid model shaped by stakeholder interactions and offering a comparative framework. A third manuscript by Sanz-Cañada et al. explored Spanish agroecological cooperative supermarkets: their findings suggest noteworthy potential for efficient scaling of sustainable food through vertical network arrangements and horizontal membership strategies, emphasizing community bonds.

Lastly, a series of manuscripts explored the role of public policy and bottom-up governance processes in supporting SFNs. Pascual and Guerra revealed that while Spanish cities' food policies align with the Milan Pact, their ability to drive change is strongly influenced by local conditions and governance. Additionally, the study by López-García et al. identified significant obstacles for municipalities in the Madrid region, attempting to implement sustainable agri-food policies due to multi-level governance complexities and proposed a framework for improvement. Zerbán and López-García highlighted key challenges hindering collaboration among Alternative Food Networks under the agroecological urbanism umbrella, such as differing perspectives and limited resources. Finally, Anandhi et al. conceptualized food access for urban food system sustainability by examining the interactions between its five dimensions and the urban food environment, using spider web diagrams to illustrate community perception and objective realities.

In conclusion, the manuscripts included in this Research Topic all underscore the critical and evolving role of Sustainable Food Networks in reshaping food systems toward greater sustainability and equity. Research into hybridization reveals the complex interplay between alternative and mainstream practices, driven by deeply held values that prioritize environmental and community wellbeing, while also highlighting potential limitations in radical transformation. Analyses of scaling strategies across various SFN models—from CSAs emphasizing agroecological practices to Farmers' Markets navigating multi-level governance, and cooperative supermarkets leveraging network benefits—demonstrate the varied pathways and inherent challenges in expanding their impact. Moreover, the crucial influence of public policy and governance structures, often shaped by local contexts and facing multi-level complexities, emerges as a key determinant of SFN success. Finally, the conceptualization of food access as a multidimensional construct emphasizes the need for an embedded

understanding of urban food environments to achieve genuine sustainability. All in all, fostering the growth and impact of SFNs will require a holistic approach that considers their values, scaling potential, supportive policy frameworks and cooperation between producers and consumers.

Author contributions

CY-O: Conceptualization, Data curation, Formal analysis, Investigation, Methodology, Resources, Supervision, Validation, Visualization, Writing – original draft, Writing – review & editing. JS-H: Conceptualization, Data curation, Formal analysis, Funding acquisition, Investigation, Methodology, Resources, Supervision, Validation, Visualization, Writing – original draft, Writing – review & editing. JS-C: Conceptualization, Data curation, Formal analysis, Funding acquisition, Investigation, Methodology, Resources, Supervision, Validation, Visualization, Writing – original draft, Writing – review & editing.

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Conflict of interest

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