



Shortening the chains: Social relations and Dynamics of production in Uppland's Alternative Food Networks

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Abstract

Current global food systems are characterised by a highly concentrated capitalist market where food is treated as a globalised hyper commodity and small-scale farmers are pushed into the side-line. The need for the transformation of that food system is urgent and acknowledged worldwide. Alternative food networks (AFNs) initiatives have emerged around the globe as opposition towards the conventional food system. This thesis investigates the potential of AFNs to be the steppingstone for the transformation of the current food system, by bringing change on a local level in the Swedish region of Uppland through their commoning practices. A qualitative approach was followed including in-depth interviews with seven farmers and two network representatives. The empirical material was analysed through a political ecology perspective and the concept of food commoning. The study concludes that AFNs contribute to changing the social relations among producers by enabling trust and a strong community feeling through an idea of collective management that is not connected to property but is related to the common governance of food as a resource and the collective management of the allocation of production. Participants saw AFNs as an effective way to shorten food chains and avoid intermediaries, but none believed that AFNs could replace the conventional food system. Overall, the analysis shows that operating through AFNs generates alternative dynamics of producing, exchanging, and managing resources, which involves a transparent and inclusionary system of collective management. This study is a part of the ongoing academic debate on the weaknesses and limitations of AFNs and their contribution to the transformation of the current food system.

Key words: Alternative Food Networks, Dynamics of production, Food commoning, Political Ecology, Social relations, Sweden

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Abbreviations

AFNs	Alternative Food Networks
CFS	Conventional Food System
CSA	Community Supported Agriculture
PE	Political Ecology
PRA	Participatory Rural Appraisal

1. Introduction

Food is a globalized hyper-commodity, and the world's food economy is characterized by an increasingly global market for food (Clapp 2016). The need for the transformation of the current food system, towards a more just and farmer-centred one, and the urgency to produce food for nearby markets that are more local to the producers is acknowledged worldwide (Drottberger et al. 2021).

The Swedish food market is highly concentrated, being one of the most concentrated markets in Europe, and the concentration keeps growing. 86% of the market share is held by the three largest retailers (Ghosh & Eriksson 2019). Supermarket concentration, as a global phenomenon, diminishes the available space for small-scale farmers to enter the market in the first place, due to the fact that different stages across the food supply chain are being controlled solely by few big transnational corporations (Pimbert 2022), which decreases diversity within the food system and leads to increased vulnerability (Clapp 2016). This phenomenon is highly observed in the Swedish food market and leads to the exclusion of small-scale farmers that make use of alternative and less intensive production methods (Drottberger et al. 2021).

To cope with the competition, small-scale farmers have to supply larger volumes per client and transaction. Smallholder farmers, with lower ability to spread the cost over a larger amount of products, and with low financial capital for inputs and machinery often stay on the side-lines (Brown and Sander 2007) and need to look for other channels to allocate their production and make a living (Blumberg et al. 2020). The emergence of informal Alternative Food Networks (AFNs) as a way for small-scale farmers to allocate their production is often stated in the literature. Those AFNs functioned as channels and became popular between small-scale producers that were unable to cope with the Conventional Food System's (CFS) requirements and therefore were excluded (ibid.).

Some of the reasons for this exclusion are supermarkets' private standards, and their aggressive business practices (Brown and Sander 2007). Supermarkets are obliged to follow strict regulatory requirements to ensure safety and quality of the

products. However, according to Brown and Sander (2007), supermarkets tend to go beyond the mandatory regulations, by setting their own stricter private standards, that go even further than the regulatory compliance and include issues such as integrated crop management, environmental protection, and farm-to-fork traceability. The development of new systems for reporting and documenting, and minimum quantities of produced goods for those systems to be effective are required if the producers want to comply with the standards (ibid.). This adds on to the burden of the small-scale farmers due to additional costs that the retailers are not willing to pay (ibid.) which increases the pressure as the farmers cannot invest in the equipment and the training to meet these standards (Blumberg et al. 2020).

Furthermore, the commodification of food is the process that has led to today's dominant industrial system that fully controls international food trade (Vivero-Pol 2017). By treating food as a commodity it loses its multidimensional value where food is seen as a basic human need, a natural resource, and an important cultural pillar for many civilizations and therefore it has been declared as a human right by the United Nations (Vivero Pol 2013). Additionally, supermarket concentration increases the physical distance between producers and consumers and the competition between local and imported products because fewer people are involved in food production and even fewer people are aware of how food is produced in general (Milestad et al. 2010). According to Clapp (2016), the fact that farmers' choices about production have become distinctively disconnected from consumers' choices about consumption increases this distance even more.

In this thesis I will dive into the world of the existing local Alternative Food Networks in the Swedish region of Uppland, to understand their contribution to changing the social relations and the dynamics of production on a local level by exploring their commoning practices, as a part of the broader discussion on the food system's transformation.

More specifically, following a qualitative approach, I will gather empirical material from AFN representatives and small-scale producers that participate in them to understand the social interactions between those producers as parts of the AFNs and to investigate how production is organised. It is also important to explore if there are commoning practices that could be identified within the operation of

AFNs in order to understand their contribution to changing the social relations and dynamics of production in Uppland region.

The empirical material will be analysed from a political ecology perspective, combined with the analytical concept of food commoning. Political ecology asks what is being produced and for whom (Flachs 2020) and attempts to link place-specific conditions to different scales and processes and will help me understand AFNs' position in the existing highly concentrated, capitalist economy. As far as commoning is concerned, it challenges dominant relations of production through a collective management of resources, and it will help me explore the transformative capacity of AFNs.

The highly concentrated and commodified food market as described above, combined with a significant decrease in the people involved in food production have lightened up an academic debate about the weaknesses and limitations of AFNs and their contribution to the transformation of the current food system. On the one hand political economists argue that structural processes limit the potential of AFNs to actively contribute to the transformation of the current food system and at the same time they hinder farmers' ability to be solely dependent on farming for making a living (Goodman 2012; Goodman 2004 in Blumberg et al. 2020). On the other hand, scholars focusing on the cultural and social aspects of AFNs criticize political economists and they identify the significance of the values, practices, and social arrangements that the initiation and maintenance of AFNs generate regardless of whether they challenge capital directly or not (Blumberg et al. 2020).

In this congested and competitive supply chain, producers seek alternative distribution channels. Alternative food networks (AFNs) could be considered as such channels. AFNs are short "horizontal" food supply chains for food distribution, that try to build ties between producers and consumers, ties that could be seen as relational and mutually constituted (Goodman 2012). Although there is no clear and definite definition for AFNs there are some common characteristics that they share in order to be considered as such. Self-governance, equity, locality, and cooperation are some of the most important aspects of AFNs which also allow us to analyse them from a commoning perspective as they have a collective and participatory basis (De Bernardi et al. 2020). The importance of investigating the

commoning practices of AFNs lies on the fact that commoning challenges the destructive market relations where externalities, exploitation, and concentration of market power negatively affect individuals and communities.

AFNs are not homogenous networks, but they have different forms, organization models, and ways of functioning. Despite their differences AFNs represent an example of collective action and could be seen as a stepping-stone toward the food system transformation (Zhang & Barr 2019; De Bernardi et al. 2020), by introducing new sets of social relations and different models of resource management. These networks have always existed but are increasing in relevance in Sweden as the need to replace placeless and faceless food (Clapp 2016) with food from the region is increasing. Currently, the connection between production and consumption is becoming less and less visible and the origin and traceability are hidden behind the label of global trade (ibid.).

According to Zhang & Barr (2019), AFNs attempt, among other things, to redistribute value by being against bulk commodity production and the investigation of how and to what extent they treat food as commons rather than commodity is becoming more and more relevant. Food as commons can refer to a natural or cultural resource but commoning demands new institutions, goals, and social relations (Carceller-Sauras & Theesfeld 2021) which is exactly what AFNs try to do by shortening the chains.

This thesis contributes to the literature on AFNs because it focuses on the producers' perspectives. AFNs have been more and more researched but this research focuses on their viability (Milestad et al. 2010; Blumberg et al. 2020), organizational functionality (Drottberger et al. 2021), and the motivations behind consumers' participation or their willingness to be part of such networks (Zoll et al. 2018). The ability and potentiality of AFNs to affect or even change the dynamics of production and to play an active role in the food system transformation haven't been extensively studied. In addition to that, this thesis enriches the literature by providing an understanding of how and why AFNs in Uppland region could be seen as commoning schemes as the connection between AFNs and the idea of food as commons is scarce (Zhang & Barr 2019). Although the study will be carried out in a regional Swedish context the results will be discussed from the perspective of

published literature presenting empirical work from other parts of the world which allows me to bring the Uppland case into conversations with other contexts and wider debates on the transformative capacity of AFNs.

1.1 Aim and research questions

This study aims to investigate if AFNs could set the path for the transition of the current food system as agents of change on a local level by exploring their commoning practices. This will be achieved by investigating the potential of local AFNs to be examples of collective action that could affect the social relations and dynamics of production on a local scale, in the agrarian settings of Uppland region. More specifically, social relations refer to the interactions between the producers and AFNs but also the direct connection between the producers and the consumers through AFNs. Furthermore, dynamics of production refer to market accessibility, the exclusionary qualitative and quantitative private standards of many supermarket corporations, and commodification of food and food products.

In order to fulfil this aim, I will observe, and explain the position of AFNs in the highly concentrated Swedish food market. Their obtained space within the hegemonic relations of production where the big conventional networks rule the market, increase the competition, and affect all the actors' operation and accessibility will also be investigated. Moreover, I will explore the collective aspects of AFNs and the practices through which they treat food as commons instead of commodity in order to explain how collective resource management contributes to changing the social relations and dynamics of production.

The following overarching research question and sub-questions are formulated as follows:

RQ: How do AFNs affect the social relations and dynamics of production, on a local level in the Swedish region of Uppland?

Sub-Q1: How do AFNs, and the actors involved, position themselves within the current food system?

Sub-Q2: Do AFNs treat food as commons? How and to what extent could commoning change the social relations of the actors involved?

By answering this question, I aim get an initial understanding of the transformative capacity of AFNs and their potentiality to set the path towards a more equitable food system by changing the existing social relations and exploring new ways for organising production. An examination of ANFs positioning will provide an understanding of how the actors involved and especially the producers relate themselves, and AFNs in general, to the CFS. Exploring how closely producers place themselves to the CFS, and why, and if they see themselves as part of it in the first place will allow me to assess the potentiality of AFNs to open the way for a transition to a food system characterised by equity where the producers will be in the centre of it, rather than in the side-line. A focus on commoning will enable insights into how setting a different set of rules and behavioural patterns could contribute to changes in the social relations and dynamics of production. Taken together, this will allow me to explore if AFNs could be seen as collective initiatives which by treating food as commons can change the social relations and the dynamics of production to an extent that could affect the food system transition.

1.2 Outline of the thesis

After this introduction where both the subject of AFNs, the aim of this thesis, and the research questions are presented, a background discussion follows where I situate AFNs in the current food system and discuss the emergence of AFNs around the globe and the notion of food commoning (2). This background discussion will allow me, and the reader, to understand the reasons behind the emergence of AFNs and will provide us with an adequate understanding of AFNs' current position and their potential to be treating food as commons. Thereafter, the theoretical framework is explained (3) as it constituted the means by which the empirical material was analysed, followed by the methodology chapter where the methods used for conducting this thesis are explained and justified (4). The next chapter includes the presentation of the empirical material and its connection to the relevant literature in order to make this study a part of the broader discussion on the capacity

of AFNs to contribute to the food system transformation (5). This thesis ends up with a conclusion chapter (6) where I present the most important findings.

2. Situating AFNs in the food system

In this section I will give a brief overview of the emergence and development of AFNs around the globe and the challenges they face. In order to understand AFNs' current position and their potential capacity to affect the social relations and the dynamics of production on a local level it is important to figure out the reasons behind their emergence and the obstacles they face and have faced on a global level. Commodification of food as one of those obstacles will be discussed further as it widens the distance between producers and consumers and limits the multiple values of food only to that of market price.

2.1 The emergence of AFNs

Historically, AFNs have emerged after the crisis in corporate and entrepreneurial farming styles in the late 20th century in Western Europe (Van Der Ploeg 2008 see Blumberg et al., 2020). Industrialization has increased production with a simultaneous decrease in prices for the farmers, leaving them with the options of stopping producing, investing more money to scale up production, or adopting alternative farming practices (ibid.). These alternative practices require changes in the social relations and the way production is valued and organised. AFNs play an important role here because they are the connecting link between producers and consumers, by allowing them to communicate directly with each other (Blumberg et al. 2020).

However, the reasons for the emergence of AFNs were not the same everywhere. According to Zhang & Barr (2019), AFNs in China represent a collective reconfiguration of the local food system as a reaction to ineffective policies that led to food safety issues. At the same time in the West, AFNs could be seen as an opposition to the globalised conventional food networks and the commodification of food (Zhang & Barr 2019). More specifically in Sweden, the representation of an alternative to those globalised networks is one of the reasons for the emergence of AFNs (Drottberger et al. 2021). Around the globe a growing number of initiatives

aim to reconnect producers and consumers through short food chains with a local character (Pimbert 2022).

In Europe, short horizontal food chains generate many social and financial benefits both for the producers and the consumers. The direct interaction between producers and consumers is an aspect of AFNs which is important to probe because it establishes new sets of social relations. As previous literature has shown, the sense of belonging and the community feeling are some of the benefits that Pimbert (2022) has identified. According to Milestad et al. (2010), the direct interaction between farmers and consumers increases the knowledge and learning opportunities of both sides. Consumers have the possibility to ask about products they don't recognize, storage conditions, and even production itself and at the same time farmers can gain insights into consumers' wishes and potential ability to use products. This creation of social bonds between social groups that are detached otherwise is a highly important contribution of AFNs, no matter how and why they were established in the first place (Zhang & Barr 2019).

Today AFNs are threatened mainly by two trends according to Pimbert (2022). The first threat is the highly concentrated food market, a reason often stated in the literature (Pimbert 2022; Clapp 2016; Milestad 2010). Few big transnational corporations gain monopoly control over different stages across the food supply chain, which undermines the capacity, resilience, and freedom of local people to operate or simply co-exist within this chain (Pimbert 2022). The second threat lays on the fact that the number of people involved in the food system is getting smaller since the 20th century and fewer people have the knowledge and the ability to grow their own food (Milestad et al. 2010) which increases the volatility of the food system threatening small-scale farmers even more (Clapp 2016).

This reduction of the people involved in the food system has led to an increase in the geographical and physical distance between producers and consumers (Milestad et al. 2010) but it has also led to the emergence of the food sovereignty movement (Pimbert 2022) and it is observed worldwide that consumers are trying more and more to create or maintain connections with producers within the current globalized food system (Zhang & Barr 2019). In Sweden, the number and size of the Swedish farms has been changed significantly in the recent decades. The largest

10% of horticultural farms currently cultivate 65% of the total area of field-grown crops and 59% of the greenhouse area. In addition to that, the number of people employed in farming (including horticulture) has decreased to 2% of the economically active population which represents a drop by almost 10% between 2000 and 2018 (Swedish Board of agriculture 2018).

Furthermore, it is also important for this thesis to recognize that AFNs might reinforce dominant relations of production rather than challenge them. Previous research has shown that AFNs are typically dependent on the existing food system and for this reason adopt some of the qualities of this system (Maye et al. 2007). Consequently, according to Blumberg et al. (2020) AFNs may reinforce exclusionary processes as structural processes might undermine their transformative capacity. This new wave of spatial and social transformation that AFNs represent raises questions about their potentiality to redefine the spatial and social aspects of food production and distribution. Spatial aspects refer mainly to locality and the effort of AFNs to promote and highlight food from the region by decreasing the actual distance that food has to travel for to be consumed.

In the sphere of production, farmers may still have to participate in conventional supply chains to be able to cope financially (Ilbery and Maye 2005 see Blumberg et al. 2020) as the conventional food networks rule the market and increase the competition by creating behavioural norms and setting the prices. On the other hand, according to Zhang & Barr (2019) “AFNs contest the conventional state-society relations” in the sense that they represent changing attitudes both in production and consumption in different places and those attitudes are accompanied with social and political change (ibid.). As such it is important for this thesis to investigate how could AFNs contribute to shifting the focus on primary producers and their needs by strengthening several small scale-farmers and challenging the highly concentrated and highly commodified conventional food system.

2.2 Food as commons or commodity?

To better understand the reasons behind the emergence of AFNs as opposition to the current food system and the commodification of food, it is also important to

understand how commodification affects the transformative capacity of AFNs in the first place. This is what I will do in this subsection by drawing attention on how scholars define food commoning and by exploring how, according to the existing literature, commoning introduces alternative sets of social relations that strengthen the transformative capacity of AFNs.

Food as commodity is the dominant narrative of the contemporary industrial food system where the production and the international food trade are fully controlled by the very few transnational corporations who have monopolized agricultural inputs whilst feeding the world's population is far from achieved (Vivero-Pol 2017). Food is almost fully privatized up to a level where human beings can eat it as long as they have either the money to buy it or the means to produce it (Vivero Pol 2013).

As a result, the multiple values of food have been decreased only to that of market price with the maximization of profit being the ultimate and sometimes the only goal (Vivero Pol 2013). Moreover, food prices have been linked to financial market trends which threatens small-scale farmers as it increases volatility and highlights the issue of food access even more (Clapp 2016). This distancing caused by commodification of food increases the reliance in international trade (*ibid.*). In Sweden specifically, food production related issues are more complicated due to the highly concentrated market as the majority of food supplied in Sweden is in the hands of a few big retail companies, thus widening the gap between producers and the market but also the distance between producers and consumers.

Commoning was first introduced as a term by Elinor Ostrom and her team, who described it as bottom-up arrangements with well-defined access rules and a self-governing character (Zhang & Barr 2019) where clearly defined social groups organise themselves to effectively manage different sets of resources (Turner 2017). In this case the resource is primary produced food, and the well-defined social groups are the producers and the consumers involved in AFNs.

The consideration of food as a commodity is a social construct that the actors involved in AFNs are trying to revise by adopting practices that could be considered as commoning. These practices will be further investigated in this thesis thus it is important to understand and recognise them. As Zhang & Barr (2019) have already

identified in their research, “the transformative power of the commons lies in its introduction of an alternative set of social relations”. As we illustrated above, AFNs are short, horizontal supply chains, usually with a local character that attempt to actually introduce an alternative set of social relations by among other things, building bonds between producers and consumers, bonds that go beyond market exchange.

Besides, the segment of the food system that could be considered to treat food as commons is based on the establishment of shared and collectively managed infrastructure and resources operating for the benefit of communities. Commoning draws attention to the subjective process involved in ‘making common’ and it is a product of collective action (Zhang & Barr 2019). This raises the question of how commoning as a framework could offer a critical lens to fully appreciate the impact of AFNs and to what extent it could change the social relations of the actors involved in AFNs and the food system in general.

It is against this background I set out to explore how AFNs could change the established social relations and challenge the ways production is currently organised in order to set the path for the transformation of the current food system. As previous research has shown AFNs in Sweden represent an alternative to the globalised conventional food networks, by attempting to shorten the chains, localize food production, and establish direct connection between producers and consumers. Equally important are the findings about commodification of food, which constitutes one of the main challenges for AFNs as it decreases their potential to contribute to the transformation of the food system and diminishes the multidimensional value of food. Yet, the attention to the commoning practices of AFNs that could be seen as an opposition to the commodification of food has remained limited and will be also explored in this thesis.

3. Theory and concepts

The main purpose of this study is to investigate how AFNs could turn out to be agents of change in the social relations and dynamics of production in the Swedish region of Uppland. In order to fulfil this purpose, my analysis will be based on political ecology combined with the analytical concept of food commoning. In what follows, I will explain what I refer to when I use the concept of food commoning in my analysis and how it is connected to social relations and dynamics of production.

3.1 Political ecology

Political ecology (PE) is a critical research field within anthropology, geography, and related disciplines that, among other things, analyses how and why structural forces drive environmental change. It emerged in the 1970s and 1980s in the context of global neo-liberalization in an effort to highlight the importance of outside forces and how these forces affect local lives and influence change (Roberts 2020). Such forces are global trade, international development, or modernization schemes. Political ecology investigates questions of the distribution and exercise of politics and power.

For the purposes of this study, I will be focusing on the tendency of PE to highlight the role of capitalist markets and the growing corporate concentration (Blumberg et al. 2020) and their effects on social marginalization and environmental disruption on a local level (Roberts 2020). PE will help me understand AFNs' position in a constraining capitalist economy and therefore it will be guiding my analysis. By studying the positioning of AFNs in relation to the CFS I will explore how the globalization of food and the food system affect small-scale producers on a local level. This will give me insights into how AFNs' relations of production sit within a broader political economy of food and how and to what extent the broader social frameworks that guide consumers around the globe develop specific habits which could be seen as competition.

One of the key methodological principles of PE is the connection and the correlation between the local, regional, and global scales of analysis (Roberts 2020). This will allow me to see the bigger picture through my analysis by comparing my empirical material, which represents the local perspective, to secondary data about AFNs on a global scale. Discovering the differences and similarities will highlight the way place-specific conditions affect the emergence and operation of AFNs and give important insights into how these conditions are created in the first place.

However, it proves difficult to set the boundaries between the local, the regional and the global, and the fact that commodification has emerged in many rural settings makes it even harder (Warren et al. 2001). In Sweden, and the European Union in general, there is no specific definition of locality as far as food is concerned. Local is often defined in terms of the distance between the point of production and the point of sale but it could also be related to a recognised geographical area such as a county, or a whole country (Augère-Granier 2016). This could potentially create confusion, but in this case, it will be a central element in my analysis as I will be guided by the way my participants define locality and the analysis will be based on their perspectives. Locality is crucial as it is one of the motives behind the emergence of AFNs which highlights the opposition of AFNs against the globalised conventional food networks and the commodification of food (Blumberg et al. 2020). Exploring the construction of locality in this case won't constitute a way to set clear boundaries between the local, regional, and global but it would rather contribute to investigating how these different scales interact and shape each other.

Lately, food has been disconnected from its political and ecological implications, and optimizing profit is the main concern of the current food system (Flachs 2020). But PE raises the question of what is being produced and for whom it is being produced and attempts to link place-specific conditions to different scales and processes (ibid.). Here I want to go beyond the connection between production and scale and focus more on how the place-specific conditions affect who is producing and how by analysing the way my participants explain the emergence of

AFNs on a local level and their contribution to them production-wise. In this way, I can relate their stories to the wider process of commodification.

Conducting this study from a PE perspective will help me understand the ways society and the economy are related to the environment and how the dominant food production affects those relations. In that sense, it can be a way to investigate if AFNs could be the means to strengthen small-scale local farmers in the Upland region by exploring how the growing corporate concentration leads to their social marginalization. Understanding the ways socioecological change is being understood and faced by the producers who participate in this study will constitute a guideline for analysing my empirical material.

3.2 Food as commons

In order to understand how AFNs could be seen as collective arrangements that treat food as commons rather than commodity and explain why this could strengthen their transformative capacity it is important to understand how the new sets of rules and social relations that emerge through commoning can challenge the role of the capitalist market that promotes commodification of food. In my analysis I will try to shed light on how my participants experience the establishment of these rules and relations and the outcome of this process.

The “commons” have played a crucial role in the intellectual development of PE as an approach (Turner 2017). Commoning has re-emerged as an attempt to figure out different forms of exchange and producing within the technocratic economy of privatization and neoliberal individualism that characterizes the capitalist mode of production (Nightingale 2019). A range of examples from around the globe indicates the re-emergence of commoning practices and the importance of those efforts. Collective governance of forests (*ibid.*), urban gardening (Drottberger et al. 2021), open source and internet-based production (Bos & Owen 2016), and food cooperatives that are characterised by self-governance are only a few of those examples.

The term “commons” has multiple meaning and can refer to a resource, those who are entitled to use the resource, or to the governance arrangements designed to manage that resource (De Moor 2011 see Zhang & Barr 2019). Elinor Ostrom was one of the first who analysed and worked on commons in social sciences. Ostrom and her team described bottom-up arrangements with well-defined access rules and a self-governing character (Zhang & Barr 2019) creating a new institutional framework. They explained how common resources could be protected and governed by individuals who undertake collective action without the need of any state or private-property rights interventions (Ostrom 1990 see Zhang & Barr 2019).

As mentioned above, Ostrom and others demonstrated that clearly defined social groups organise themselves to effectively manage different sets of resources (Zhang & Barr 2019) and in our case resources related to food production and food itself. This work has had a significant effect on environmental governance contributing to the spread of community-based approaches to resource management. These approaches attempt to recognise the ‘commons’ as a set of social relations that are not fixed but dynamic (Turner 2017) and require new ways of building and establishing those societal relations (Zhang & Barr 2019) and new rules (Nightingale 2019). However, defining new rules and relations never comes without significant struggle (*ibid.*).

The emergence of AFNs around the world as a way to resist collectively against the capitalistic conventional food and agro-systems could be seen as an example of commoning (Zhang & Barr 2019) and an example of struggle. The idea of commons applied to food deconstructs food as a commodity and shifts the focus on treating food as a resource with more than one dimension, and managing it through collective action (Vivero Pol 2013). In any case, the most important aspect is that all members are active participants in the governance of the resource and simultaneously can benefit from it (*ibid.*).

In order to establish a common understanding of what I refer to when I mention food commoning in this study I set some prerequisites which will guide my investigation, my interview questions, and my analysis. I see commoning as a practice of “making commons” and through this thesis, I want to draw attention to the social practices behind the commons and commoning. In other words,

commoning generates products of collective performance that are based on acts of mutual support, negotiation, and collective resource management (Zhang & Barr 2019). I will align with Vivero-Pol's (2017) idea of commoning where we need a resource and a governing community and as Nightingale (2019) argues, commoning is not necessarily tied to property but rather to collective action that generates alternative dynamics of producing, exchanging, and managing resources.

Commoning recognises the multiple dimensions of food where food is valued for its cultural, social, and environmental aspects, rather than as just a tradable good (Vivero-Pol 2017). Equally important aspects of food commoning are transparency and highly appreciated labour (Zhang & Barr 2019). Through my analysis, I will highlight the importance of facilitating traceability of products and procedures throughout the value chain as it leads to an open and honest share of costs and risks between the well-defined groups that collectively manage the resource. Transparency can also contribute to higher appreciated labour as it provides insights into how the producers work and what obstacles they face. The importance of equal participation in decision making cannot be ignored in my analysis as it constitutes another key aspect of food commoning (Nightingale 2019; Zhang & Barr 2019) where decisions must fairly represent the diversity of affected views and interests and not be dominated by any single view or interest.

In this study, I will analyse food commoning from the perspective of joint responsibility for the allocation of production. Drawing from the concept of food commoning as discussed above, I will investigate if the actors involved in AFNs govern them collectively and what they mean by collectively. Some important aspects that I will attempt to follow are access to resources, participation in the decision-making process, and transparency of the processes followed. Moreover, how labour and knowledge exchange are valued will be discussed and analysed.

Taken together, the theory I have laid out above will help me better investigate the transformative capacity of AFNs as agents of change on a local level. PE will constitute the means to understand the position of AFNs in the constraining capitalist market. Commoning, building on this understanding, will help me investigate if and to what extent could collective resource management of AFNs

change the social relations of the actors involved by challenging the dominant dynamics of production.

4. Methodology

4.1 Methods

A qualitative approach has been followed as the most appropriate one to achieve the aim of this thesis because it fulfils the need of understanding phenomena in their own settings (Robson & McCartan 2016). In order to understand the social relations that are being introduced through commoning and explore how they affect the transformative capacity of AFNs; it is important to investigate how the actors involved experience them in their own place-specific conditions. In this section, I will introduce and justify the methods I used to gather and analyse the empirical material in this thesis.

I started this thesis by formulating the theme. The first step was to deepen my understanding of the subject by reading the existing literature about AFNs, supermarket concentration, and commoning both on a global and local level. A mapping of the existing AFNs in the study area was the next step, followed by in-depth, semi-structured interviews of the producers that participated in the identified AFNs and a few networks' representatives as well. The interviews were combined with the use of a Venn diagram to help my participants position themselves in relation to the CFS by providing a visual tool. The selected methodology builds on the existing literature, as presented in the background section (2), and aims to the collection of relevant empirical material that will guide the analysis in such a way that will provide answers to my research questions.

4.1.1 Why Uppland?

This thesis focuses on investigating AFNs in the Swedish region of Uppland. As mentioned above, locality is a key motivating factor behind the emergence and operation of AFNs, and because of that it is important to be clear and well-defined. Through a mapping of the existing AFNs in the region of Uppland, which will be described in detail below, many initiatives were identified which makes it a reasonable choice for this thesis. In addition to that, the region of Uppland includes

some of the higher populated Swedish cities but at the same time, many small-scale farms can be found in the suburbs. Choosing this study area was strongly dependent on the existence of AFNs that are active and directly include primary producers and on the presence of a substantial number of primary producers that are involved in those AFNs and operate through them.

4.1.2 Mapping

My data collection started with a mapping of the existing AFNs in the region of Uppland. This happened by analysing secondary data to understand and identify what exists and what fits the purposes of this study and more specifically, the definition of AFNs that has been given above. The data was collected from different sources. Those sources included existing literature on how AFNs are identified and categorised in different settings around the world, as I could not find any specific research with Swedish case studies, and online search mainly on the webpages of the AFNs I was already familiar with. In some cases, the already identified networks were the source for identifying initiatives that were small or new and weren't yet stated in the literature. By asking the actors involved in a recognised initiative or by reading their webpages other initiatives caught my attention and then it was assessed if they fit the definition of AFNs that I have given for the purposes of this thesis.

This mapping process created new data that can be interpreted in various ways and played an important role in designing the next steps of my research as it allowed me to get the bigger picture of what already exists and to understand the complexity of AFNs due to their various organizational models and the different reasons behind their emergence. It also gave me an initial idea of which actors I needed to involve in the interviews as it helped me understand the relations between them and their connection to primary production.

4.1.3 Interviews

The next step of my data collection was to focus on gathering empirical material for my study. I conducted nine in-depth, semi-structured interviews. Two of the interviews were conducted with the representatives of two of the networks that I

had identified in the mapping process. The chosen AFNs needed to be in direct connection to primary production as it is the most relevant in this case. “Ultimat”, as a food cooperative, and “the Svenska Delikatesser”, as a locally sourced shop, were interviewed, both because they represent two structurally different cases of AFNs due to their organizational models and because they relate to the producers in different ways. The remaining seven interviews were conducted with primary producers that are part of AFNs and allocate all or part of their production through them. Out of the seven farmers, five were men and two were women. Four of them own small-scale farms in the Uppland region, one of the rents the farm, one of them is a garden-farmer, as they identify themselves, and lastly, one is part of a non-profit agricultural cooperative.

I chose to conduct semi-structured interviews because this ensures the flexibility of response (Robson & McCartan 2016). I included an interview guide for my interviews where my predesigned questions could serve as a checklist to cover all the important issues required to fulfil the purpose of my thesis. This predesigned interview guide proposed an order for my questions as well (ibid.). However, the questions were designed in a way that allowed my participants to express their own views and experiences and to bring up issues that concerned them (Creswell & Creswell 2018). In that sense the questions were open-ended and the proposed order could change at any moment if that felt relevant (Robson & McCartan 2016). The interviews helped me understand the complex relations within AFNs and between AFNs and the conventional food system. Through direct interaction with my participants, I could gather information that could answer my research questions both by asking them several questions that led to a discussion and by observing their reactions.

4.1.4 Venn Diagram

A Venn diagram adapted from participatory rural appraisal (PRA) was included as part of the interviews to visualize how actors see and understand the positions and the relations between the Conventional food system, the AFNs, and themselves, as it is hard to grasp this through a discussion. It helped me work best with visual-verbal expressions and symbols to explain things that are hard to put into words

(Doyle & Krasny 2003) and it will give me the bigger picture about positionality of AFNs in the analysis chapter as well.

Circles of different sizes were given to the interviewees, as it is shown in figure 1 below, and they were asked to choose different circles that represent, for them, the CFS, the AFNs, and themselves and place them in relation to each other. There was no guidance by my side regarding which size they should choose for each actor. Furthermore, they could choose more circles if they needed to, but they had to explain and justify their choice. Throughout the whole process of constructing the Venn diagram, I encouraged the participants to think out loud, which gave me an insight into their way of thinking about this particular matter. The Venn diagram was a crucial part of the interviews as initiated discussions about issues that are hard to explain without visual help, such as positionality of AFNs in relation to other actors, and it was highly appreciated by my participants.

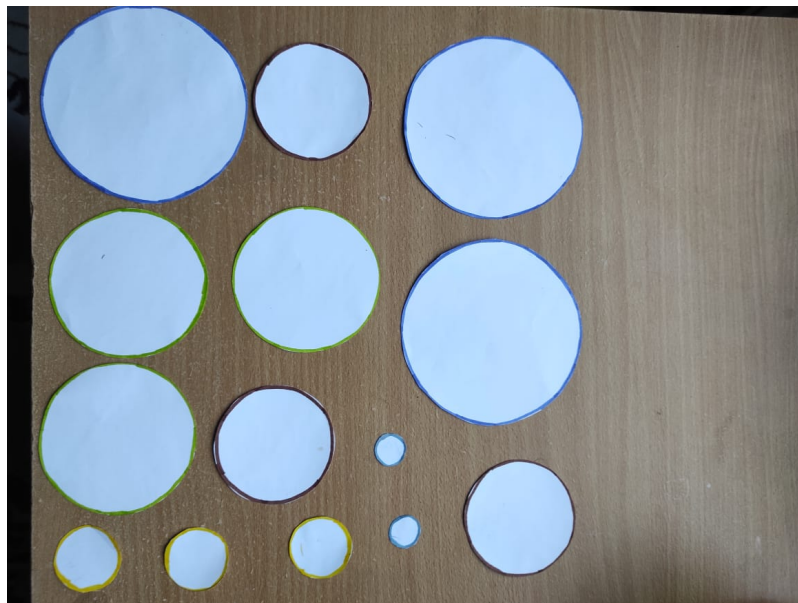


Figure 1 Circles for the Venn diagram, that would be chosen from the participants as representation of the AFNs, the CFS and themselves.

4.2 Analytical strategy

The next concern, after the data collection was how to bring conceptual order to my empirical material (Dally 2007). As Creswell & Creswell (2018) suggest, I tried to

be connected with my data during the whole process of data collection. That means in practice that I transcribed my interviews right after they were conducted and related my transcripts to my notes and observations of each interview session. All the interviews were recorded, which gave me the freedom to observe other things as well as I didn't have to write down what my participants answered and it also gave me the opportunity to pay deeper attention to what was said, and not said, and formulate follow-up questions when necessary. If for instance, the participants needed too much time to interpret and answer a question, or if they needed clarifications this question would be readapted afterward. This process helped me consider the analytical interplay between me as a researcher and my participants and to include the interactions that occurred in the interviews as another level of interpretation (Dally 2007).

After organising and preparing my data for analysis by transcribing the interviews, typing my field notes, and gathering the visual material from the Venn diagrams, a coding process followed. I generated initial codes first, that served as the three general categories (Robson & McCartan 2016). Those categories were “social relations”, “dynamics of production” and “food commoning” and then I started identifying themes under each category (ibid.). The coding process moved between inductive and deductive reasoning, as I knew what I was looking for, but some themes were generated through the process, such as alternativity, because many participants mentioned them or talked about them and a pattern was created. Lastly, in the analysis chapter (5) that follows, I discuss the identified themes in detail, and I make interconnections between themes. Connections to the broader literature are also presented in the analysis chapter, to make this study part of a greater discussion about AFNs and relevant beyond the Swedish context.

4.3 Limitations

Time and seasonality were the two main limitations of this study. As a thesis project, the available time for conducting fieldwork was limited which means that the number of conducted interviews is rather small. The main concern was the response. This could be a potential limitation especially regarding the networks are

concerned because I managed to conduct two interviews and due to that I might miss on other perspectives. As far as seasonality is concerned, this thesis was written during the winter semester which means that the range of markets and events that took place was limited. At the same time, this meant that the producers had more time to respond to my questions and we had some in-depth discussions. Moreover, studying in Uppland makes it difficult to draw definitive conclusions about the transformative capacity of AFNs in general, but it can give important insights into the growing body of research and discussed in relation to the existing literature can be relevant beyond the Swedish context.

4.4 Ethics

Ethical considerations are crucial in every research and especially in qualitative research that includes people (Robson & McCartan 2016). For this reason, I gave serious thought to the ethical issues of my study at an early stage. All the participants were informed, from the very beginning, of the aim and the process, and of their right to withdraw at any time and they all agreed to take part in this research voluntarily. They were also asked for permission to record the interview.

As far as anonymity is concerned, the identity of the network representatives will remain hidden, but the names of the networks will be public. I choose to do so to protect the identity of the representatives and decrease the pressure they might feel as they would not only express their personal views but also the general position of the network. This could be a risk as some of the networks are small and the participants could be easily identified which could hinder them from sharing what they really believe. But I was open about this and it was discussed with the representatives before the interview took place, and it could even be reconsidered through the process as according to Robson & McCartan (2016) ethics is a process that has to be reviewed again and again and it is not static.

Moreover, the identity of the producers won't be revealed either because I wanted them to be able to talk freely by making sure that their identities were protected. For this reason, their names are changed to randomly assigned ones. The random name has no connection to the age, gender, or nationality of the participants

as it is not relevant for this study and won't affect my analysis in any way. A table with some important information about the producers is included in the Appendix (Table 1) where both the state of ownership of their farms is described and if they allocate their production solely through AFNs or through other channels as well.

4.5 Reflexivity

One key element in qualitative research is reflexivity. Reflexivity is about knowing yourself as a researcher (Madden 2017) and by keeping that in mind I tried to consider how I could personally affect the research process. I have a natural science background which might affect my research because interpretivism might be a challenge for me as it requires my adaptation to a more open-ended nature of a qualitative inquiry. Additionally, the fact that I strongly believe in the transformative power of AFNs could impact the research. However, identifying those aspects of myself as a researcher at an early stage and keeping them in mind through the whole process has been helpful. Even before conducting the interviews, when I was designing my interview guides, I tried to formulate the questions in a way that would not give any direction to the interviewee and would not hinder the expression of any personal thoughts.

5. Results and analysis

In this chapter, I present my findings and analyse them from a political ecology perspective based on the theoretical frame of this thesis. It is my concern to give space to the ideas, views, and opinions of my interviewees and for this reason, the analysis of my empirical findings is the central part of this chapter. However, these findings are being discussed in the perspective of the published literature in order to make this study part of the greater discussion about the transformative capacity of AFNs and relevant beyond the Swedish context.

This chapter is divided into five sections. It begins with a mapping of the existing local AFNs in Uppland region (5.1) to identify them and understand their differences and complexity. The second part (5.2) is about the AFNs that are the most relevant for this study to explain how they are organized and operate. Moreover, how my participants understand the term alternative is being analysed. In the third part of this chapter (5.3) I present and analyse the social relations within producers and between producers and consumers and how and to what extent AFNs affect those relations. An analysis of how the participants position themselves or the networks they represent in relation to the CFS follows in the fourth part (5.4) aiming to connect and provide an understanding of how the dynamics of production are being influenced on a local level and how local is defined in the first place. This part will bring us closer to fulfilling the aim of this thesis by answering the first research question (Sub-Q1) about positionality. The last part of this chapter (5.5) focuses on food commoning by identifying different commoning practices in the operation of AFNs through the narrations of my participants, aiming to answer the second research question (Sub-Q2). By combining all these emerging themes in the analysis chapter, I am going to provide a better understanding of the ways that food commoning practices within AFNs could influence their transformative capacity by changing the social relations and dynamics of production.

5.1 Mapping

A mapping of the existing AFNs in the region of Uppland was a necessary step for getting the background information needed to fulfil the aim of this study. As described in detail in the methodology chapter (4.1.2) this mapping is a product of secondary data analysis in order to understand and identify the existing AFNs in the study area and which of them fit in the purposes of this study. The networks that were identified should follow the definition given in the introduction where AFNs are defined as short “horizontal” food supply chains for food distribution that try to bring producers and consumers closer to each other. Then they were categorized according to their organizational and functional models. Through the mapping process, five different AFN models were identified and are presented below.

- **Direct Access Markets:** There is a direct interaction between the producers and the consumers (either in person or online) and the producers are getting paid directly for their products.
REKO, Local food nodes, Fooever, Bondens Mat I Uppland
- **Distribution platforms:** They aggregate food from farmers and then provide home delivery to consumers.
Årstiderna
- **Food cooperatives:** Aggregate the consumers instead and have drop-off points. They are mainly run by volunteers.
ULTIMAT
- **Community supported agriculture (CSA):** Long-term agreement between the consumers and the producers. It is a way of sharing the risks of bad weather and offering more stable support for farmers.
Ramsjö Gårdsprodukter
- **Locally sourced shops and organizations:** Svenska delikatesser, Bruised food club.

This mapping shows the diversity in the existing AFNs in the Uppland region. The different identified categories shows that diversity lies upon the ways they are organised at an administrative level, the ways they function, and how they try to

benefit producers. As mentioned in the background discussion, there is a tendency to categorise all the initiatives that attempt to localise food or to be opposed to the CFS under the umbrella term Alternative food networks (Moragues-Faus & Marsden 2017) but as this mapping shows the initiatives to localise the food systems in the region of Uppland are diverse and many.

This diversity between AFNs is also noticed in Germany (Zoll et al. 2018) which indicates that AFNs are growing in number and relevance and it can provide many opportunities for the producers but can also give us an understanding of how complicated it is to come up with a definition for these initiatives and to categorize them under the same title, that of AFNs. However, the identified diversity also shows how dysfunctional the dominant market is as the need to feel gaps is obvious. Through this mapping I got the bigger picture of the different initiatives that exist and an initial understanding of their general purpose, which helped me decide what I needed to include in this study. A more detailed description of the initiatives that are relevant for this study follows.

5.2 Functional and operational organization of AFNs in the Uppland region

Among all the diverse initiatives identified through the mapping process, the ones I chose to study closer were “Ultimat”, “Reko-ringar”, “Bondend Mat i Uppland”, and the “Sveska Delikatesser” because they share similar values as they all attempt to localise food and support primary producers. Moreover, they were mentioned frequently by my participants. In this part, I explain how these initiatives are organised and how they operate.

“Ultimat” is a Food Cooperative and more specifically, a non-profit association at Ultuna Student Union in Uppsala. Their main concern is to localise food and support primary producers. They organise deliveries where the producers deliver pre-ordered foodstuffs to the association and the consumers pick them up there. This means that producers are not obliged to be present during delivery dates, which as different producers mentioned, has the benefit of saving time but simultaneously they miss out on the aspect of having a direct connection with consumers.

“Reko-ringar” is neither an organization nor a company, but a platform that connects producers and consumers directly, and promotes local food initiatives. They operate mainly through social media where they provide the space for producers to promote their products, and they set dates for deliveries. According to the narrations of all the producers that I interviewed who participate, or have participated in “Reko”, they are themselves responsible for giving all the information about their products on the platform and they set the prices too.

As far as “Bondens Mat I Uppland” is concerned, it is an association where everything is organised by the producers. I tried to talk with the chairperson of the board (Styrelsens ordförande) but they directed me to the producers. This was because, according to them, the producers are responsible for organising everything, something that all the participants of this study who are involved in the association confirmed. Last but not least, “the Svenska delikatesser” is a locally sourced shop that sells local food in the heart of Uppsala.

Through what is mentioned above we get an understanding of how heterogeneous AFNs are, vastly different from one another both on how they operate but also on how they address issues of choice, sustainability, and power distribution. These findings align with Wilson's (2013) findings from exploring the potentiality of autonomous food spaces in Canada where a diverse range of food networks and communities are squeezed under the concept of Alternative Networks. From a political ecology perspective, alternative symbolizes attempts to resist or transform the dominant capitalist corporate model of producing food (ibid.) but categorising all these attempts under the same term hinder their transformative capacity.

However, this organizational diversity of the networks combined with the diverse motives of consumers participation in AFNs that Zoll et al. (2018) noticed through their research on consumers' motivation for participating in AFNs in Germany, could potentially hinder the formation of one bigger, consistent movement with greater societal impacts. As Logan, a small-scale farmer with an organically certified farm in the outskirts of Uppsala mentions,

“It is just that all the networks are really different. In the markets that are organized through “Bondens Mat I Uppland” for example, you need to sell your

products yourself, but in “Reko” or “Ultimat” you sell beforehand and then you just deliver. You have to consider very different things”. (Logan, 13/2/2023).

Based on this mapping we can see how the diversity among AFNs could be both an opportunity and a challenge for the producers. Having more than one option for the allocation of their products helps producers to minimize the risk of not being able to sell what they produce, but at the same time it is more time-consuming, and it demands additional skills due to the heterogeneity of AFNs.

5.2.1 Why alternative

In order to be able to better understand the reasons behind the participants' involvement in AFNs and the connection between alternativity and the transformative capacity of AFNs it is important to understand the participants' thoughts on the extensive use of the term alternative. After a few simple warm up questions, the first thing I asked my interviewees was what according to them makes the AFNs alternative to probe how the use of this term makes them feel.

As a general conclusion, alternative for most of the producers is selling directly and avoiding too many steps. And as many of them mentioned, the principle is to shorten the chain something that the representative of “Ultimat” agrees with. Alternative is to not go to the supermarket, is to be small-scale and less industrial. As Avery, a volunteer board member in a non-profit agricultural cooperative mentioned,

“Alternative means less based on money and less based on big producing and overproducing and more like towards actually nursing the land and the people and finding an equilibrium where everyone is happy and not only the big companies”. (Avery, 16/2/2023).

In other words, the dominant capitalist market is the reference point against which people position their alternativity and PE acknowledges the need to challenge the concentrated power of those dominant markets (Roberts 2020). Some of the producers also added the aspect of not being able to find everything in AFNs in comparison to a conventional store but still choosing to buy there is what makes them alternative which gets as back to the fact that the market is always there as a point of reference and comparison. According to Maye et al. (2007) in the

dichotomy between the conventional and the alternative, the alternative could be seen as a way to symbolize the attempts to revolutionize the dominant food system which was also expressed by three of the producers who openly related being alternative with actively choosing not to be part of what is considered conventional.

However, as Maye et al. (2007) also argues, the label of alternative can be considered offensive as many actors involved don't see themselves and what they're doing as alternative. Some of the participants expressed their concerns too, for the extensive use of the term alternative, because, as they said, it is broad and makes people think that alternative is everything that is not conventional, which is confusing. As Noah, a small-scale farmer who runs a family business in the suburbs between Uppsala and Stockholm, which focuses on organic farming and with plans of scaling up, mentioned,

“When I started farming, and it was many years ago, organic farming was called alternative farming. I am looking forward to seeing how alternative food networks will be called in the future”. (Noah, 13/2/2023).

From what is mentioned above we can conclude that shortening the chain is an important reason behind the participation of many primary producers in AFNs. If we look at this from a PE perspective, we can conclude that AFNs have the potential to address social injustices in the food system (Moragues-Faus & Marsden 2017). The participation in AFNs for many is an active choice associated with their will to express their opposition to the current CFS, which on its own shows the potential of AFNs to set the path for the transformation of that system.

5.2.2 Accessibility

I now turn to a discussion of how easily accessible AFNs are for the producers in terms of finding the networks, approaching them, and fulfilling the requirements for being part of them or selling through them, if there are any. This will allow us to understand how easy it is for the producers to be parts of AFNs and if there are any circumstances that potential exclusionary processes are generated.

As far as accessibility is concerned there were quite different responses. One thing that every producer mentioned is that it is easy to find and contact the networks but, in some cases, it takes a lot of time to become part of them and it depends on

how the network is organized in the first place. For example, one mentioned that “Ultimat” needs some time to take in new members because they have to visit them and get in contact with them first, and also because they are based on volunteers who are not farmers themselves. Some others mentioned that it is easy to be part of “Reko”, but it requires some skills in social media that not everyone possesses. Furthermore, some of the producers expressed that this variability between AFNs, which is extensively discussed above, is an advantage for accessing them and it gives them options while others think that it is confusing and requires additional skills.

However, it is not the same everywhere, and as Blumberg et al. (2020) have noticed research in the United States has demonstrated regional inequality in farmer access to AFNs. As both Noah and Logan mentioned, “Reko” markets in some places require permission from the municipality for selling their products, something the municipality is unaware of and cannot provide it. As Logan phrased it:

“With “Reko” it depends on the place. There are some markets, in the suburbs of Stockholm, where they have so strict rules that you need permission from the municipality for your products, but the municipality says you don’t need it, but “Reko” says you must have it so I can’t sell there at the moment. But in Uppsala “Reko” is not like that”. (Logan,013/2/2023)

These strict rules can hinder the participation of the producers in such markets and resemble the exclusionary standards that the CFS sets. In theoretical terms, this shows how exclusionary processes can be generated through regional policies that affect local conditions and resource management practices (Roberts 2020).

Moreover, some producers think that the fact that most of the networks use social media platforms to operate is progressive and a good way to include customers or for the networks to approach the producers. Others though, believe that social media is not the place for such things because it requires that producers have both the knowledge to use the platform and the marketing skills to allocate their products and they feel forced to use it. As Bos & Owen (2016) concluded from their research on the online spaces of AFNs in England, having an online presence can be a low-cost and efficient strategy that contributes to the development of AFNs, by utilising

existing social networks between producers and consumers. However, they present AFNs' online spaces as an additional layer to their offline spaces.

Through this section, I have provided some insights into how the producers who participated in the study, have experienced accessibility of AFNs. In general terms, it is not hard to find the networks and get in touch with them, but there are cases where the operational models of the networks exclude producers from participating in them. This realization makes this section part of the discussion about how existing structural norms affect primary producers, which will be further discussed in the section about Dynamics of production (5.4).

5.3 Social relations

Analysing the organizational complexity of AFNs, the ways the participants relate themselves to the term alternative and the degree to which AFNs are easily accessible for the producers gives us an idea of some of the reasons and the hindering factors behind the participation in AFNs. In this section, we turn to more internal processes within AFNs to understand how social relations within the actors involved are shaped by analysing how and to what extent AFNs build or affect the bonds both between producers themselves and between producers and consumers.

I will start by explaining what I mean by social relations in the sphere of this thesis. Social relations include all the relations and interactions that take place between the actors involved within AFNs. This means that apart from the obvious relations and interactions between producers and consumers, the relations among producers themselves are also analysed and are important for this thesis. Moreover, the ways producers' labour is appreciated are included.

The notion of reconnection, is one of the main purposes of shortening the chain, as AFNs attempt to do (Bos & Owen 2016). But reconnection does not only refer to the process of building bonds between producers or reconnecting producers and consumers but also to the introduction of a set of social, environmental, and moral processes that reconnect the market with the people involved and with the environment. Reconnecting the market with the people involved entails moving away from distant transactions towards more direct and meaningful relations. The

importance of investigating these processes lies in the fact that they shake the existing sets of social relations by introducing new ones which, as a process, is a core element of commoning (Zhang & Barr 2019).

In order to investigate if AFNs affect the relations between the producers, I asked them if they get a community feeling when they operate through AFNs. The majority expressed that they feel connected as parts of an alternative production system and they help each other, exchange experiences, and motivation. They find it socially rewarding to meet each other and it motivates them to pursue their personal interests by simultaneously creating value for the community, something that Drottberger et al. (2021) also observed among young market gardeners in Sweden. John, a small-scale organically certified farmer who runs a family business outside of Enköping gave me an example of this.

“I thought once that it would be nice to have music in my stash in the farmers’ market, but it wouldn’t benefit anyone if I kept this thought for myself and execute it only for me. So, I started ringing people telling them to bring speakers. We all had the same music which attracted more consumers. By helping the others, you help yourself too.” (John, 14/2/2023)

This incident indicates how individuals can promote collective arrangements and those arrangements generate new narratives and relational infrastructures (Zhang & Barr 2019). As common scholars argue the transformative power of commons lies behind the introduction of such new social arrangements which create new ways of conceiving and challenging the existing social roles and relations (Zhang & Barr 2019; De Bernardi et al. 2020).

Furthermore, many producers added that farming is a lonely work and small-scale farmers mainly work alone or with family so this connection is socially beneficial for them. The participants expressed that there is a strong community but some think that it is an informal one, one that they create themselves because they want to have it and it is not necessary that the AFNs contribute to that as Madison, who owns a farm outside of Uppsala with a complementary café on the farm highlighted. This suggests that the producers themselves could actively strengthen the transformative capacity of AFNs by collectively managing them.

Moreover, according to the participants, the idea of being many smaller actors involved with direct connection to each other is what constitutes a network. Everyone shares everything and it is characterized by trust and personal contact. It depends on which people are active each moment and how they are connected to everyone else who is involved. The producers expressed that they feel dependent on each other but at the same time, they are doing their own thing. Harper, a small-scale farmer who rents a small farm in the countryside of Uppsala, expressed that the producers will help each other if someone asks for it, but they are independent. *“I am part of a community but at the same time I don’t have to explain why I do what I do”*. (Harper, 27/2/2023)

As far as the relations between producers and consumers are concerned, producers enjoy and appreciate the direct connection that AFNs provide, and they mentioned the gain of knowledge as a positive outcome of this connection. Both the producers and the representatives of the networks that were interviewed translated knowledge as feedback and they all appreciate it. The direct interaction with the consumers provides valuable feedback to them which gives them knowledgeable insights into what consumers want. The representative of the Svenska Delikatesser said that the occasions where they discovered a new producer because a consumer suggested them are more than one. They all like to know what happens with their products after them which also gives them ideas about what they should change and as Milestad et al. (2010) argue, learning from each other is a precondition for strengthening the community.

Additionally, some producers said that they learn other things as well such as recipes or even agricultural innovations that they hadn’t heard of yet. They also added that negative feedback is beneficial, as far as they don’t get it twice, as Logan said, and seeing the same consumers again and again or even stop seeing someone is considered feedback for Harper as well. Through this process of direct exchange of knowledge and opinions, all the participants said that they feel like they build bonds. This exchange of knowledge indicates the benefits for the producers of the direct interaction between them and the consumers. But it also shows the existence of a community between the producers themselves which introduces social relations

that oppose the prevailing competitive individualism that characterizes the relations between the actors involved in the CFS.

In the same direction through the discussion, I got insights on how the participants experience trust. They mentioned two different levels of trust. The one refers to the trust they build with the consumers and the other one to the trust they show to each other as producers. In the first case, everyone expressed that consumers trust them and they never ask about certifications, they don't care because they trust the producers as Milestad et al. (2010) and Blumberg et al. (2020) also observed. "Ultimat's" representative mentioned, *"from our experience, our producers don't have certificates in general, unless they also sell to other channels that demand it but none of the consumers asks for it"*. (Ultimat's representative, 9/2/2023).

Moreover, in the second case, most of the producers feel like they can trust each other, and it is important for them because they are small-scale, and being together makes them stronger. As Madison said, *"one can exchange experiences with people that understand, and we can help each other out. Sometimes we even sell each other's products on the market"*. (Madison, 7/2/2023).

From a commoning perspective, this shows a collective management of production that goes beyond ownership (Zhang & Barr 2019) and leads to the co-creation of new norms in food production and distribution by the members of AFNs (Nightingale 2019; De Bernardi et al. 2020). Trust plays an important role in this because it strengthens the norms and values that producers and consumers share (Milestad et al. 2010), and it is highly important for the consumers to establish trust in "their farmer" as well and it is one of the motives for their participation in AFNs (Zoll et al. 2018). Common research tends to argue that increased trust in communities, especially through face-to-face communication, leads to more effective common governance (De Bernardi et al. 2020). This trust, both between producers and consumers and within the producers themselves, reflects the formation of strong and mutually constituted social relations between the actors involved in AFNs.

Another important aspect that came up is that of sharing the risk. The majority of the producers that were interviewed believe that most of the participants in AFNs

would support them in harder times and some even mentioned that they saw it happening during the Covid-19 pandemic. During the pandemic, the farmers' markets were either banned or limited but producers expressed that consumers kept finding ways to contact them and buy from them. "Reko" was a good option for the allocation of their production at that time as Logan, Noah, and Harper confirmed.

In addition to that, the farmers that were also participants in Community Supportive Agriculture (CSA) schemes said that sharing the risk was the main reason behind their participation. According to Zoll et al. (2018), consumers share similar ideas and they identified their willingness to get to know the farmers and to be aware of their work and struggles as an important community-oriented motive for their participation in AFNs.

To conclude, from the analysis of the empirical findings in this section we can identify a strong community feeling between the producers who help and support each other for the general benefit of the community. However, the formation of this community cannot be solely attributed to the producers' participation in AFNs but more to the commoning practices that were identified which include the unified organization of things that benefit everyone in the community and, in some cases, the collective management of their resources. By trusting each other and by realising that strengthening the community helps them as well they create new norms. These norms include the collective organization of the allocation of production, where they take initiatives that benefit the community, and even production itself in some cases, for example by selling each other's products as mentioned above.

5.4 Dynamics of production

In the previous section, I argued that the identified social relations within the actors involved in AFNs could be seen as opposition to the competitive individualism that characterizes the CFS. I shall now analyse how AFNs challenge the existing dynamics of production.

Dynamics of production refer to the ways that production is organized and how existing rules and norms affect the primary producers. In this part, I analyse my

participants' views on who set those rules and norms in the first place, and link place-specific conditions with different scales and processes. This will help me identify any exclusionary processes within AFNs and further investigate their ability to challenge the CFS, as agents of the food system's transformation. But in order to do that, I begin with analysing how local is defined within the context of primary production and AFNs, because locality is a key factor behind the emergence of AFNs and motivation for the consumers' participation in them.

All the participants expressed the same confusion when I asked them how they would define local, and many said that Sweden has no specific rules or definitions of locality. *"It can be all the extremes from a few kilometres to the Federation of Swedish Farmers (LRF), where they mean Swedish when they say local"* (Logan 13/2/2023), as Logan mentioned. According to PE scholars, this could be seen as a result of capitalist penetration, where the local is integrated into the global and it is considered less important (Roberts 2020). But for all the participants in this study, it is important to be as local as possible and they mainly defined locality as every food and foodstuff that is produced in the Uppland region.

5.4.1 Operation in relation to the CFS

Most of the producers said that they don't see themselves as part of the CFS and as many phrased it "We operate in different spheres". Many explained that this is because the consumers are different because they share different values. As Madison highlighted, the ones that choose to shop from them, and from AFNs in general, are those who understand the difference, those who want to know where their food comes from, who worked for it, and under which circumstances. These motives were identified by Zoll et al. (2018) as self-oriented motives from the consumers' perspective as well.

However, as all the producers said, at this point it is not possible to shop entirely from AFNs, so their consumers shop from the conventional stores as well, but they shop other things there. Many expressed that not relating to the CFS is a conscious decision as they don't want to be part of the system. But two producers said that it is not exactly a decision as being small-scale automatically means that you can't

respond to the quantity demands and the private standards the CFS establishes. As Mary, a garden-farmer who transforms her production into higher-valued products which sells through AFNs, phrased it,

“I don’t know if I would be a part of the system if I had the means but now, I am definitely not, mostly because of my low volume and consistency. I can't have the same product in the same quantity every time”. (Mary, 27/2/2023).

From a political ecology perspective, this could be seen as social marginalization caused by corporate concentration (Roberts 2020). As far as the networks are concerned the answer was slightly different. They also think that they are not closely related but they position themselves closer to the conventional food system than the producers. The visual representation of how the interviewees position themselves and AFNs in relation to the CFS, according to the empirical material collected through the PRA activity explained in the methodology part, is presented in Figure 2. By looking at Figure 2, we can identify that all the producers position themselves in a different sphere than the CFS, either as a conscious decision or as a result of the strict standards that it sets and most of them position themselves as parts of the AFNs. That indicates how urgent is the transformation of the food system by introducing new dynamics of production that lead to more inclusive processes for small-scale farmers.

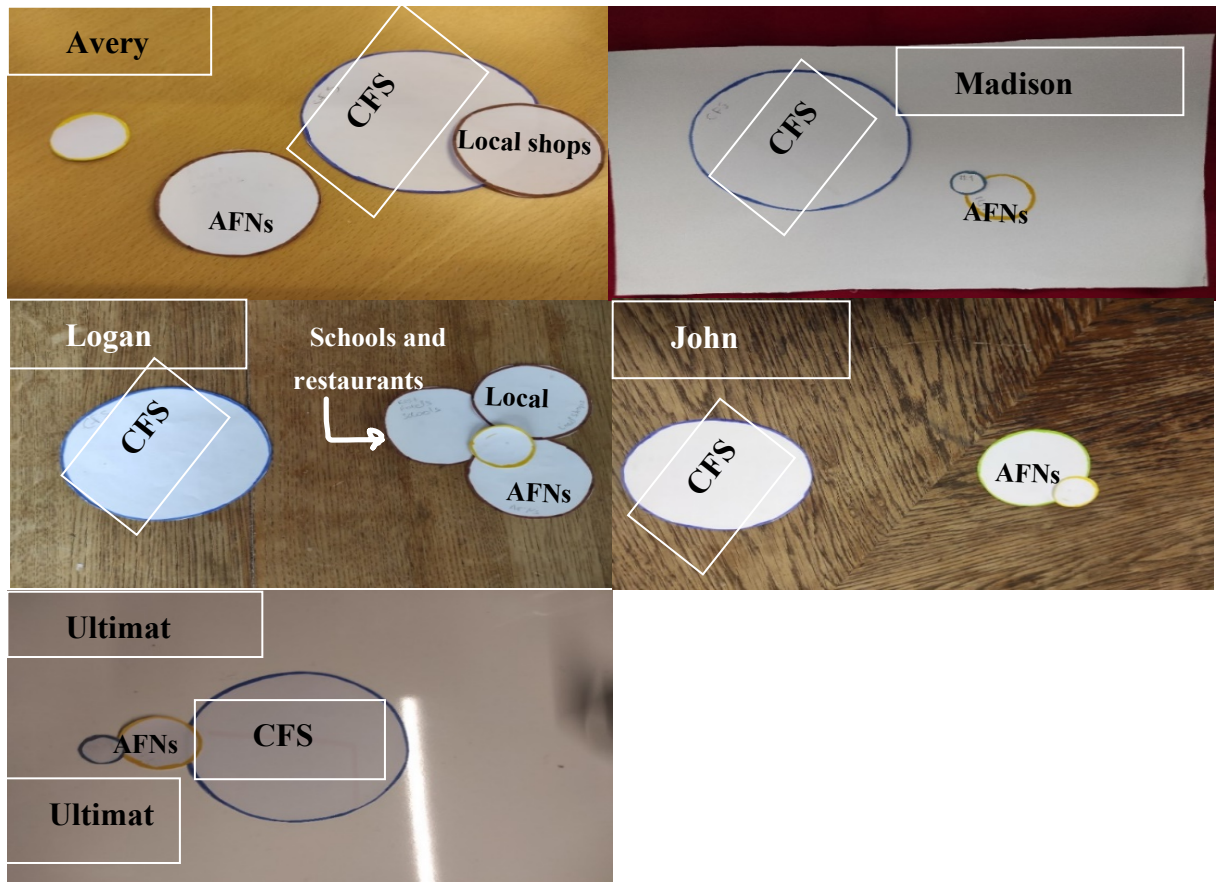


Figure 2 Venn diagrams' results: Positionality in relation to the CFS

Furthermore, when I asked the interviewees whether they see AFNs as middlemen or channels to allocate their production everyone responded quite fast saying that they see AFNs as channels because there is no one in the middle and the producers organize everything by themselves, and even the networks that organize things for the producers, like “Ultimat”, they work in a voluntary basis. These volunteers can't be seen as middlemen because they don't gain anything, and they also share the same values with the producers. This lack of intermediaries is the main argument of local food systems advocates and according to Milestad et al. (2010), it improves the outcome both for the producers and the consumers involved. Moreover, the fact that there is no hierarchy contributes to them being channels for the producers to allocate their products and relate directly to the consumers. These findings confirm that it is possible for a food chain to function on a local scale without middlemen. It could be seen as a step in the right direction which can

increase the transformative capacity of AFNs, but we cannot draw safe conclusions for the functionality of these patterns on larger scales through this study.

The question that followed was if the producers would like to have access to some extra services provided by the networks. This question was asked to investigate the participants' thoughts on how beneficial AFNs are for them but also to understand how they feel about this dominant notion of shortening the chains that characterizes AFNs. They all reacted the same way to this question and said no immediately. They all think that extra services mean more steps in the chain and the involvement of middlemen, nevertheless, the purpose is to shorten the chain and meet the consumers directly. They believe that it's an asset that they are responsible for doing their own thing because it gives them freedom as well. However, some expressed that the AFNs could strengthen their communication channels and contribute more actively to bringing the producers closer to each other and to the creation of a stronger community between them. As we concluded in the previous section, AFNs don't contribute to the creation and maintenance of the community feeling that much, but this can be improved. This immediate reaction that all the participants had, indicates that they understand deeply the need of shortening the chains and it constitutes a motivating factor for their participation in AFNs.

As far as competition between AFNs and the CFS is concerned, the producers said directly that they don't compete and that they are two different worlds. But as the discussion went on, they all concluded that they might compete in a way, not with the system itself but rather with what the CFS creates. They have to compete with convenience, seasonality, and lack of knowledge. The CFS could be characterised as convenient in the sense that supermarkets are easily accessible and offer an increased variability of food products. Nowadays, the conventional globalised food system provides consumers with a big variety of food products regardless of the season as they can be imported, something that goes against the principles behind the operation of AFNs. As far as lack of knowledge is concerned the producers involved in AFNs don't always have the required management or technological skills that the organization of the allocation of production requires. The networks though, expressed that since the inflation they have noticed that they

have to compete with prices too, and this wasn't the case before, but they attribute it to the special times that we live in.

However, all the producers think that operating through AFNs has other advantages such as the lack of intermediaries, the fact that they are more ecological, and freedom because as John narrated, they can do their own thing. As Mary expressed, *"I think the advantage of these networks is that we don't have intermediaries and most of the products are ecological"*. (Mary, 24/2/2023).

In the same direction according to Avery's words,

"I think we are kind of in different spheres and we don't have to compete in the traditional way, but I think with compete with lack of knowledge and habit and convenience. But it is not necessarily that we compete with the food system but more with what it creates". (Avery, 16/2/2023).

And with that, we get back to the main question of Political Ecology, which investigates what is produced and for whom (Flachs 2020). This question will be addressed through my analysis by investigating the norms that emerge from AFNs' operation, as those new norms question how the CFS produces commodities rather than food for the people and how it only aims to benefit big transnational corporations rather than primary producers who should be treated as fundamental components of the food chain.

Moreover, as Blumberg et al. (2020) highlight as well, small-scale farmers might have to either cooperate with the CFS or have a secondary occupation in order to cope financially. All the producers who participated in this study mentioned that farming is not their main source of income, especially during the winter. Many work outside of the farms with other things and others complement their income with cafes or accommodation on the farm.

After analysing the empirical material related to the dynamics of production, we can conclude that the producers think they operate in different spheres with the CFS, which highlights the need of transforming the current food system. The competition between the CFS and the small-scale producers that are parts of AFNs is not direct, but they have to compete with convenience, seasonality, and lack of knowledge that the system creates. However, the fact that there are no intermediaries was identified as one of the biggest advantages that AFNs offer

which contributes to the fact that the producers see them as channels rather than middlemen. Lastly, it seems that most of the producers are benefited from their participation and operation through AFNs, although for some it is their only option as being small-scale excludes them from being part of the CFS.

5.5 Food commoning

In order to better answer the research question if AFNs could be seen as a way of food commoning and how that affects their transformative capacity, I draw on the preconditions that I explained in the theory chapter. In this thesis commoning is seen as the practice of “making commons” and it requires a resource and a governing community. Participation, transparency, and appreciation of labour are some of the aspects that are analysed and discussed in this section to investigate how commoning practices, generated through the operation of AFNs, contribute to changing the social relations and dynamics of production. It is important to investigate if we can identify these preconditions as existing aspects in operation of AFNs and to see how these aspects affect the social relations of the actors involved.

As mentioned above, through the analysis of the empirical material and the participants’ views, I have identified an existing community through AFNs. The active participation of the producers in the organizational aspects of most of the networks was identified both from the gathered information and the producers’ narrations. But as commons research tend to argue (Zhang & Barr 2019), participation goes beyond the literal meaning of taking part in the labour and it is about the contribution to the making of a community. Following this commoning perspective, consumers are part of the commoning communities, because they actively participate in the operational organization of the networks. As John said, *“Every time that someone in the farmer’s market thanks us for being there, we always answer that we thank them for coming, because if it wasn’t for them, we wouldn’t be there in the first place, we would possibly not be able to maintain the farm either.”* (John, 14/2/2023).

This highlights the fact that even consumers, who are not taking part in the labour, are integral parts of AFNs and the commoning communities.

As far as transparency is concerned, the producers mentioned that they know enough about the operation of the networks. According to commons literature transparency facilitates commons governance (De Bernardi et al. 2020). As Noah mentioned,

“The chains are so short, so they are much more transparent in comparison to selling in bulk. We don’t know what the customers do. But I think we know enough”. (Noah, 13/2/2023).

They all added that the process is very transparent for the consumers as well and they can “just ask” as many put it and they will get all the information, something Zoll et al. (2018) identified as an idea between the consumers as well. The networks expressed as well that transparency exists. They said that the producers know the process and they are always open about prices and what happens to their products, they are also welcomed to board meetings as “Ultimat’s” representative mentioned. According to De Bernardi et al. (2020), transparency is one of the factors needed in order to facilitate common governance. Transparency is important as it allows the producers to know and observe the processes followed which increases the motivation for them to be actively engaged with those processes and strengthens their collective governance. It also encourages consumers to buy more often, which strengthens the performance of AFNs.

Furthermore, all the producers expressed the feeling that their labour gets a higher value by operating through AFNs and many attributed that to the direct connection with the consumers. They all expressed that they feel appreciated and known within the AFNs in comparison to the anonymity that a supermarket shelf offers. All the producers mentioned that they have experienced many cases where the consumers were willing to pay something extra because they knew who worked for it and under which circumstances. As John mentioned,

“I think my labour gets a higher value. If it comes out in a conventional grocery store no one can see the value of it. And we are anonymous, and our things do not fit into the standards”. (John, 14/2/2023).

In the same direction, Logan expressed: *“Well, at least my labour will be more known within a small community. Those who operate through the CFS are anonymous if they don’t become very big.”* (Logan 13/2/2023). We can clearly

observe that the reference point is once again the capitalist market, as all the participants answered by comparing to the CFS. However, the fact that they feel that their labour is highly appreciated by the consumers could be seen as a new norm that AFNs create which also contributes to the introduction of different sets of social relations between the actors involved, strengthening this way the commoning practices behind AFNs' operation.

By analysing the empirical material in this section, we can draw conclusions on participation, transparency, and highly appreciated labour as three important aspects of AFNs. Seeing participation as contribution to the making of a community leads us to the conclusion that consumers that take part actively in the organization and the operation of the networks are part of the commoning communities and all the participants expressed that the existence of the consumers allows them to continue their operation. These three aspects strengthen the governing community and introduce different sets of relations between the actors involved.

To conclude, this study identifies commoning practices in the operation of AFNs and highlights that consumers are integral parts of AFNs as they contribute to the making of the community. Besides, the introduction of new norms and sets of relations between the actors involved, that are generated through commoning, increase the transformative capacity of AFNs and their potential to set the path towards the transformation of the current food system.

6. Conclusions

This study has aimed to investigate if AFNs could set the path for the transition of the current food system as agents of change on a local level in the Swedish region of Uppland, by exploring their commoning practices. Through the mapping of the existing AFNs in Uppland region we figured out that they are very heterogenous. This heterogeneity is a potential advantage as it offers many different distribution channels for the producers to allocate their products, but it can hinder the formation of one bigger and more consistent movement, and it shows how dysfunctional the dominant market is as it highlights the need to fill gaps.

Through my analysis, four overarching themes were identified. Firstly, the idea of being alternative, according to the participants, is based both on the scale of production as all the producers consider themselves as small-scale farmers, and also on the fact that the production itself is more human centred which gives more dimensions to food than just being a commodity product. However, the label of being alternative can create confusion between the consumers and lead to exclusion among the producers which hinders the transformative capacity of AFNs.

In the sphere of social relations, a strong community feeling was identified that goes beyond the relations between producers and consumers and involves strong and active relations among the producers, which is an under-researched aspect of AFNs. Previous studies have indicated the great importance of the direct interaction between producers and consumers (Milestad et al. 2010; Blumberg et al. 2020; Drottberger et al. 2021). In this thesis, I have shown that a strong community between the producers who participate in AFNs exists and highly benefits them, as they create a network characterized by trust and personal contact. We can argue that the empirical material of this study indicates that AFNs contribute to changing the social relations among the producers in Uppland region by enabling trust and a strong community feeling between the actors involved. Trust is an important factor in terms of commoning because increased trust in communities leads to more effective common governance (Zhang & Barr 2019) which in its turn generates more trust.

Furthermore, the interviewees expressed that they operate in totally different spheres from the CFS and that they compete with the habits it creates, like convenience, seasonality, and lack of knowledge, rather than with the system itself. In addition to that, the participants consider AFNs as channels and as an effective way to shorten the chains and avoid intermediaries. Simultaneously, the producers who participated in this study expressed that this is the exact reason why they don't want extra services provided by the networks as it would mean additional steps in the chain, and it would probably involve middlemen as well. The absence of middlemen increases the transformative capacity of AFNs on a local level, but we cannot draw safe conclusions of the functionality of these patterns on larger scales through this study.

To conclude none of the participants in this study believes that AFNs could replace the CFS, but this is not what they are aiming for either. On the other hand, the participants expressed that being together through their operation within AFNs makes them strong enough to be able to turn the fact that they are small-scale to an advantage for them. From a commoning perspective, the new sets of social relations which take place in AFNs through their self-organizing mechanisms can lead to the creation of new norms in food production and distribution (Nightingale 2019; De Bernardi et al. 2020). It is highly observed both through this study but also from the literature (Zoll et al. 2018; Blumberg et al. 2020) that the interest of both the producers and the consumers being parts of AFNs grows more and more and this can be seen as a steppingstone to the transformation of the food system.

Lastly, the analysis of the empirical material leads us to the conclusion that operating through AFNs generates alternative dynamics of producing, exchanging, and managing resources. Most of the actors involved appreciate food as a multidimensional resource and consider AFNs as a way to manage this resource collectively. This idea of collective management is not connected to property but is related more to the governance of the allocation of production through a transparent and inclusionary system where labour is appreciated and personal, and not hidden behind the anonymity that a supermarket self provides.

6.1 Future work

In this study, the networks that participated are only a small part of the existing AFNs, mainly due to time constraints. The main focus of this thesis is the perspective of the producers, and the involvement of the networks only supported that. However, studying and approaching more networks to include several perspectives is recommended for future research in order to be able to draw safe conclusions on larger scales. Moreover, deepening the investigation of the role that AFNs play in treating food as commons is necessary because, as this study shows, it has the potential to increase the transformative capacity of AFNs. Lastly, something that came up a lot during the interviews but is not in the scope of this study is how certifications affect small-scale farmers in Sweden, specifically farmers that operate through AFNs, which needs to be investigated further to understand how it affects the participation of small-scale farmers in AFNs and adds to their burden.

AFNs is an important field to study as they represent an opposition to the current food system. They are an eminent feature in the realm of agricultural and food-related academic research since they challenge the CFS by their commoning practices. AFNs create new sets of social relations between the actors involved and generate new dynamics of producing, exchanging, and managing resources.

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Popular science summary

Current global food systems are highly concentrated food is traded and valued primarily for its economic worth. Small-scale farmers that have limited access to inputs and machinery are often pushed into the side-line. The need for the transformation of that food system is urgent and acknowledged worldwide. Alternative food networks (AFNs) have emerged globally as a way to express opposition to the current food system. This thesis investigates the potential of AFNs to be the steppingstone for the transformation of the current food system, by bringing change on a local level in the Swedish region of Uppland. The study focuses on exploring the commoning practices behind the operation of AFNs. Food commoning is a way of coming together as a community to collectively manage and share food resources, which encourages local participation and shared responsibility. A qualitative approach was followed, including individual in-depth interviews with seven farmers and two network representatives. The study concludes that AFNs contribute to changing the social relations among producers by enabling trust and a strong community feeling, by collectively managing their food resources and organizing the allocation of production. Participants saw AFNs as an effective way avoid intermediaries, but none believed that AFNs could replace the conventional food system.

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Appendix

Table 1 Information about the producer'. State of the ownership of the farm, allocation of production and other relevant information.

Random name	farm's ownership	Allocation of production	Other relevant information
Logan	Owner of a small-scale farm	Both AFNs and other channels (schools and restaurants)	organically certified
Madison	Owner of a small-scale farm	AFNs, CSA schemes	-
Mary	Garden-farmer	Only AFNs	Collecting things from forests too
Harper	Rents a small farm	Only AFNs	-
John	Owner of a small-scale farm	Only AFNs	organically certified
Avery	Volunteer board member in a non-profit agricultural cooperative	Only AFNs	Volunteers run the cooperative; consumers help voluntarily with the workload
Noah	Owner of a small-scale farm	Both AFNs and other channels (local shops and restaurants)	organically certified, plans to scale up

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