



# Growing through Connections – A Multi-Case Study of Two Alternative Food Networks in Cluj-Napoca, Romania

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## Abstract

In a context of urgent global socio-ecological challenges, the aim of this paper has been to explore the potential of localised and socially connected food systems. More specifically, through a multi-case study of two alternative food networks in the city of Cluj-Napoca, Romania, their contribution to a sustainable food paradigm has been explored. An important synergy within the networks is how good food is equated with peasant produce, but issues regarding quantity, delivery arrangement, power relations and inclusiveness constitute potential conflicts. Although challenged by unfavourable trends on national and EU levels, the networks are becoming more embedded horizontally, through an intrinsic focus on community in one case and through quality food stimulating good relations in the other case. The networks contribute to a sustainable food paradigm by promoting agroecology, by reclaiming socio-cultural factors of food provisioning and by being part of a (re)-peasantisation process. Exploring how these kinds of initiatives can emerge, be sustained and be developed is of relevance, especially considering their potential for improving the prospects of environmentally sustainable and socially just futures in Romania and beyond.

## Introduction

In different places in the world, a diverse range of local solutions for providing food are sprouting, such as in the form of community supported agriculture (CSA) schemes, community gardens, and agroecology movements (Goodman & Goodman, 2009; Ploeg, 2008; Wezel et al. 2009). These strategies often focus intrinsically on sustainability and health and can be seen as a response to the conventional food system (CFS) which many scholars recognise as unable to effectively deal with converging global challenges (Marsden & Morley, 2014; Ploeg, 2008). The CFS is the supply chain

which is characterised by large-scale, productivity agriculture, global trade and a concentration of corporate influence (Morgan, Marsden, & Murdoch, 2006). This process towards increased ordering and control often happens at the expense of the autonomy of small-scale producers (Ploeg, 2008). The CFS is also argued to be increasing the geographic as well as social distance between producers and consumers of food, which is said to be related to many of the socio-ecological challenges the world is currently facing (Plumwood, 2002; Polanyi, 1944). Indeed, industrial agriculture is a

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major cause of global trends such as biodiversity loss and climate change (Rockström et al., 2009).

The growth of the CFS, as well as alternative solutions, can be seen in Romania, where half the land is owned by small-scale farmers, often referred to as peasants, using traditional practices with a high level of diversity (Hartel & Fisher, 2013; Voiculescu, 2008). Such alternative solutions are, for example, in the form of CSA, where producers and consumers share the risks of the production, and direct selling vegetable box schemes, where producers sell their produce through subscriptions directly to consumers. This paper explores two such strategies in the city of Cluj-Napoca, namely Asociația pentru Susținerea Agriculturii Țărănești (ASAT) and Cutia Țăranului (CT), in order to understand how they can contribute to a sustainable paradigm for food and agriculture. Although the limitations of the CFS are subject to debate, exploring potential alternative solutions is nevertheless relevant, as is also argued by the United Nations Special Rapporteur on the Right to Food who stresses that a “new paradigm focused on well-being, resilience and sustainability must be designed to replace the productivist paradigm and thus better support the full realization of the right to adequate food” (De Schutter, 2014, p. 13).

The alternative initiatives included in this paper involve close ties between vegetable producers and urban consumers and weekly deliveries of fresh, local, and largely organic food. Such initiatives are generally referred to as alternative food networks (AFNs). Based on insights from a multi-case study involving farmers, consumers and project initiators in the two AFNs, specific attention is given to the implications of the close relationships under construction between the involved actors. The outline of the paper is as follows: after providing a theoretical background to the CFS and a sustainable food paradigm, the methodology of the study is presented.

The next section with the findings and discussion gives an overview of the Romanian context and the AFNs after which focus is on synergies, conflicts, and the level of embeddedness in the local and broader context. A concluding section summarises the main points and pro-

vides some food for thought for further research.

## **Challenges and Opportunities for Food and Agriculture**

### ***The Social and Ecological Limitations of the Conventional Food System***

Starting in the 1960s, the Green Revolution has resulted in benefits for global food security through the industrialisation of agriculture and the use of inputs such as chemical fertilizers, pesticides and improved seeds. However, the yield gains have been coupled with side-effects such as soil degradation, pollution, losses of biodiversity and a favouring of wealthy farmers (Griffin, 1979; Pingali, Hossain, & Gerpacio, 1997; Rosset, 2006), showing that this agricultural model is not sustainable (Holt-Giménez & Altieri, 2013; Horlings & Marsden, 2011). Further, the global food crisis in 2007-8 served as a major shock to the CFS, eroding the notion of an abundance of cheap food (Marsden & Morley, 2014; Rosin, Stock, & Campbell, 2012).

Although Bailey (2011) and Brown (2011) argue that the global food crisis in 2007-8 was caused by price inflation rather than limited food supplies, the crisis has sparked a renewed interest around “food security”. The aim is to increase production through the use of the Green Revolution model, albeit with a greener touch and with trade liberalisation and proprietary technologies (Holt-Giménez & Altieri, 2013). Besides limiting small farmers' autonomy, this is problematic in relation to the rapidly changing global ecological circumstances. Three of nine planetary boundaries which set the limits for safe long-term human development have been passed, namely carbon dioxide emissions, biodiversity, and phosphorus and nitrogen cycles (Rockström et al. 2009). These are all associated with industrial agriculture and need to be halted in order to avoid “disastrous long-term social and environmental disruption” (p. 22f.).

In recent years, the agricultural sector has become subject to trade liberalisation and deregulation, resulting in a few large global agribusinesses controlling for example seeds, fertilizers and markets. Sometimes the whole supply chain is controlled by one company and supermarkets have become major institutions for food supply, influencing global

production and consumption patterns (Lawrence & Burch, 2007; McMichael & Friedmann, 2007). Supermarkets can improve food access for consumers and provide opportunities for some farmers, but challenge many small farmers who are less able to compete (Reardon & Gulati, 2008). In essence, the implementation of neoliberal policies in the food sector has led to a concentration of power and wealth in the hands of a few (Peck & Tickell, 2002).

A major implication of these developments is "the creation of disconnections" (Ploeg 2008, p.4), which can be seen as central to the functioning of the CFS. Indeed, the globalised nature of food provisioning means that food is increasingly commodified and disconnected from socio-ecological relations (McMichael, 2009). This is referred to as dis-embeddedness, the "'lifting out' of social relations from local contexts of interaction and their restructuring across indefinite spans of time-space" (Giddens 1990, p. 21). Dis-embeddedness is further driven by commodification processes and the environmental consequences of the CFS can be associated with how it disconnects people from understanding how production is constrained by ecological limits (Plumwood, 2002). Indeed, consumers in the CFS are more or less socially disconnected from the people engaged in and affected by the food production (Bauman, 2004).

Another implication of the CFS is the dispossession of peasants. Peasants are often considered in derogative terms, but here Ploeg's (2008) more progressive way of defining the peasant condition is used. Being a peasant is related to continuously adding value to a limited resource base, providing for a range of needs and striving for autonomy "in a context of dependency relations, marginalisation and deprivation" (p. 23). Although the importance of peasants is increasingly recognised, especially in relation to contributing to poverty reduction and food security (World Bank, 2007; IFAD, 2010), many of the trends mentioned previously are leading to a phenomena called depeasantisation. This refers to a "weakening, erosion or even disappearance of peasant practices and associated rationality" (Ploeg, 2008, p. 35). This is problematic in relation to sustainability, since many principles from peasant farming are seen as important for building resilient

food systems (IAASTD, 2009; United Nations, 2013).

### ***Agroecology and (Re)peasantisation as Features of a Sustainable Food Paradigm***

There is a wide range of alternative strategies emerging, largely provoked by the limitations of the CFS. These strategies are not simply a resistance, but also an active attempt to create practical solutions that are substantially different (Ploeg, 2008, p. 269). In addition, whereas the CFS is largely characterised by increased centralisation, control and homogeneity, the alternatives are, and should be, diverse, multi-faceted, and highly context-specific (McMichael, 2010). Therefore, a sustainable food paradigm is not defined in strict terms here, but instead two strands of thought are highlighted which can be seen as part of the same process of organising food and agriculture in systematically different ways (Rosin et al. 2012, p. 225), namely agroecology and (re)peasantisation.

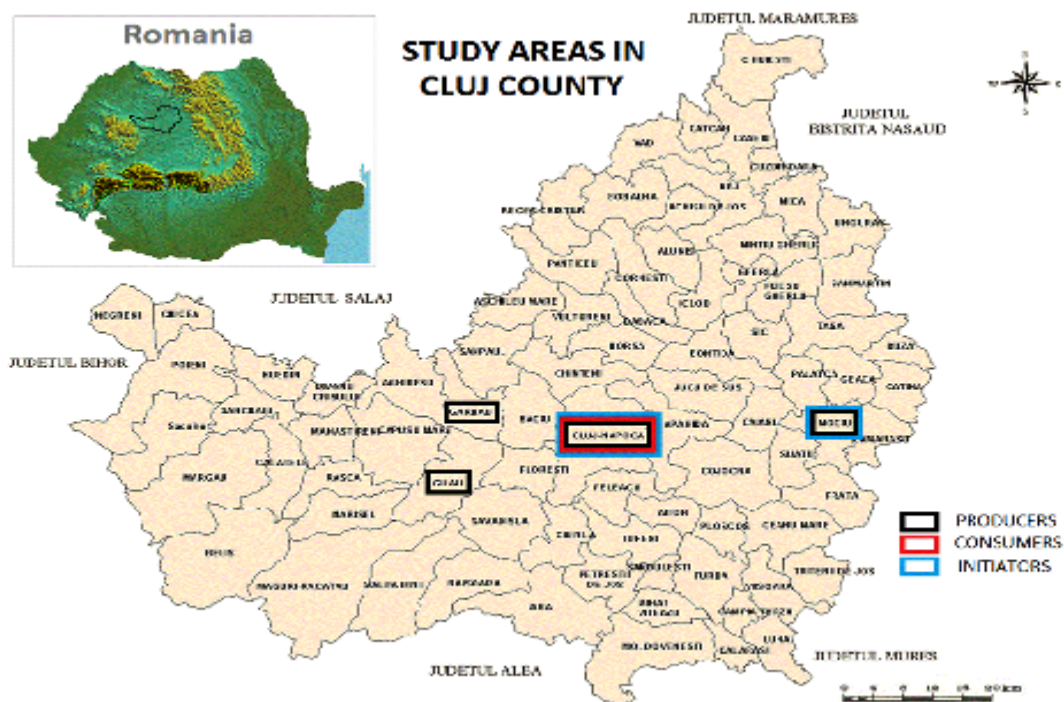
Agroecology can refer to a science, a practice and a movement (Wezel et al. 2009). The movement focuses on promoting local and autonomous small-scale food systems in contrast to the increasingly global and dominant CFS (Altieri & Toledo, 2011). Agroecological practices try to minimise the use of external inputs, establishing diversified farming systems with a functional interconnectedness between farm components and adapted to local realities (Rosset & Martinez-Torres, 2012). Agroecology can be seen as a resistance to the CFS, both discursively and in practice (Rosset & Martinez-Torres, 2012). As farmers become less dependent on external inputs and turn to agroecology, they become "more peasant" (Rosset & Martinez-Torres, 2012, p. 5). Ploeg (2008) emphasises the role of peasants in handling the current crises, by grounding farming in ecological, social and cultural capital. This refers to seeing healthy ecosystems as essential for farming, increased local and regional self-regulation as an alternative to the control exercised by the CFS, and closer producer-consumer connections. Ploeg (2010) stresses that peasants build resilience through these strategies, making their farms "more resistant and better equipped to survive the externally induced crises that are likely to de-activate (if not destroy) capitalist and entrepreneurial farms" (p. 25).

Ploeg (2008) uses the term “(re)peasantisation” (p. 7) to refer to the strive for autonomy by peasants, which both entails an increase in quantity, the number of peasants, and in quality, meaning greater autonomy and distance from conventional markets. McMichael (2010) identifies (re)peasantisation as a key contributor to sustainable food systems. This process is sparked by the CFS, as well as by the reduction in urban opportunities, making people turn to the countryside. Peasants are resisting the CFS through “heterogeneous and increasingly interlinked practices through which the peasantry constitutes itself as distinctively different” (Ploeg, 2008, p. 265). Although some argue that these approaches are labour-intensive and romanticises peasants (Collier, 2009), Ploeg stresses that peasant farming involves a sense of pride and identity which often is more valuable than material benefits. Further, labour-intensity need not be an issue as unemployment is growing globally (Ploeg, 2008; Badgley et al. 2007).

innovative vehicle for showing us ways of creating a real sustainable food paradigm” (p. 21). AFNs generally refer to an increased connection between consumers and producers through a focus on food with certain requirements, such as local, organic, and Fair Trade, often distributed through alternative channels such as farmer’s markets and food cooperatives. The rise of AFNs is related to a discontent with the CFS, mainly regarding aspects such as quality and sustainability (Goodman & Goodman, 2009). AFNs are often re-localising food production and consumption which can be seen as a response to the de-localisation caused by the CFS (Watts, Ilbery, & Maye, 2005). CSA is one kind of AFN, referring to “local markets with special arrangements between consumers and producers” (O’Hara & Stagl, 2001, p. 145), involving them co-planning the production and supply of food. Many scholars see potential in CSA since it often blurs consumer and producer roles, has an intrinsic focus on community and works towards a de-commodification of food (Higgins, Dibden, & Cocklin, 2008; Wilson, 2013).

One manifestation of peasant resistance to the CFS is the engagement in alternative markets, and Marsden & Morley (2014) argue that looking into alternative food practices can be “a critical

In summary, agroecology and (re)peasantisation are two strands of thought aiming to bring about



**Figure 1 Study Areas in Cluj County**  
Source: Map is adapted from Cluj County Council (2014)

more sustainable alternatives to the CFS. A sustainable food paradigm involves a range of heterogeneous practices, often characterised by autonomy, self-regulation, and a re-grounding of farming in ecological, social and cultural capital. Spatially and socially connected food systems have the potential to be part of this process. Later, the AFNs included in this study are discussed in relation to these strands of thought.

### Materials and Method

The research method for this study has been a multiple case study of AFNs in Cluj County, Romania, carried out in October to December 2013, especially in and around the county capital Cluj-Napoca, see the map in **Figure 1**. Cluj-Napoca (46°46'N 23°35'E) is the second largest city in Romania with a temperate climate and a population of 411,379 in the metropolitan area according to the 2011 census (National Institute of Statistics, 2011). Two AFNs were included in order to show

actors, their location can be seen in **Figure 1**.

The main methods used to understand the AFNs have been in-depth interviews and participant and non-participant observations, complemented with a digital survey. Given their limited number, all producers and initiators in the AFNs were included in the study. For the consumers, all of them were invited to participate in the survey, and to select some of them for in-depth interviews a convenient sampling strategy was used. Consumers were able to submit their contact information in the survey if they wanted to be interviewed.

In-depth interviews with initiators, producers and consumers were carried out with the aim of understanding the involved actors' perceptions and experience of the AFN and the context in which they take place, with a specific focus on motivations and relationships between actors, see **Table 1** for a list of interviewees.

Category of Stakeholder	Institution
Consumers	5 consumers from ASAT
	15 consumers from CT
Producers	1 ASAT producer (joined in 2012)
	2 ASAT producers (joined in 2013)
	2 CT producers (joined in 2012)
	2 CT producers (joined in 2013)
Project initiators	Main administrator of ASAT
	Social networking volunteer at ASAT
	2 founders and administrators of CT

**Table 1. List of stakeholder interviews**

some of the diversity within alternative food practices in and around Cluj-Napoca. Although they are compared to some extent, the point is not to evaluate them against each other but rather to gain a broad range of insights on their potential. All types of actors involved in the networks were included, namely producers, consumers and initi-

ators. Observations were made on farms so as to understand the site of food production, the methods used and also to some extent the livelihoods of the producers. Further, observations were made at the various meeting places between producers and consumers in order to get insights into the relationships between the actors, and how

they relate to each other and the food itself. For CT all farms except two were visited and observations were done during one delivery. Visits were made to all ASAT farms and pick-up points as well as two evaluation meetings and one farm visit for consumers. To complement the interviews, a digital survey (N=141) was conducted so as to further understand the demographics of the consumers, their general experience of the AFN, their motivations for participating, and their values when it comes to food and their attitudes towards the CFS. The total response rate for the survey was 53.2% (47.3% for CT and 82.2% for ASAT).

The main materials used in this research consists of transcription notes from in total 31 interviews (20 consumers, 7 producers and 4 initiators), notes and photographs from the observations mentioned above as well as statistical data from the digital survey. Insights from these sources have been merged and contrasted with previous research and theory to form the discussion of results in the next section. Only active members in the networks have been interviewed which is a main limitation for the research. It would have been relevant to also include participants who cancelled their membership in order to get a deeper understanding of the networks but this was not feasible due to inaccessibility.

## Results and Discussion

### ***Analysing the Challenges and Opportunities of the Romanian Context***

Following a history of collectivisation during communism, where peasants were forced to work on large industrial farms, Romanian agriculture now has a dual structure (Kligman & Verdery, 2011). This means that about half the land consists of a large number of very small-scale farm units, and the other half of a few large-scale commercial enterprises (Möllers, Buchenrieder, & Csaki, 2011; Voiculescu, 2008). 90% of Romanian land holdings are less than 5 hectares (Möllers et al. 2011). Peasants in Romania grow mainly for self-consumption, using traditional practices with a low level of mechanisation and a high level of diversity, both in terms of livestock and plants (Hartel & Fischer, 2011; Möllers et al. 2011). Despite its many ben-

efits, such as for farmland biodiversity and resilience, peasant agriculture is generally considered a relic from the past, and Dale-Harris (2014) argues that “the movement of peasants off the land has been billed by the government as inevitable, a hitch on the road to becoming a prosperous, western economy”. Indeed, peasants in Romania are facing many challenges, which in recent years can be seen with the growth of supermarkets and commercial retailers in the farmers’ markets (Prada, 2008). This is related to Romania entering the EU in 2007, which made the Romanian markets more accessible for foreign actors. Such actors are also attracted by the liberalised seed and land markets, and some estimate that around 8 % of Romania’s farmland is now owned by foreign companies (Bouniol, 2013). Since 2001, the agricultural employment has been declining in Romania, showing a trend of depeasantisation (Voiculescu, 2008).

However, due to these challenges, some peasants are turning to alternative solutions in order to sustain their livelihoods. Some consumers are also interested in alternatives to the conventional markets due to disappointment with the decreased food quality in recent years (Vețan & Florean, 2013). Such solutions can be in the form of direct producer-consumer arrangements, which in Cluj-Napoca happens through CSA initiatives and subscription schemes for vegetable boxes. There are at least three such AFNs in the city which have emerged in the last few years, all having in common the fact that boxes with local produce are delivered weekly from rural producers to urban consumers (Hirsch, 2013; Meaker & McFarlane, 2013; Vețan & Florean, 2013). However, these kinds of arrangements between rural producers and urban consumers are not new to Cluj-Napoca, having a history of *hostezeni*. This refers to peasants living near the city responsible for providing citizens with fresh and organic fruits and vegetables, a tradition which largely disappeared in the 1980s (Deac, Irimus, & Pacurar, 2013). The next section provides an overview of the AFNs included in this paper.

### ***Community Supported Agriculture in Asociația pentru Susținerea Agriculturii Țărănești***

ASAT is based on a CSA model from France and started their first partnerships in Cluj-Napoca in

2012. As of 2013, three small-scale producers are supplying fresh vegetables to a total of 45 consumers in Cluj-Napoca. Based on findings from the digital survey, most of these consumers are highly educated young families with household incomes well above the Romanian average. Growing organically is a precondition for ASAT, and this is also a main reason why consumers are part of the network. Consumers sign a contract for a year, a budget is made to cover all the production costs, and a part is paid in advance, as a form of risk-sharing. The freshly harvested vegetables are then supplied weekly through deliveries to a pick-up point, near the home or office of a consumer. ASAT is marketed mainly by word-of-mouth, and the network involves direct forms of consumer-producer and consumer-consumer interaction in several ways: through planning meetings, farm visits, social events and online social networks. However, the study shows that many consumers seem to not fully understand the idea of community, although some state that they do want to build closer relationships with the producer and other consumers. The motivations for being involved in ASAT can be said to be "nested within each other" (Cox et al. 2008, p. 212), with more personal reasons such as accessing fresh, tasty, and organic produce often being expressed together with broader aims such as knowing where the food comes from and supporting small-scale producers. For producers, it is a matter of gaining a more secure source of income, but also to access a more rewarding system, since the prices are directly linked with the production costs and the efforts are acknowledged by a group of engaged consumers.

### ***Direct Selling Vegetables and Growing Relationships in Cutia Țăranului***

CT is a direct selling box scheme, initiated in 2011 by a couple who wanted to provide a link between rural peasants and urban consumers. In Cluj-Napoca, there are four small-scale vegetable producers providing vegetables for in total about 220 consumers. From the digital survey it can be concluded that most of the consumers are fairly affluent, well-educated young families. To some extent, the producers adapt the methods to the interests of the consumers, for example by growing a greater diversity of crops, or by transitioning

completely to organic farming. All producers are successors to previous farmers; one of them used to be *hostezeni* and expresses pride in continuing the heritage of peasants feeding urban dwellers. Consumer sign up for a producer online, discuss the practicalities with them, and fresh vegetables are then delivered to the home of the consumer weekly. Advertising is mainly done through word-of-mouth. The consumer-producer interaction is limited to brief talks during deliveries, and some consumers are satisfied with this, but others value this relationship highly and want to get closer with the producer. Whereas the consumer motivations initially was a range of personal reasons such as convenient access to tasty, fresh, and healthy food, consumers indicate that being part of the network can foster motivations related to wider benefits, such as the well-being of the producer and an active support of peasant agriculture. The producers take part in CT since it is more secure and fulfilling than standing in the farmers' market. Another reason is to continue a heritage, and many producers express a sense of pride in being a peasant, knowing that the work is worthwhile.

### ***Synergies and Conflicts in the Functioning of the Networks***

There are a few synergies and conflicts within the networks which are important to consider in relation to their functioning and future development. A main synergy is the perceived quality of the food (especially in CT), which according to one consumer in the study is of "superior quality" compared to what she had eaten before. Indeed, some consumers state explicitly that they are looking for food produced by peasants, and others do so implicitly by talking about the importance of natural food "that has seen the ground" and about "quality as in the real product, the real deal, not the supermarket deal". This can in practice be seen as a promotion of agroecology, since traditional peasant farming systems are largely agro-ecological (Rosset & Martinez-Torres 2012). Most of the consumers are connected to rural areas in various ways; they prefer Romanian and seasonal vegetables, and claim to know the difference between local and imported foods.

Although the networks generally function well for

both consumers and producers, there are a few areas of conflict which can create friction. One is related to the box deliveries. Consumers in ASAT emphasise that going to a pick-up point is inconvenient and that they would prefer home delivery, like in CT. However, from the point of view of producers, a pick-up point is more useful and also entails an opportunity to build relationships. This clash of interests between consumers and producers could be solved if the ASAT pick-up points were more inviting meeting places (they are now car parks), or if there would be a more expensive box which gets home delivered. Another issue is the quantity of food, with many consumers (especially in CT), emphasising that the amount of vegetables is excessive. In ASAT, the quantity is co-decided, but the actual quantity differs from year to year due to weather differences. It is thus difficult to satisfy the needs of all consumers due to variability. However, large quantities can be a way to build relationships, since consumers often solve the issue by sharing food with colleagues, family or friends.

There are some unequal power dynamics to consider, especially within ASAT. The co-planning of the production is largely a result of mutual discussions between the actors, but the consumers have some leverage on the producer in those interactions. Consumers want the producer to “be more open and flexible to our suggestions” and make requests on what crops to grow and how to do it. In CT, there are also unequal power relations to some extent, with consumers requesting smaller boxes and more or less of certain vegetables. The producers accommodate to these requests since they are afraid to lose customers, but this entails a risk of “self-exploitation” (Jarosz, 2008, p. 241) as they put in more time and effort. The consumers in both networks are affluent and highly educated, which raises the issue of inclusiveness. These particular networks should not be seen as universal solutions, but it is problematic that it might be more difficult for low-income groups to access good quality food in Cluj-Napoca.

Thus, CT and ASAT constitute fairly strong forms of AFNs since they are organising food provisioning differently through short and connected supply chains, as well as providing food with certain

characteristics (Watts et al. 2005). ASAT has the potential to be a more transformational mode of food provisioning, due to the intrinsic focus on community (Hinrichs, 2000; Kloppenburg, Hendrickson, & Stevenson, 1996). However, CT consumers are more satisfied with most aspects of their network, indicating that the CT model is better suited to the interests of the consumers.

### ***Elements of Horizontal and Vertical Embeddedness in the Networks***

In contrast to how social relations largely are lifted out of transactions within the CFS, embeddedness is about bringing them back, which according to Granovetter (1985, p. 490), can change the nature of exchange between actors, for example by generating trust. It also involves a concern for wider common goods over or in addition to personal interests; “the willingness of actors to offset purely personal financial incentives against social criteria involving collective, community or environmental benefits” (Sage, 2003, p. 48). ASAT and CT both represent embedded forms of food provisioning, with the food representing something more than just a product – it matters where and how it was made. ASAT is explicitly focusing on creating relationships between producers and consumers; there is a notion of community and solidarity. CT is also building relationships between actors, through a process where the perceived quality of the food is important. The quality of the produce seems to accords with local notions of good taste (Morgan et al. 2006). Although the consumers in many cases joined the networks in pursuit of easy access to good food, many of them they express interest in creating more embedded food systems, by visiting the farm and connecting with the producer.

Similarly, the producers are satisfied with having more embedded relations than in the farmers’ markets: “when you know that the customers are happy you are also happy”. They emphasise the sense of pride in providing good food for people in the city. Creating an identity in this way can be related to Ploeg (2008)’s notion of a peasant strive for autonomy. According to Ploeg, peasants engage in self-organised and embedded food systems as a way to position themselves as distinctively different from the CFS and to in-



crease their autonomy and legitimacy. In this way, ASAT and CT can be seen as part of a (re)peasantisation process. Seeds of this process are found among the consumers as well since some of them are interested in moving to the countryside to engage in peasant farming themselves. Besides exploring relationships on a local, horizontal level, Sonnino and Marsden (2006) stress the importance of looking into broader political and institutional dimensions of embeddedness, the vertical level. Trends on these levels can facilitate for or hinder the development of AFNs. On a national level, the Romanian National Rural Development Plan for 2007-2013 focused largely on increasing the competitiveness of the agricultural sector in order to participate in global markets, and facilitating the movement of labour out of agriculture (Government of Romania, 2010). The plan for 2014 onwards is under development and according to Szocs (2013) it has similar aims and is likely to involve "the end of peasant farming in Romania".

As mentioned previously, land and seed markets are becoming more liberalised in Romania. 94 foreign companies had registered seeds on the Romanian market in 2012 (Ministry of Agriculture & Rural Development, 2012). Producers in CT also mention how seed companies are promoting the use of hybrid and other commercial seeds to peasants. Replacing traditional seeds with hybrids can reduce resilience and autonomy, since these seeds are often infertile, meaning that their usage replicates a model of industrial agriculture, with a constant need for external inputs (De Schutter, 2010). Further, from 2014, land in Romania is available to buy also for companies in the EU. The result is that Romanian farmland is increasingly controlled by large-scale agribusinesses wanting to produce mainly for export (Bouniol, 2013). Land prices have increased during the last decade and are likely to continue doing so as competition increases (Voiculescu, 2008). This can be a major obstacle for those who want to move to the countryside and constitute a pressure on peasants to sell their land.

The development of the EU Common Agricultural Policy (CAP) may have implications for AFNs in Romania. This policy has largely been unfavourable for peasants, due to an unbalanced focus on

productivist agriculture rather than rural development (Gorton, Hubbard, & Hubbard, 2009). Subsidies are only eligible for farms over 1 hectare, and have mainly been used by large-scale commercial enterprises (Möllers et al. 2011). Although the CAP has increased its focus on rural development and sustainability in recent years, many argue that it still mainly gives incentives for "agricultural intensification, despite its likely ecological costs" (Hartel & Fischer, 2013, p. 7).

As has been argued above, engaging in AFNs and turning to agroecology are important strategies in peasants' strive for autonomy (Ploeg, 2008). However, agroecology is not an explicit aim within these AFNs and not seen as a political strategy. Gonzalez de Molina (2013) emphasises that for agroecology to be able to effectively challenge the CFS, politics has to be at the centre which involves seeing how food production is closely "linked to the technological, political, economic, social, and cultural aspects of the broader food system" (Tomich et al. 2011, p. 213), in other words the vertical embeddedness. The actors involved in CT and ASAT are largely not aware of broader trends influencing food and agriculture in Romania, which indeed is a limitation. However, this could be dealt with by strengthening producer-consumer relationships since "[n]o agroecological transition will be fully successful without a major alliance between producers and consumers" (Gonzalez de Molina, 2013, p. 56).

## Conclusions

What can be concluded from the preceding analysis is that ASAT and CT both accommodate to consumers' need for tasty, good quality, and local produce and producers' need for a more secure and rewarding market. CT consumers are more satisfied with their network, but ASAT might be a more transformational mode of food provisioning, through the focus on community and solidarity. Potential conflicts lie in issues regarding food quantity, the delivery system, unequal power relations, and inclusiveness. A major synergy is the idea of quality produce being closely tied to peasant production, which constitutes a main embedding factor, especially within CT, where it assists in strengthening producer-consumer relations. Thus,

although the vertical embeddedness is limited considering disadvantageous trends on national and EU levels, the networks are in the process of becoming more embedded in a horizontally which improves the prospects of contributing to a sustainable food paradigm. Furthermore, the equating of quality food with peasant produce can be seen as a promotion of agroecology, which contributes to a sustainable food paradigm. Further, AFNs such as CT and ASAT could play an important role in creating strong alliances between producers and consumers. By strengthening these relationships, broader benefits, for example related to peasant livelihoods and environmental sustainability, could become central aims.

The AFNs also contribute to a sustainable food paradigm by highlighting socio-cultural aspects of agri-food, which can serve to position the AFNs as qualitatively different from the CFS. In CT and ASAT, this happens through producers expressing pride in providing urban citizens with food, consumers seeing peasants as an important part of the Romanian identity and through the focus on community and solidarity. Similarly, these AFNs can be seen as part of (re)peasantisation process, whereby the autonomy of peasants is increased. However, in order to effectively establish a new paradigm, it is important to consider how alternative practices can build connections between each other so as to constitute a more significant counter-force to the CFS and the trend of de-peasantisation. This includes further stressing the socio-cultural aspects of food and recognising the political significance of participating in AFNs.

ASAT and CT provide benefits for both consumers and producers and can also have broader socio-ecological benefits considering the intrinsic focus on sustainability and health. The direct connections between the involved actors are interesting since they seem to be deepening a sense of co-dependence, solidarity, and community. This could serve as an important way to strengthen the networks, but broader political and institutional frameworks are largely favouring a more productivist kind of development for food and agriculture in Romania.

Local responses to the limitations of the CFS are

developing in various places around the world and studying how these innovative practices can emerge, be sustained and developed, can provide important insights on sustainable solutions for food and agriculture. Thus, considering their potential socio-ecological benefits, it is important to explore how to better facilitate for the development of AFNs, rather than hinder them. More generally, instead of aiming to find a one-size-fits-all agri-food solution, recognising the importance of autonomy and facilitating for people and communities to devise meaningful solutions for themselves, could improve the prospects of ensuring widespread environmental sustainability and social justice.

For future research it is relevant to look into to what extent initiatives like ASAT and CT can or should explicitly challenge the CFS, considering that alternative solutions may have limited prospects if the CFS increases its dominance. Building alliances has been mentioned as an important strategy for AFNs and a potential research agenda can be on examining how alliances can be built between different actors and initiatives. Furthermore, whereas most research on AFNs focus on producers and consumers, it is of high relevance to also explore the role of initiators in starting up, sustaining, and influencing the development of AFNs. These kinds of alternative initiatives are flourishing in many places around the globe and should be explored further in order to more thoroughly understand their functioning and potential broader implications for sustainability.

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## Conflict of Interests

The author hereby declares that there is no conflict of interests.

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