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Food Glorious Food

An investigation into the processes of learning, network building and articulation of expectations at *The Food Assembly* in London, UK

Jamie Bajer

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Supervisors: Barry Ness & Maja Essebo, LUCSUS, Lund University

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Abstract

Society has become locked into an unsustainable agri-food system based on resource intensive industrial agriculture and a globalized supply chain producing food that is damaging to the environment and society. In London, United Kingdom a network of alternative food initiatives exists challenging this agri-food system and bring about a transition to one that is more sustainable. However so far the unsustainable food consumption and production practices remain dominant and these alternative food initiatives remain on the fringes of society. In order to better understand the processes that influence the success of alternative food initiatives *The Food Assembly*, an initiative promoting local food purchased directly from producers online and distributed at local venues or *Assemblies*, was studied using the internal processes of learning, networking and articulation of expectations as an analytical framework. Contribution of an intermediary role of The Food Assembly headquarters (HQ) to these internal processes was also investigated. Semi-structured interviews were conducted of Assembly hosts and producers and a survey was conducted of members. The study found that existing learning processes could be improved for hosts through training on a range of topics including in particular marketing and for both hosts and producers through sharing sales analytics data. Existing networking processes would benefit from regular meetings between hosts and through increased collaboration with local cafes, restaurants and offices. Existing expectations regarding time commitment of hosts may be made more credible with a formalized volunteering system. Finally it was found that HQ could play a greater intermediary role through creating generalized knowledge from host, producer and member feedback, creating a forum for exchange of this knowledge with the aim to produce updated guidelines based on this feedback. The use of the processes of learning, networking and articulation of expectations proved helpful as a framework and enabled key issues within The Food Assembly to be highlighted. The findings of this study may prove helpful for other niche initiatives and intermediary actors in achieving success.

Keywords: Sustainability, London, alternative food networks, Strategic niche management, intermediary actors, niche-internal processes

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Abbreviations

MLP – Multi-level perspective

HQ – *The Food Assembly* UK headquarters

SNM - Strategic niche management

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1 Introduction

Over the last half-century changes in diet and food production methods together with an increasingly globalized agri-food system have created a situation in which people around the world are consuming food that has a greater negative impact on the environment, society and their health. The modernization of the agri-food system through the introduction of fertilizers and pesticides and greater mechanization in the 1940s, although leading to a significant increase in food production, has also led to increased greenhouse gas emissions, water consumption and biodiversity loss (Smith, 2006; Marsden and Morley, 2014). This agri-food system in fact now provides us with a large number of cheap unhealthy food products with high salt and sugar content and low nutrient value (Johnston, Fanzo, & Cogill, 2014). One response to this unsustainable agri-food system has been the relocalization of food consumption and production through alternative food initiatives such as community-supported agriculture, farmer's markets and food cooperatives that seek to connect consumers more directly to farmers, maintain agricultural practices that use less fuel, fertilizer and chemicals such as organic farming, and build and develop local communities (Maye & Kirwan 2010; Campbell, Boucquey, Stoll, Coppola, & Smith, 2013).

The UK is heavily dominated by a select few supermarkets chains and discount stores with just the top 4 supermarkets Tesco, Asda, Sainsbury's and Morrisons and top 2 discount stores Aldi and Lidl making up approximately 90% of the food retail market share (Kantarworldpanel, 2017). This societal consumption of food from supermarkets and discount stores can be said to be locked-in. This lock-in exists because resources both financial and material have been invested in technology and institutions at every level of the supply chain and together with the established social practices and the influence of the interests of stakeholders create a formidable barrier to change (Spaargaren, Oosterveer & Loeber, 2012). This challenge of breaking through the established food 'regime' can be viewed through the lens of transition theory and multi-level perspective (Geels, 2002; see section 3.1 and 3.2) in which alternative food initiatives can be viewed as part of a niche trying to break through to the regime level changing the dominant forms of food consumption and production. Additionally Strategic niche management (SNM) is concerned specifically with how niches can be supported to develop and grow and tells us three key processes specifically, learning, network building and articulation of expectations are crucial in the development of the niche (Schot and Geels, 2008).

1.1 Aim and Research Questions

The aim of this study is to analyse the internal processes of learning, network building and articulation of expectations within *The Food Assembly* and identify how these can be improved. Through understanding how these processes of learning, networking building and articulation of expectations could be improved the intention is that this initiative can be better supported to develop and grow.

In pursuit of my aim, three research questions will be asked:

1. What internal processes of learning, network building and articulation of expectations currently exist within *The Food Assembly* network?
2. How could these internal processes be improved to help Assemblies develop and grow?
3. Could a greater intermediary role for *The Food Assembly* UK Headquarters (HQ) contribute to improving these internal processes?

1.2 Sustainability Science Contribution

Human activity has impacted Planet Earth to such an extent that it can be said that we have entered a new geological era, 'the Anthropocene' (Lewis, & Maslin, 2015) in which the biophysical processes of climate change, biodiversity loss, land-system change and biochemical flows (of nitrogen and phosphorus) have reached levels that cross planetary boundaries risking a destabilizing of the earth system (Steffen et al., 2015). The disruption of these biophysical processes together with others including freshwater use and ocean acidification represent a direct and indirect danger to society and can be seen as the 'new' sustainability challenges of our time (Jerneck et al., 2010). The modern agri-food systems contributes to these sustainability challenges through increasing CO₂ emissions, extensive use of fertilizers, extensive land clearing, biodiversity loss and significant freshwater consumption (Marsden and Morley, 2014). Sustainability science attempts to address sustainability challenges through better understanding the interactions between nature and society, two fields of science that have traditionally remained separated (Kates et al., 2001; Jerneck et al., 2010). Kates (2011) following on from Kates et al. (2001) presents seven key questions to guide sustainability science research. This study makes a contribution to answering two of the questions in particular 1) "What shapes the long-term trends and transitions that provide the major directions for this century?" and 2) "How can society most effectively guide or manage human environmental systems toward a sustainability transition?" Both these questions are concerned with transitions to more sustainable ways of living. This study is contributing to answering these questions by investigating in particular the processes occurring within a niche initiative challenging the conventional agri-food

system and examining how these processes can be improved to help the niche initiative develop and grow. By understanding better how niche initiatives can grow we can deepen our understanding of how transitions can occur and how to guide them.

1.3 Research gap

Researchers have studied how SNM theory can be applied to market-based initiatives (van der Laak, Raven, & Verbong, 2007; Hegger, Van Vliet, & Van Vliet, 2007) and more recently grassroots initiatives (Seyfang & Haxeltine, 2012; Seyfang & Longhurst, 2016), however these studies largely focused on innovations within the field of energy paying very little attention to the agri-food system (except Kirwan, Ilbery, Maye, & Carey, 2013). This thesis addresses this gap by examining the existence of niche-internal processes within an alternative food initiative. Additionally given that *The Food Assembly* 'system' exists as numerous projects or 'Assemblies' connected together by one central organization *The Food Assembly* this case study provides an opportunity to examine the existence of an 'intermediary actor' role in which multiple niche projects are connected through one actor and opportunities for knowledge aggregation and dissemination exist (see section 3.4). The 'intermediary actor' perspective and its contribution to niche-internal processes has received only a little attention in the literature quite recently (Kivimaa, et al., 2014; Bush, et al., 2017) and as far as the author is aware no research has been carried out on intermediary actors of alternative food initiatives nor their contribution to niche-internal processes.

1.4 Case boundaries

For the purpose of this study I will delineate my case boundaries to clarify what exactly will be the subject of analysis. My physical boundary will be Greater London (from now on simply referred to as London), an area of 1,572 sq km and a population of approximately 7.5 million (Watson, 2009). *The Food Assembly* can be viewed as an organizational system with Assemblies spread over Europe with a Food Assembly Headquarters in each country and Food Assembly staff, Assembly hosts, food producers and members as the actors. Within my organizational boundary exists the UK Food Assembly Headquarters (HQ), the London Assemblies, as well as all the producers and members of all Assemblies in London.

1.5 Thesis outline

In the next section I will introduce the case study, *The Food Assembly*, explaining its structure, practices and ideas. Following this the theoretical background to this study will be presented in sections 3.1 and 3.2 including an introduction to transition theory, multi-level perspective and

strategic niche management. Section 3.3 will then explain the analytical framework using the niche-internal processes of learning, network building and articulation of expectations to guide my research. Section 4 will contain an explanation of the research design and methods and following on from that in Section 5 an analysis of the results is presented in which the three research questions are answered. Finally Section 6 will discuss the wider significance of the study for SNM, alternative food initiatives and the field of sustainability science.

2 Case study: The Food Assembly

2.1 The Food Assembly Network

The Food Assembly was started in 2011 in France under the name “La ruche qui dit oui” (“the beehive that says yes” in English) (La Ruche Qui Dit Oui, n.d.-a) and has since spread to Switzerland, Italy, Belgium, Holland, Germany, Denmark and the UK (Food Assembly, n.d.-a). The network includes the local venues where the weekly collection takes place, referred to as ‘Assemblies’ as well as the central offices, known as the ‘Mamassembly’ which are located throughout various European countries including the UK and whose role is to “provide an ever-improving platform and build a sustainable network” (The Food Assembly, 2015).

According to the map of Assemblies on The Food Assembly website, as of the time of writing (April 2017), there are 1425 Assemblies distributed over 8 countries of which “more than 900 are open”, the others being under construction (Food Assembly, n.d.-a). These Assemblies however are not evenly distributed across Europe and France is by far the country with the greatest number of Assemblies (823) (see figure 1)

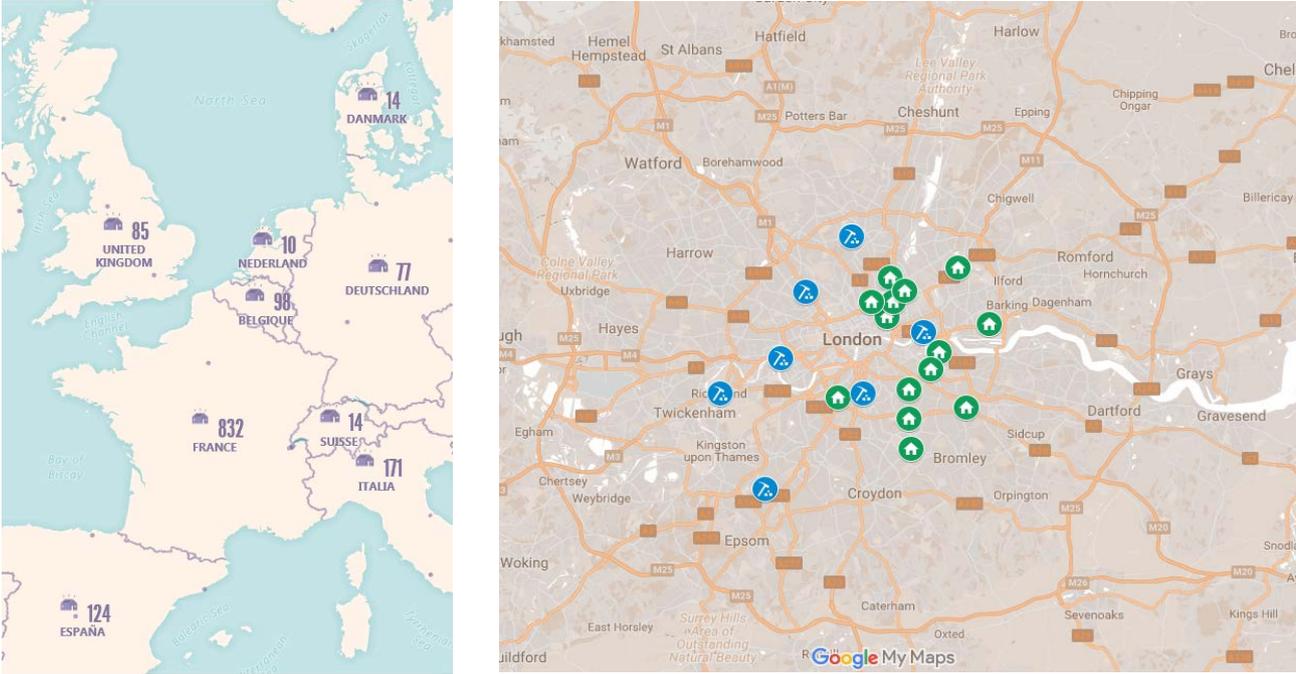


Figure 1. (left) Location and number of Assemblies in Europe (Food Assembly, n.d.-a) and **Figure 2.** (right) location of and status of Assemblies in London. Green denotes open and blue denotes under construction (from Google My Maps)

The UK has 85 Assemblies of which 21 are in London (Food Assembly, n.d.-a). The locations of the 21 London Assemblies are shown in Figure 2 of which 14 are currently open (denoted by the green house icon) and 7 are in the process of being set-up (denoted by the under construction icon). It can be seen from the diagram that the Assemblies are currently predominantly located in the east of London. It appears from the map and distribution of Assemblies around London that there is a significant lack of presence in some areas suggesting there is still room for significant expansion of the network across London.

2.2 The Food Assembly system

The Food Assembly system consists of a technical component, the online platform and Assembly venues, and a social component of five actors: the Assembly hosts, food producers, HQ, members and venue owners. In brief *The Food Assembly* works as follows:

- 1) Through *The Food Assembly* website consumers can find an Assembly that they would like to join
- 2) After joining an Assembly on the online platform they can view producers and their products
- 3) The consumers (now members) can then purchase the desired food item through the platform
- 4) The members can then collect the produce from the Assembly venue at the specified collection time

The Food assembly viewed as a system can be seen to be constituted of two main components the technical component (consisting of the online platform and Assembly venue) and the social component (consisting of the various actors of *The Food Assembly*)

2.2.1 Technical component

The online platform is a key component of *The Food Assembly* and has the capability to allow members to view and purchase food products and producers to display their products (*The Food Assembly*, 2015). Each Assembly has its own space on the platform to which members can join (e.g. see: *The Food Assembly*, n.d.-b) and gain access to view which products are sold, read comments from hosts and leave comments themselves. Members can see the location of all Assemblies and freely join and leave any of the open Assemblies across the whole Food Assembly network. Within each online Assembly site information is available about each producer which may include product details such as farming methods and production methods.

The venue is the other crucial technical component of *The Food Assembly* where the weekly collection takes place and could be any space from a restaurant to a library to a pub. Whatever space the host sees as a “welcoming, spacious and easily accessible place where the community can gather regularly” for distribution of produce (*The Food Assembly*, 2015). The venue therefore acts not just as a space simply for the distribution of food but also as a space for the fostering of local community. Additionally it can be seen as a space for learning and networking, with opportunities to meet and interact with not just other members but also potentially other food producers. The produce is picked up from the venue at the particular time and day set by the hosts.

2.2.2 Social component

Food Producers, hosts and *The Food Assembly* headquarters each have important obligations specified by *The Food Assembly*. Members and venue owners do not have specific responsibilities but are still an essential part of *The Food Assembly* system. Hosts are fully in charge of the local Assembly and have many crucial duties related to its running. The hosts are in charge of finding the venue, selecting producers for the Assembly, organizing the weekly online markets and the weekly food pick-up from the venue as well as visiting the workplace of each producer within 1 year of working with them. Furthermore they are expected to promote the Assembly and act as a “communication bridge between members and producers” (*The Food Assembly* n.d.-c). Producer’s duties include agreeing to be transparent about how their products are made and sourced and ensuring delivery of products if minimum orders are met (*The Food Assembly* n.d.-c). *The Food Assembly*’s role involves training hosts, monitoring payments on the platform, supporting food producers in use of the platform and ensuring the producers that are chosen reflect the core values of *The Food Assembly* (*The Food Assembly* n.d.-c). Members although not given specific obligations are of course vital to *The Food Assembly* and their consumption and participation is essential. Additionally cooperation with venue owners is essential in guaranteeing a stable location for the distribution of food and community gathering that is an essential part of *The Food Assembly*.

2.3 Sustainability

The Food Assembly differentiates itself from the agri-food regime through its emphasis on local food, grown sustainably and fairer pay for farmers. All food is produced within 150 miles of the Assembly where it is sold and in fact the average distance of food sold at Assemblies is said to be 26 miles (*The Food Assembly* n.b.-d). Farmers and other food producers can set their own prices and get more than 80% of the proceeds from every product sold which is a great deal more than supermarkets where

they only get 15-25% (*The Food Assembly*, n.d.-e). Additionally the farmers will only harvest as much as they need, depending on the order, which reduces food waste (*The Food Assembly* n.b.-d).

2.4 Conceptualizing *The Food Assembly*

There are a number of ways *The Food Assembly* could be conceptualized. From a business perspective *The Food Assembly* could be conceived as a franchise in which each Assembly Host acts as a franchisee receiving support from *The Food Assembly* and access to the online platform (Proctor & Berdegué, 2016). There are similarities here between the franchise role and the intermediary role of *The Food Assembly* (see section 3.4) which will be explored later in the paper. Another conceptualization is that of an 'omnichain' which Cordón, Caballero & Ferreiro (2015) use to describe *The Food Assembly* 'ecosystem' in which several roles can be played by each actor. A host could also be a member and a producer if desired and the members and producers can become hosts for example. Woskow (2014) describes *The Food Assembly* as a food distribution service within the sharing economy, an 'evolution' of a farmers market. Presumably because the online platform gives farmers and other food producers the ability to share their produce directly with consumers cutting out the middle man.

However I am not going to conceptualize *The Food Assembly* as a franchise, an omnichain or as part of the sharing economy but as a niche initiative within the framework of transition theory. The Assemblies can be seen as projects joined together through *The Food Assembly* which acts as an intermediary actor connecting the various projects and supporting them together as part of a wider niche. *The Food Assembly* can in fact be viewed as one of many initiatives that are trying to bring about a transition in the conventional agri-food regime in London. London Farmer's Market is another initiative composed of approximately 20 farmer's markets that are members of the network and follow its rules such as only selling local food (London Farmers markets, n.d.). London Farmers Markets could also be seen as an intermediary actors of alternative food initiatives challenging the current agri-food regime. Another organisation also promoting more sustainable ways of consuming and producing food is Farmdrop (farmdrop, n.d.) which delivers local produce London-wide. Producers supplying to *The Food Assembly* could themselves be seen as alternative food initiatives and may be connected through other intermediaries such as London Farmers' Market and/or Farmdrop. This conceptualization as a niche initiative within transition theory and multi-level perspective (MLP) focuses on the desire of the experiments within the niche to grow and challenge the regime and is therefore an appropriate approach to tackle the problem of the dominance of the supermarkets and other conventional retailers. In addition to this SNM theory is helpful in

understanding what processes are important in determining the success of the niche and so is used as an analytical framework in this study, focusing on the internal niche processes of learning, network building and articulation of expectations.

3 Conceptual framework

3.1 Transition theory and Multi-level perspective (MLP)

To understand the use of strategic niche management (SNM) as an analytical framework within this thesis we first need to understand what a niche and why it is important. We therefore will start with an introduction to transition theory and the multi-level perspective (MLP).

A transition is defined by Rotmans, Kemp & Van Asselt (2001 p.16) as: “A gradual, continuous process of change where the structural character of a society (or a complex sub-system of society) transforms.” Transitions are said to arise from a series of changes across different domains (technology, economy, institutions, behavior, culture and ecology) that mutually connect and reinforce each other (Rotmans, Kemp & Van Asselt, 2001). Different domains will change at varying speeds however a general pattern of change with four phases (Figure 3) has been described: 1) an initial predevelopment phase in which there is no visible change 2) a take-off phase initiating change 3) a phase of accelerating change 4) a stabilization phase in which a new dynamic equilibrium is reached (Rotmans, Kemp & Van Asselt, 2001).

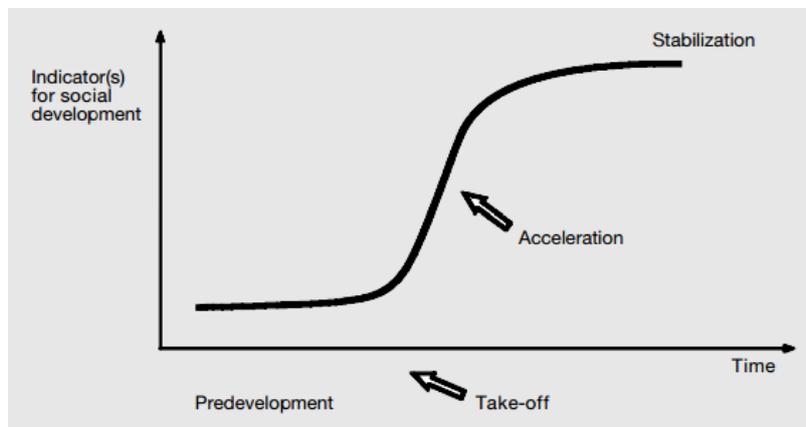


Figure 3. The four phases of transitions (Rotmans, Kemp & Van Asselt, 2001).

Geels (2002) builds on this idea of transitions and applies MLP to technological transitions differentiating three different levels: a technological niche (micro-level), socio-technical regime (meso-level) and landscape (macro-level). Technological niches are spaces in which radical innovations can grow protected to a certain extent from selection pressures (Schot, 1998). Niches are embedded within the regime level within which incremental change occurs within the constraint of a

communal set of rules (Geels, 2002). The landscape embeds the other two layers and comprises of factors that are external to the technology such as economic growth and cultural norms (Figure 3).

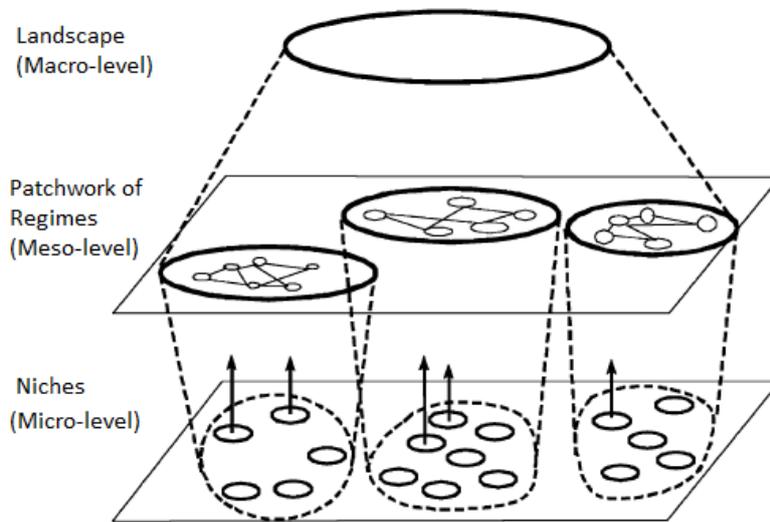


Figure 3 An illustration of the multi-level perspective showing the niche, regime and landscape (adapted from Geels, 2002)

Geels (2002) illustrates the dynamics of a technological transition with a diagram consisting of the 3 socio-technical levels and arrows of different directions and lengths to indicate stability and coherence (Figure 4). At the niche level arrows are short and pointing in different directions representing the varied and relatively unstable collection of efforts by actors working on radical innovations, however stabilization of these radical innovations can occur, which together with a 'window of opportunity' created by processes at the regime and landscape levels enables the niche innovations to break through into the regime level (Geels, 2002). I have indicated the 'breaking out' of the radical innovation on the diagram in red, a key aspect of the transition process that involves what Geels (2002) terms 'niche-cumulation' where radical innovations are cumulatively applied to market niches.

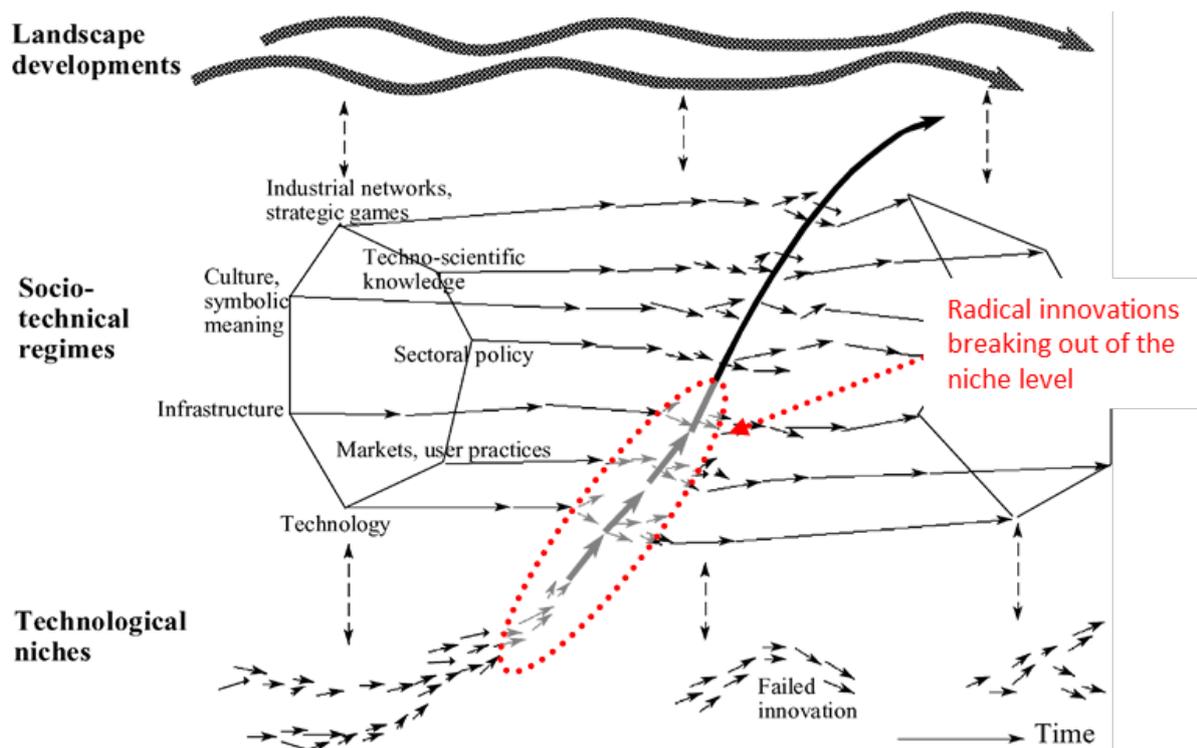


Figure 4. A multi-level perspective of transitions (adapted from Geels, 2002)

Transition theory provides a mechanism for how we may change a locked-in unsustainable agri-food system with its unsustainable consumption and production practices through allowing radical innovations that may provide solutions to establish a new, more sustainable socio-technical regime (Spaargaren, Oosterveer, & Loeber, 2012). This transition clearly does not happen overnight but as mentioned above with the right conditions to create the ‘window of opportunity’ in the regime, technological niches can, if nurtured and supported, accumulate and breakthrough into the regime level. The nurturing and supporting of niches is crucial to enabling a transition to occur (Schot & Geels, 2008). Although transitions were originally theorized to occur through substitution of the regime by the niche, later work has shown in fact that various kinds of ‘co-evolutions’ may occur which can lead to a regime shift (Schot & Geels, 2008). As well as substitution changes in the regime may occur through incorporation of niche innovations and transformation from within (Raven, 2006) or lessons from niche innovations may be translated into the regime (Smith, 2007). Strategic niche management theory tells how niches can be best supported and developed.

3.2 Strategic niche management

Strategic niche management (SNM) can be defined as “the creation, development and controlled phase-out of protected spaces for the development and use of promising technologies by means of

experimentation” (Kemp, Schot, & Hoogma, 1998 p.186). SNM was developed in the context of sustainable transportation and mobility as an approach able to bridge two competing paradigms of how problems related to transportation, such as pollution, congestion and accidents, should be dealt with (Kemp, Schot, & Hoogma, 1998; Schot, Hoogma, & Elzen, 1994; Hoogma et al., 2002). One paradigm, the utopian ‘technological fix’ paradigm views these problems as being solved simply by inventing an appropriate technology whereas the ‘cultural fix’ paradigm believes technology is in fact part of the problem and what is needed is social and cultural change (Hoogma et al., 2002). SNM aims to foster a co-evolution of new experimental technologies together with their ‘cultural’ contextual factors such as user preferences, networks and expectations. This approach has since been studied in other areas besides mobility and sustainable transport including energy (van der Laak, Raven, & Verbong, 2007; Seyfang & Haxeltine, 2012), sanitation (Hegger, Van Vliet, & Van Vliet, 2007) and agriculture (Kirwan et al., 2013).

Key to this approach is the understanding that the experiment is taking place inside a niche, a protected space, protecting the experiment from selection pressures of the dominant regime (Kemp, Schot, & Hoogma, 1998; Hoogma et al., 2002). Entrepreneurs and spaces for application of the niche, such as the army, are important examples of protected space (Kemp, Schot, & Hoogma, 1998). A balance should be achieved between protection and selection pressure however as if too much protection is given this could lead to failures with a heavy cost, but if too little protection is provided this may prevent the technology from developing in the first place (Kemp, Schot, & Hoogma, 1998). SNM involves the nurturing of experimental technologies from technological niches (in need of protection for market forces) to develop them into market niches (can develop without protection) and eventually to create a regime-shift and become dominant at the regime level (Weber et al., 1999; Kemp, Schot, & Geels, 2008). **Three niche-internal processes have been identified as being key to the development of technological niches: learning, network building and articulation of expectations** (Kemp, Schot, & Hoogma, 1998). The niche-internal processes as described in SNM theory will be used as my analytical framework.

3.2.1 Learning

The idea of experimentation, as seen in the definition above, is key to the SNM approach. Hoogma et al. (2002 p.5) are explicit that their use of the term “experiment”, when describing the spaces of technological creation and development in the niche, is intentional, choosing not to use the terms demonstration or pilot project to highlight how learning is a central component of SNM. According to the SNM approach, successful niche development requires learning processes to be both broad, going beyond the technical dimension and deep, involving reflexive second-order learning (Grin, &

Van De Graaf, 1996; Kemp, Schot, & Hoogma, 1998; Hoogma et al., 2002). Broad learning processes involves learning that goes beyond purely accumulating technical knowledge and but also social knowledge such as user preferences and cultural significance (Kemp, Schot, & Hoogma, 1998; Raven, Van den Bosch, & Weterings 2010). Schot & Geels (2008) explicitly mention 7 'dimensions' of knowledge necessary for successful development of the niche 1) "Technical aspects and design specifications" 2) "market and user preferences" 3) "cultural and symbolic meaning" 4) "infrastructure and maintenance networks" 5) "industry and production networks" 6) "regulations and government policy" and 7) "societal and environmental effects". With regards to deep second-order learning Hoogma et al. (2002) discuss the importance of co-evolutionary learning involving the mutual questioning and exploring of technology choices, user demands and regulatory options. According to Hoogma et al. (2002) this can also include collective value learning (Wynne, 1995) which involves articulating and connecting values of different groups involved in the technology. Further to values, second-order learning involves the questioning of assumptions that structure the practices and approaches related to the technology being developed (Smith, 2007). These learning processes have been applied and analysed in a number of studies, particularly in the field of energy. Studies have often shown that niche experiments have low levels of second-order learning and learning is often narrow and technologically focused (Schot & Geels, 2008). More recent studies analysed learning processes taking place have focused on grassroots innovations. Seyfang & Longhurst (2016) investigate not just the occurrence of second-order learning but also look at what type of learning is occurring whether it is tacit knowledge that is being gained or more formal learning processes such as project evaluations or academic research and additionally whether learning is being consolidated.

3.2.2 Networking

Network building is an essential process for the development of the niche. It enables the continued support for the initiative through the provision of resources such as money, people and knowledge that may be necessary for the growth of the niche and enables interactions to occur between different stakeholders (Schot & Geels, 2008; Hatzl, Seebauer, Fleiß & Posch, 2016). According to SNM theory niches are successful if their social networks are both broad including a variety of different perspectives and actors from different domains including politics and science and society as well as deep, with members contributing significant resources (Raven et al., 2010; Seyfang, Hielscher, Hargreaves, Martiskainen, & Smith, 2014) furthermore successful networks will have regular interactions between members (Kivimaa, 2014). These niche-internal processes do not exist in isolation and network building processes are intimately connected to learning processes. Networks that are broader and more inclusive of outside actors show deeper and broader learning processes,

including more second-order learning (Schot and Geels, 2008). As well as broad and deep network building processes Seyfang et al. (2014) distinguish between pre-existing, reactive and pro-active network building processes demonstrating a gradient from less active in building new and more extensive networks and to a much more active approach. This demonstrates the importance of not just the kind of networking the initiative aims to achieve but also their approach to network building. Lastly another distinction that would be important to bear in mind when judging the quality of network building that is taking place would be networking between internal actors that are part of the niche and external networks that are made by Seyfang & Haxeltine (2012). Seyfang & Haxeltine (2012) who in their study of Transition towns see that internal network building is as important for niche growth as external network building. It could be said this is implicit in having a 'broad network' however this dichotomy is useful analytically as it enables the intention of particular network building processes to be made more explicit.

3.2.3 Expectations

Articulation of expectations and visions are an essential niche-internal process because they provide the direction in which the niche will develop and in which learning can be focused and they help attract the attention of various stakeholders to provide resources that may support the niche (Kemp, Schot & Hoogma, 1998; Laak, Raven & Verbong, 2007). Expectations are particularly important in the early stages of development of the niche when those promoting the initiative will try and communicate positive expectations so that stakeholders and those starting the initiative believe that investing resources will produce positive outcomes (Hoogma et al., 2002). Research has shown that expectations will support development of the niche best when they are robust (shared between a greater number of actors), specific and credible (backed up with evidence) (Elzen, Hoogma, and Schot 1996; Kemp, Schot, & Hoogma, 1998). Van der Laak, Raven, & Verbong, (2007) question this idea of 'robustness' however arguing that rather than trying to force a common vision between actors with different visions the differences should instead be made explicit and then used constructively such as through testing the viability of various expectations through experimentation.

3.3 Intermediary actors

In addition to the internal-niche processes of learning, networking and articulation of expectation an additional feature of niches is described within the SNM literature. This 'fourth feature' is the distinction between a global niche of abstracted knowledge and local projects with context specific embedded knowledge (Figure 5) (Raven, 2012; Seyfang & Longhurst 2016). The formation of a global niche is essential for a shift in regime to occur and takes 'dedicated work' by intermediary actors

(Geels & Deuten, 2006) that connect together various projects within a niche as well as share and aggregate knowledge (Hargreaves et al., 2013). This is relevant for *The Food Assembly* because the initiative is composed of local Assemblies or ‘projects’ connected together by HQ.

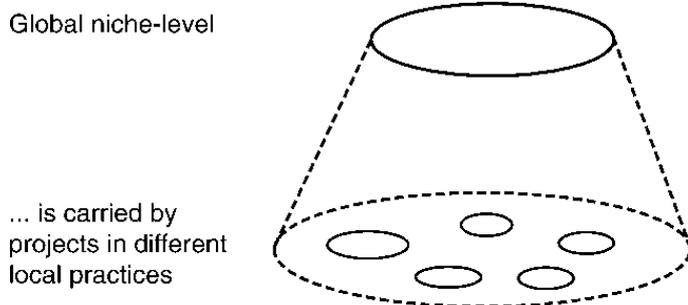


Figure 5. Analytical distinction between a global niche level and local projects (Geels & Deuten 2006)

Three sequential roles have been outlined for the establishment of a global niche by intermediaries (Geels and Deuten, 2006; Hargreaves et al., 2013). Firstly exists the aggregation of knowledge by the intermediary, in which knowledge is ‘disembedded’ from its local context and made sufficiently general to be able to be transferred to other projects. Secondly there is the establishment of an ‘institutional infrastructure’ to deposit and exchange this aggregated knowledge through the interaction of different actors such as through workshops or technical journals. Lastly occurs a change in the direction of flow of knowledge between projects and intermediary such that the intermediary now guides the local projects through providing templates and guidelines for further projects. Recent studies have shown that Intermediary actors can support development of the niche through contributing to building the niche-internal processes of learning processes, network building and expectations (Kivimaa, 2014; Bush et al., 2017) The HQ therefore as an intermediary actor has the potential to contribute to niche-internal process and help support and develop the niche to which *The Food Assembly* belongs. Acknowledging that intermediary actors are able to influence and support niche-internal processes through their actions I will additionally examine the opportunities of HQ to contribute further to niche internal processes through strengthening its intermediary actor role.

4. Methodology

4.1 Research design

My study could best be described as a mixed-methods single case study with the unit of analysis being the London Assemblies. My case would be characterised as what Yin (2009) calls a “representative or typical case” or described by Bryman (2012) as the “exemplifying case”. The London assemblies form an example of an alternative food initiative to which niche theory can be applied and dynamics within these initiatives better understood. My study can be described as a mixed-methods study as it involves collecting data both qualitatively through interviews as well as quantitatively through a member survey (Bryman 2012).

4.2 Research methods

In my quest to understand the internal processes from different angles I sort to interview not just the hosts of Assemblies but also the producers who supply to the Assemblies. Additionally I felt the most appropriate way to contact members would be to send them a survey. I also contacted HQ by email to attempt to arrange an interview however in the end this was not possible as staff at HQ were so busy and did not have the time. In addition to the interviews and survey *The Food Assembly* website and UK Food Assembly “who we are” 2015 report (*The Food Assembly*, 2015) have been used to provide a further understanding of how *The Food Assembly* works and what it does. I initially contacted HQ to discuss the feasibility of studying The Food Assembly and HQ recommended I speak to Assembly hosts. On the 12th March 2017 I attended an Assembly where I expressed my interest in studying *The Food Assembly* and asked about the feasibility of contacting producers and members as well as interviewing hosts. The hosts were keen to help me and said that they could help me get in contact with producers and also were interested in sending out a member’s survey to better understand their members and suggested we could work on a survey together.

4.2.1 Interviews

In line with the SNM theory on niche-internal processes and intermediary actors, I constructed two sets of interview questions which focused around the three themes of learning, networking building and articulation of expectations, one targeted to hosts and one to producers (see appendix I). In line with the recommendations of Rowley (2012) I formulated 12 questions around these themes with a provisional order and a number of prompts for various questions to use if necessary to ensure the questions were explored sufficiently. Semi-structured interviewing was selected as the most appropriate technique providing a balance between the rigidity of a structured interview and the lack

of structure and comparability of an unstructured interview (Rowley, 2012). One preliminary unstructured interview with an Assembly host on the 12th March 2017 was conducted to better understand *The Food Assembly* and dynamics of the organisation. In total I conducted 11 semi-structured interviews, 6 with Assembly hosts of 4 different Assemblies and 5 with food producers. I contacted all hosts through *The Food Assembly* online platform.

Using an excel spreadsheet finding out through *The Food Assembly* online platform which producers supplied to this Assembly I assigned a number to each producer. I then used a random sequence generator (random.org, 2017) to randomly order all the producers and selected the first 10. I selected the producers randomly to try to remove bias that might arise from me choosing which producers to contact. The 10 producers were contacted by me via the hosts of one of the Assemblies. 5 of these producers were available for interviewing. The interviews were recorded and consent was collected for recording prior to the interviews in line with ethical considerations. Additionally it was made clear that the interviewee could choose not to answer any question if they desired and could stop the interview at any time. As some of the hosts and producers wanted to remain anonymous I have coded the producers (A to E) and hosts (A to F) (Table 1). Of the 11 interviews 3 were face-to-face and 8 were over Skype. For the face-to-face interviews a consent form was signed and for the Skype interviews the information was read to the interviewee prior to interview and consent then obtained verbally.

Table 1. Interview schedule with anonymized interviewees

Role	Code	Date of Interview
HOST	A	24/03/2017
	B	24/03/2017
	C	3/4/2017
	D	11/4/2017
	E	12/4/2017
	F	12/4/2017
	A	28/03/2017

PRODUCER	B	28/03/2017
	C	29/03/2017
	D	31/3/2017
	E	3/4/2017

4.2.2 Survey

As mentioned above the survey was conducted in collaboration with the hosts of one of the Assemblies. Firstly a meeting was held with the hosts where I presented some questions that I was interested in including. As this was a collaboration the hosts also included questions that were not directly relevant to my study but important for them to ask (see Appendix II for list of survey questions cited in this study). The survey was then compiled online using Google Forms and distributed to the approximately 1100 members of the Assembly by the hosts by email. The aim of the survey from the point of view of the hosts was to understand what members liked and disliked about the Assembly and see what could be improved. It was also important to the hosts to try to find out the reasons for members registering but not using the Assembly. The collaboration was mutually beneficial with me helping compile the survey and creating it online and the hosts helping promote the survey through an online promotional video as well as organizing a prize that could be won, encouraging people to fill in the survey. It was made clear on the survey that it was compiled in collaboration with a Master's student for the purposes of this thesis project and that all data would remain anonymous. A pilot survey was carried out with 3 friends of the hosts that new about *The Food Assembly* and following the pilot and all of us checking over the survey it was sent out with a deadline following a week later within which time it could be filled in and people would have a chance to win the hamper prize. The hamper prize was a selection of produce from various producers of the Assembly and so served as a promotional opportunity for these producers as well. A survey was chosen as the method being most appropriate to collect views from members, given the large number of members and the less time commitment needed to complete a survey compared to interview, as well as the advantage of being able to reach out to members that have never purchased from the *The Food Assembly* but have joined as members.

4.3 Data analysis

All interview recordings were transcribed using the 'smooth verbatim' transcription system (Mayring, 2014) which involved transcribing the recordings word for word however omitting utterances such as 'eh' and 'uhm' and filler words such as 'like' and 'you know'. This system has the advantage of presenting data more clearly whilst still conveying the meaning. The transcripts from the interviews were then coded thematically with respect to the three internal processes. The survey results from the 40 respondents was downloaded from Google forms onto an excel spreadsheet where it was available for analysis.

5 Results and Analysis

This section presents an analysis of the results of my research into both the extent of the niche-internal processes of learning, network building and articulation of expectations within the London Assemblies of *The Food Assembly* network as well as how these processes can be improved. This section is split into three sections, one for each of the niche-internal processes. Each sub-section is then divided into what currently exists of each process (research question 1) and how it can be improved (research question 2 and 3).

5.1 Learning Processes

A diagrammatic summary of the existing learning processes, key improvements and HQ intermediary role contribution is shown below (Figure 6).

5.1.1 Existing Learning processes

This study found numerous examples of learning among hosts, members and producers. Hosts explained that various learning materials are made available to them through a series of online documents on how to run an Assembly and an online handbook. These materials seemed to provide hosts with largely 'technical' knowledge regarding the innovation itself i.e. *The Food Assembly* and how to set it up. Examples of other first-order learning beyond 'technical' knowledge was observed by Host B who commented that they had gained knowledge related to food production saying "I'm definitely more knowledgeable now, I've researched it more. I've talked to the producers directly so I've definitely learnt about where food comes from [and] the impact on the environment." This is indicative that there is also learning occurring additionally in the seventh dimension of learning outlined by Schot & Geels (2008) namely "social and environment knowledge" in which hosts may be learning about the environmental and social benefits of the initiative. Another example of learning was given by Host A, who explained how they "feel much more comfortable writing for a specific audience." going onto to explain how working as a host they had become much more confident of the use of social media. The fact that hosts may be gaining knowledge and skills related to social media and marketing the Assembly relates to the second dimension of learning "market and user preferences" as it can be assumed the ability to market the Assembly needs take into account the preferences of the target audience to be effective. With regards to producers for some the knowledge gained was mainly basic technical details related to the platform and their obligations as a producers of *The Food Assembly*. A couple of producers did mention however that they had gained

knowledge about user preferences including which of their products were more popular with members. Members have opportunities for learning from the weekly assemblies that they attend where they can meet with producers. Furthermore Host E mentioned how three members had accompanied them on a trip to a farm which would potentially be an opportunity for members to gain knowledge about how the food they buy at *The Food Assembly* is produced.

As previously mentioned SNM theory tells us that as well as first-order learning, second-order reflexive learning is also important for successful development of a niche in which assumptions, structures and practices are questioned. In general examples of second-order learning were not so common however one significant opportunity for second-order learning that was mentioned was the Make:Sense problem-solving event that was held together with *The Food Assembly* and described by Host A as an opportunity to get “an outsider's perspective” to the challenges they face. The idea was that by getting an outsiders perspective this would be an opportunity to provide fresh ideas and new ways for looking at the way *The Food Assembly* functions and structures itself. Host C gave an example of second-order learning explaining they had changed the way they organise the Assembly from having a table laying out the produce and packing during the Assembly collection to pre-packing each members order so members can “spend more time chatting than packing”. This example demonstrates the Host Engaging in second-order learning rethinking the way they organize the Assembly responding to feedback from members. Another example of second-order learning was mentioned by food producers who through customer interaction said they learnt of new ways of potentially using their product. Producer A commented “we have our [product] in things like chocolate and patisserie we have it in a beer [...] little things that would never have thought of, might have indirectly or directly come from something someone said at a food Assembly”.

5.1.2 Improving learning processes

Broadening learning

A number of areas were suggested where more training for hosts would be helpful which would broaden the learning processes within the Assemblies. One key area that came up was marketing. One of the hosts explained that “there isn't really any support for people that don't have experience with marketing. Marketing your Assembly and advertising is a really big piece that's missing”. Although another host did mention that they had received some marketing training it did not seem to be the case for all hosts. Marketing was also mentioned by producers as being important. Producer B explained “I think Food Assembly should be much better marketed. They're really missing a trick on the marketing with *The Food Assembly*” and also went on to say “if it was my business, I

would certainly arrange some very good marketing workshops". Broadening learning at *The Food Assembly* to include marketing training and workshops as well as guidelines and examples for hosts would be helpful. Other areas of learning that might benefit from training and/or guidelines that came up in the interviews were mainly related to the sixth dimension of learning mentioned by Schot and Geels (2008) "regulations and government policy" namely information on the tax system, health and safety, insurance and how to deal with local councils. Furthermore broadening learning experiences of members with respect to environmental impact of food, was also suggested which could be done through talks or workshops which connects to the seventh dimension "societal and environmental effects".

Increasing sharing of data

Another issue was the sharing of data by HQ, in particular the ability to have sales analytics data from the online platform was mentioned. The Host A explained "we don't have any information on past sales, I'd like to know what our best-selling product or producer is, but not just this week, I want to know since the beginning, [...] I want to see an evolution". As well as lack of information on past sales, being unable to see how many people opened and filled baskets but did not check them out and being able to see how many people opened emails they've sent from the platform was also brought up as an issue. Greater sharing of sales analytics data as well as other data related to the online platform by HQ would potentially broaden and deepen learning processes at the Assembly. This kind of information would be particular useful in increasing knowledge regarding the second dimension of learning mentioned by Schot and Geels (2008) namely "market and user preferences" and the fourth dimension "infrastructure and maintenance networks" as the online platform could also be seen as a piece of vital infrastructure connecting assemblies.

More member interactions

Finally there is also potential to increase both first-order and second-order learning among members. Greater numbers of tasting events and farm visits would present members with the opportunity to talk to producers and learn more about the values of *The Food Assembly* as well as the reasons why a food producer may produce food in a more sustainable way which could make them rethink and evaluate their values with regards to food consumption and production. Additionally these visits would present an opportunity to broaden learning in terms of the environmental and societal impact of food production and consumption. In response to the survey question "Which events would you like to attend at *The Food Assembly*?" Nearly 50% (12 out of the 26) respondents said they would like to attend farms trip, 11 out of 26 said they would like to attend talks, and almost all (25 out of 26)

said they would like to attend tasting events, demonstrating an appetite for these kind of events among members.

Contribution of a HQ intermediary role to learning

There is great potential to increase learning through the collection of lessons learnt and feedback at different levels of the organisation. It was found during the interviews that lessons learnt and knowledge gained by the Assemblies were not systematically recorded and collected. One of the hosts explained, with regards to whether they thought it was a good idea to record lessons learnt: “I think that would be a good thing to do because [...] this is knowledge that [...] is all in our heads [...] if we decided to not do it [be hosts] anymore at all, then who would take over and how would they know all this stuff”. I would argue that the collection of lessons and knowledge learnt from Assemblies could be helpful in two keys ways. Firstly if knowledge and lessons learnt are collected from all the Assemblies by HQ it would be part of the first step in the establishment of a global niche, disembedding knowledge from its local context and creating abstract knowledge as is theorised by Geels and Deuten (2006) which could then contribute towards serving as guidelines and advice for other projects. Secondly recording lessons and knowledge gained by Assemblies ensures that if there is a change of hosts information is not lost. This recording of lessons learnt and knowledge also has the benefit of potentially increasing second-order learning as particular lessons from one Assembly may cause the host of another Assembly to challenge and rethink the way they do things.

There is also greater potential to learn from producers and for producers to learn from each other. HQ could also play a greater intermediary role collecting feedback on producers from Assembly hosts, Host C stated “when I do speak to my producers and [...] get certain feedback I think to a certain extent I probably know more about them than *The Food Assembly* [HQ] does which is fair enough, I work more closely with them. But I think they [HQ] [...] should collect that feedback”. The host emphasized how they believe that *The Food Assembly* could be more “proactive” in asking for feedback. Feedback could also be actively collected from members by hosts after products are sold and this information relayed to the producer and used by the hosts to ensure the members are satisfied. It seemed to be the case that producers were interested in feedback but some producers also particularly stressed the lack of time they had and were keen for feedback to be relayed by the host if necessary. One producer, Producer D was particularly keen on direct feedback stating “you’re not talking about having to deal with thousands of messages [...] I think [...] the reason why people buy [is] because they can see a face behind a product, the most important thing that you can get is feedback from people that buy your produce as to why they buy it or why they don’t buy it [...] for small producers that is really helpful.”. Producers could be given the option to receive feedback

directly from members if they desire, this could be made possible through adjustment of the platform. The HQ could also play a greater intermediary role collecting feedback from producers and members possibly via the hosts to contribute to the creation of the global niche, through the aggregation of knowledge from project, creating abstract knowledge and using this to support new projects through guidelines and recommendations. The benefits of feedback from members was seen in the survey that was carried out as part of this thesis study. For example in response to the question “How did you hear about *The Food Assembly*” the advantages of using certain marketing strategies can be seen with flyering appearing to be the most effective marketing strategy with 25% of respondents having heard about *The Food Assembly* that way.

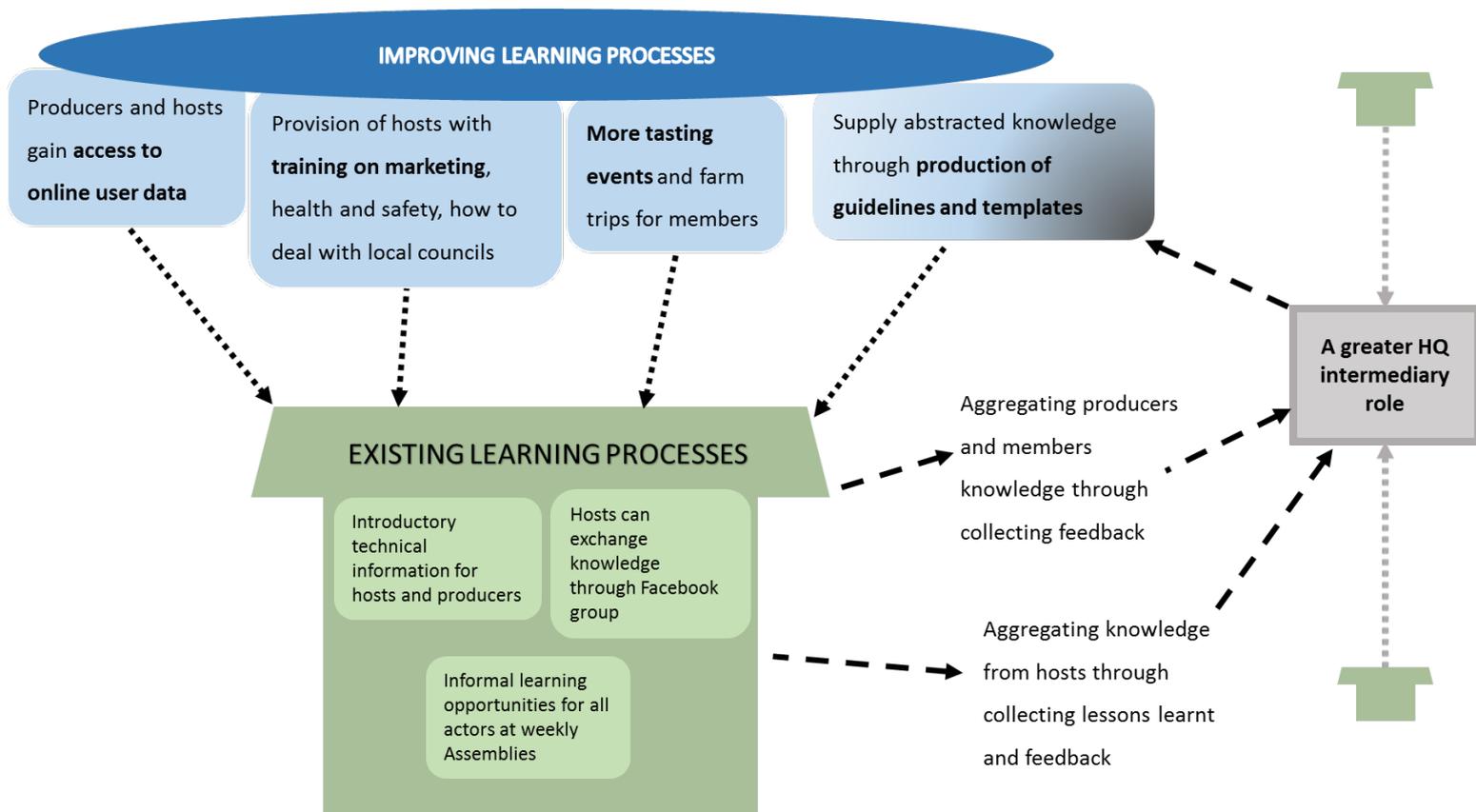


Figure 6. Assembly learning processes: Existing learning processes are shown in green, ways of improving learning processes are shown in blue and the greater HQ intermediary role is illustrated in grey. (own illustration)

5.2 Network building

A diagrammatic summary of the existing network building processes, improvements and HQ intermediary role contribution is shown below (Figure 7).

5.2.1 Existing network building processes

Network building processes were found to occur in a number of ways at *The Food Assembly*. Initial contact of hosts and producers with HQ may be through meetings in person or by email. Networking amongst hosts was found to occur mainly through a host Facebook group and also through the online platform. Examples were also seen of hosts attending other Host Assemblies to share knowledge and support each other. Host D explained how they were very close to one of the other Assemblies and describe how this Assembly gave some “very insightful tips on how to get started” and had also learnt suggestions related to marketing and how to leaflet. Interestingly in this case there was also the advantage that this other Assembly that they were collaborating with was geographically relatively close so they could also give some contextual specific advice which was seen as helpful.

Producers also have opportunities to interact if they meet at tasting events that are sometimes held by Assemblies or possibly if they meet at a weekly Assembly collection. However because of the logistical situation in London and the difficulty of getting around a number of Assemblies and having to deal with traffic and long travelling distances producers often aren’t able to be present at the Assemblies. There are also examples of producers collaborating with each other for example Producer A collaborated with another producer of *Assembly* collections to combine ingredients in a finished product. Producer E also mentioned that they collaborated with another producer of *The Food Assembly* who are both involved in sourcing the same kind of food. Members also have opportunities to network with each other, hosts and producers at the weekly Assemblies as well as other events depending on the Assembly. For example Host E holds a monthly community dinner at their Assembly where members bring their own food and have opportunities to interact. These kind of activities outside *The Food Assembly* also deepen the network with members committing more time than simply the collecting the food at the weekly assemblies. All the Assemblies interviewed were found to be engaging in some kind of external networking in various ways. Host B mentioned they had been in touch with a local councillor and described it as an avenue to get involved more in the local community. Host E mentioned that they were collaborating with a local pop-up restaurant which will prepare meals using ingredients only from producers of their Assembly. This kind of broadening of the network as proposed by SNM, collaborating with restaurants and local politicians is important in developing the niche.

5.2.2 Improving network building processes

Internal networking

Many different opportunities for improving network building processes were found from interviews. There appeared to be a consensus among hosts that it would be helpful to have regular host meetings with quarterly or bi-yearly meetings specifically suggested by a couple of hosts. The importance of having an agenda to the meeting was also noted as well as suggestions of using mind-mapping exercises. The opportunity for hosts to work better together was highlighted by the Producer B who stated “They’re all part of the same team swimming in the same direction, so they should all try and strategise together and maybe join up resources to do joint campaigns”. Regular meetings between hosts would provide a platform for more cooperation and collaboration between hosts. The need for meetings is recognised in SNM theory which notes the importance of regular meetings between actors as being important in niche development (Kivimaa, 2014).

Another suggestion by hosts was to improve internal networking through a mentorship scheme. As Host C explained “something like mentoring would be great, having an existing host willing to take the time to help other hosts”. The usefulness of the Facebook group was acknowledged, however it was described as lacking the advantages of ‘live conversation’. Host A also suggested assigning someone from an established Assembly to a new Assembly. Additionally it was suggested that HQ could organise this mentorship scheme introducing the new Assembly hosts to each other. An introduction of a mentorship scheme would be an opportunity to strengthen the internal network increasing interactions between actors and provide opportunities for increased learning processes further strengthening the initiative.

There is also great potential for more networking between producers. As mentioned above collaboration between producers has been seen, however it was clear that there was opportunities to increase collaboration between producers. Producer D expressed a desire to work with other producers and source ingredients from other producers in the Assembly: “if we could, we would love to be able to source those from other producers of *The Food Assembly* [...] but that has never been offered to us as an opportunity”. Building networks between producers at the Assemblies could be done through informal interactions at tasting events or through the setting up a food producer Facebook group/network. Greater networking between producers could also be a way to deal with the logistical problem of having producers supplying to many Assemblies spread around London. As Producer B put it “there are several producers that supply [...] Assemblies but we all send our own transport, so I think [...] a logistics department [...] should help reduce food miles [...] and obviously

wasted packaging and wasted fuel". Although a solution is currently being looked into by HQ (personal correspondence) as of the time of interviews the model had not changed and it appears that greater collaboration between producers could help alleviate this logistical issue *The Food Assembly* is facing. This could involve producers that are close to each other cooperating and transporting each other's good when advantageous.

Greater interactions between members would also improve networking. The importance of the community aspect of the Assemblies was emphasized a number of times across the hosts. For example Host B mentioned their desire "to improve member to member interaction to build more of a community". The member survey also showed a desire from members to be involved in opportunities to interact with other members. 14 out of 26 of members that responded to the question "Would you like more opportunities to get to know other members of the Food Assembly?" replied affirmatively and a further 3 selected other and wrote comments that implied they would possibly be interested. Also in response to the question asking which events they would like to attend 7 out of the 26 respondents said they would like to attend social meetups at *The Food Assembly* indicating a significant opportunity to increase networking among members. Another questions of the survey asked members "How frequently do you order from the Assembly?" giving an indication of how committed these members are to The Food Assembly and showing the potential for deepening the member network further. 11 out of 26 members that replied order weekly, 3 fortnightly, 6 at least once a month, 5 less than once a month and 1 said they had just ordered once. These results show that more than half of members could engage with *The Food Assembly* more frequently. With regards to members interactions the question of when "Do you feel you need more opportunities to meet producers?" was asked. More than half 16 out of 26 of the members replied no however the answers may have been different if the questions had be phrased differently. There still seems to be yearning for greater producer interaction from a sizable number of members though.

External networking

Despite external networking being seen to some extent across all Assemblies opportunities were seen for increased collaboration with external actors that could benefit both the hosts and the producers. This broadening of the network would bring in different perspectives and ideas contributing to niche development (Raven et al., 2010; Seyfang et al., 2014). The examples seen of restaurants or cafes willing to work with the Assemblies and put on events where they serve food using produce exclusively from the Assemblies demonstrates a great potential for a greater collaboration between local restaurants and cafes and the Assemblies. Serving local restaurants and

cafes presents opportunities for producers to reach a wider audience as well as an opportunity for hosts to promote themselves. As well as strengthening the initiative through potentially increased support and sales this would also bring in different perspectives from the catering industry. Host C also mentioned the possibility of supplying to local offices as well as restaurants: "I think that the future is all in working with local offices so delivering at the offices and working with local restaurants so that the move to local food is actually a widespread one." Supplying additionally to local offices particularly presents a wide market especially in parts of London that are more commercial/financial than residential. Producer B also suggested a different opportunity for collaboration which was working with the Junk Food Project who save surplus food and help feed homeless people as well, and although this would not increase sales directly it could increase awareness of the organization and bring in different perspectives broadening the network further. Host B mentioned networking with transition movements in London which could be another avenue for learning and collaboration with other organizations with similar values. In fact 'transition' is one of the values of *The Food Assembly* which aims to be involved in "finding new ways of producing and consuming food." and "connecting people together and helping them achieve more than they could alone" (*The Food Assembly*, n.d.). This is similar to the transition network who's values including finding "new ways of living and working" and having "a greater impact together than we can as individuals" (Transition network, 2016).

Contribution of HQ intermediary role to networking

Meetings could serve as the space for the "institutional infrastructure" in which interaction of actors allows for exchange of knowledge that has been aggregated and generalized by HQ (Geels and Deuten, 2006). These could involve forums of exchanges such as meetings/workshops /seminars and could be organised by HQ and include both hosts and producers to get different perspectives and input. Hosts already stated that they would like HQ to be involved in organising regular host meetings. HQ could even play a wide role through external networking with other intermediaries and alternative food initiatives to create abstracted knowledge applicable to a wider range of initiatives and initiate steps for guidelines for the wider alternative food network. Examples of this intermediary role by HQ could be knowledge about which venues work best gained through the collection of lessons from different Assemblies and then relayed to the hosts in an appropriate forum such as a meeting or workshop and discussed to later be recorded in guidelines and reports for Assemblies.

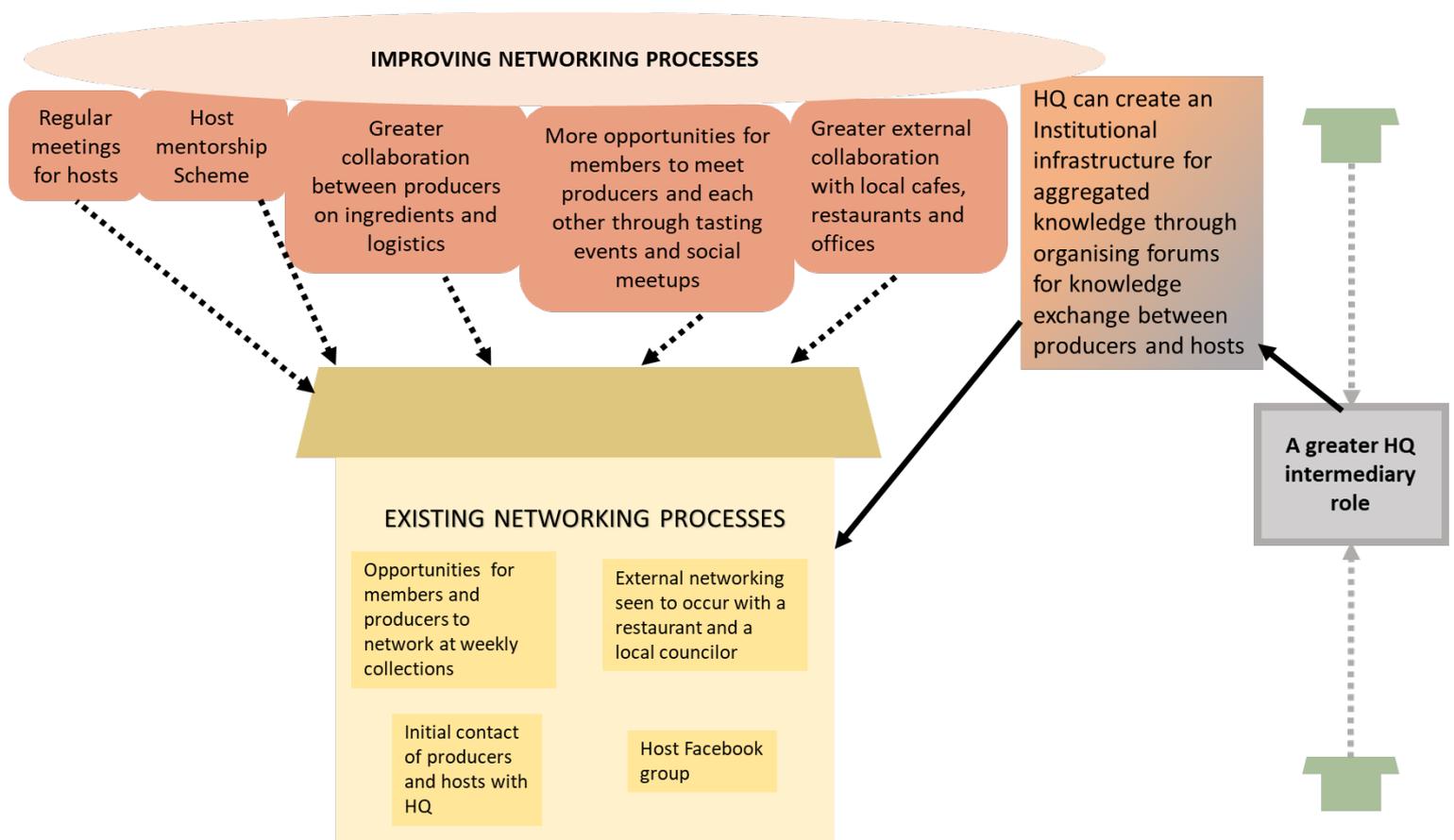


Figure 7. Assembly networking processes. Existing network processes are shown in yellow whilst the suggestions for improving the processes are in red. The benefit for a greater intermediary role is shown in grey (own illustration)

5.3 Articulation of Expectations

5.3.1 Existing Expectations

From the interviews with hosts a widely shared vision for their Assemblies emerged. Hosts hoped for their Assembly to develop in two keys respects. Firstly there was a clear desire all-round to increase turnover at Assemblies. This increase in turnover appeared to be for the sake of the producers and community rather than a drive from hosts to earn more commission. As Host B said this hope to increase sales was to satisfy producers, ensuring they meet minimum orders: “I want it to be bigger in sales [...] not because of our commission [...]. We want the producers to value it also for the return not only for the ethos.” This fact that hosts are doing this job for the values it represents and not the money not simply to make money was expressed well by Host D “the reason why I do it is completely not for the profit [...] I just love having my veg box and talking to everyone about cooking my food”. On the other hand it is important to note that although the hosts were not doing this for the money, it did not mean that more money would not be helpful. In fact Host E argued that commission for hosts should increase so they have more money to spend on promotion and can have more time to devote to being a host. The other largely shared vision for their respective Assemblies is to create a

larger and stronger community. This hope was put forward by Host A stating: “I would really like it to be a vibrant, community space where people can connect with one another and connect with their neighbours but also connect with the people that make their food”. Host C’s vision was for their Assembly to be more integrated with the local community such as local cafes and restaurants and become “an integral part of the food ecosystem” in the area. Host E although pleased with the community feeling at their Assembly still wanted a larger community with an aim to “double the number of people that are as committed”. With regards to *The Food Assembly* network some of the hosts stated that they wanted to see *The Food Assembly* network grow and become a more well-known alternative to supermarkets. Another host saw the direction of *The Food Assembly* as becoming more of a franchise providing more continued support and a closer relationships with the ‘franchisees’ i.e. the hosts. Producer’s responses suggested that their expectations for the network was that it would involve greater collaboration between different producers and hosts of the Assemblies. Producer B explained “I really do think they should have a very good clear marketing strategy and involve everybody from the hosts to the producers”. Producer D echoed this stating “I see that there could be much greater collaboration between producers and networking and also between Assemblies.” The vision of Producer E involved a growing Assembly with a reduction in prices as producers sell more enabling more people to afford to buy from the Food Assembly.

5.3.2 Improving Expectations

Although the expectations seen regarding *The Food Assembly* were to some extent robust there did seem to be an issue of credibility of expectations. A key example of this was the expectation of hosts regarding time needed to devote to the job. There was a general agreement from hosts that they would like to devote more time to their role and furthermore that they didn’t expect they would need to devote as much time as they do, as Host B said “a lot of hosts have an unrealistic idea of [...] how much work it will take and we had that but we were lucky we were in the position to put in that amount of time”. According to the Assembly “who we are” report in its description of the role of hosts “The management of an Assembly requires ten to fifteen hours of work per week.” Host A said “easily we put in 15 hours a week [...] you still feel like [...] there’s a need for 15 more hours”. This issue is also echoed by Host F who said that “I think one of the main challenges on my end is time commitment”. This lack of credibility in terms of expectations can lead to Assembly hosts changing relatively frequently if new hosts are unprepared for the time commitment. As Host B said: “it’d be better if headquarters were a bit more realistic with people”. A number of the hosts mentioned that they relied on volunteers and this could be a way to help deal with the lack of time for hosts. Host E mentioned that they had one volunteer who was “really lovely and amazing” however explained she

had moved away and they had tried to find volunteers but no one came forward. A formalized volunteering system maybe be helpful and would allow visions to be made more credible if a volunteer system meant that the hosts were to devote 15 hours a week without feeling it wasn't sufficient. Another issue with regard to credibility is the fact that questions of how realistic the hosts' expectations of increased sales and more members is. Although this does seem possible and not unrealistic it might be the case that members and sales don't increase to the extent that members would hope however with more support from the HQ and perhaps case studies or examples of success these visions can become more realistic and achievable.

6 Discussion

6.1 What can be learnt about SNM

The use of SNM theory in this study was helpful in understanding the core processes within *The Food Assembly* that are integral to its functioning and development. The use of the three internal-niche processes as a framework provided enough structure to focus the interviews and at the same time enough flexibility that many topics and issues that were important to interviewees could be covered. Furthermore investigating how learning and networking could be deepened and broadened, and how articulation of expectations could be more credible and shared as suggested in the SNM literature (Kemp et al., 1998; Hoogma et al., 2002; Schot and Geels, 2008) brought up many issues that needed to be addressed within the alternative food initiative and that appear to be promising avenues for strengthening the Assemblies and the wider Food Assembly Network.

One problem encountered is that there is great flexibility in the way a 'good' niche-internal process can be understood. Learning processes may benefit from being broadened in certain areas more than others and this is likely to depend on the kind of initiative. Furthermore a downfall of SNM can be that actors that have a vested interest in the regime may act detrimentally to the development of the niche (Schot & Hoogma, 1998). Therefore the aim to broaden the network as put forward by SNM theory trying to include regime actors could in fact endanger the project if not done appropriately. In terms of articulation of expectations although SNM theory says that expectations need to be shared and credible it also mentions them being 'specific' which is vague and difficult to interpret. Narrowing the internal processes down into only learning, networking and expectations is also limiting because issues that are crucial to the success of the initiative such as lack of time and money may be forced through this prism and be 'lost' amongst other issues within one of the three processes or even worse left out completely being deemed not fitting neatly enough within the framework.

With regards to the intermediary actor aspect of niche-intermediary theory this was also very helpful in this particular study because of the structure of the initiative such that many Assemblies being connected under one central office or 'Mamassembly' as its called in the 'who we are' report (*The Food Assembly*, 2015). The prospect of HQ playing a closer, more supportive role within the organisation appeared to strike a chord with many of the hosts, who hoped for more support and training and supported the idea of the HQ collecting lessons learnt and feedback. In this respect increasing an intermediary role for HQ in line with SNM theory, aggregating knowledge, exchanging it to create a global niche and then providing templates and guidelines for projects (Geels and Deuton,

2006; Hargreaves et al., 2013) may be very beneficial for *The Food Assembly* network. Although *The Food Assembly* already provides some support and guidelines to Assemblies this role could clearly be increased and would appear to be of benefit for the Assemblies. There is a serious question however of the desirability of abstracting and generalizing knowledge to form global niches and the loss of contextual knowledge in the process (Hargreaves et al., 2013). The importance of local contextual knowledge was evident through talking to one of the hosts who explained that the support they had received from hosts nearby was useful in giving information that was particularly relevant to their areas such as particular locations to do leafleting. This kind of knowledge would be lost when abstracting knowledge from all Assemblies across London. I would say this view of a global niche as homogeneous, with its abstracted, generalized knowledge is too simplistic and in fact variations between the projects can be a source for strength through broadening learning (Schot and Geels, 2008). Hargreaves et al. (2013) in their study on community energy niches questions “whether the development of a single, robust and coherent community niche is either an achievable or even desirable goal” recognising the importance of local context and the differing “aims, ideologies and approaches”. A more nuanced model of an intermediary actor could be one which takes into account local knowledge abstracting knowledge at a number of levels. For example instead of abstracting knowledge from all Assemblies in London, knowledge could be abstracted from Assemblies in a certain region of London that share certain similar local characteristics such as wealth of population or similar demographics. This could be a regional niche taking into account some of the local context and so abstracting at a level that is more relevant for the project, with this regionally abstracted knowledge providing more context-based guidelines and support.

6.2 Relevance for other alternative food initiatives

The findings of this study could be helpful for other alternative food initiatives which may face much the same issues as *The Food Assembly* and so benefit from improving the niche-learning processes in the same way. Introducing a mentorship scheme and ensuring regular meetings may be helpful for food initiatives that are also composed of multiple projects in the way *The Food Assembly* is. Perhaps more widely transferable to any food initiative is the suggestions for improving broadening networking by collaborating with restaurants and cafes and perhaps offices which would represent an advantageous path to explore for any initiative that is involved in direct selling and community. With regards to learning, the particular learning areas that were suggested in this study may also be relevant for other food initiatives, broadening learning beyond technical to include the 2nd, 6th and 7th dimensions of learning mentioned in Schot and Geels (2008) namely “regulation and policy”, “societal and environmental effects” and “market and user preferences”. Specifically this refers to

the findings that training in marketing as well as health and safety and coordinating with local councillors would be helpful to some of the hosts. My findings could be particularly useful for other initiatives in London or urban conglomerations similar to London. Given the perceived strong competition from other alternative food networks stated by most of the interviewees marketing training and external networking and collaboration with local cafes, restaurants and offices could be particularly helpful to grow and develop initiatives.

6.3 What can be learnt about transitions

This study and framing of *The Food Assembly* using SNM theory has been helpful for understanding one aspect of transitions, namely the niche. The focus on niche-internal processes and intermediary actors has brought the niche into the forefront and left the issues of regime and landscape to the side. In one sense it provides focus and clarity in the research process and focuses on what the initiative has the power to change. The focus on the niche bypasses the issue of lock-in and relies on the window of opportunity to open up. On the other hand important reasons for why an initiative may be struggling related to competition from the regime and restrictions and difficulties faced due to landscape factors are left out in this analysis. An example of this could be that producers in the UK, although wouldn't make as much profit per sale with supermarkets compared to *The Food Assembly*, the supermarkets function on huge economies of scale and so the producers are able to sell a lot through them. The supermarkets have systems set up of logistics and business with producers making it difficult for alternative food initiatives to compete. I would say however that this lock-in has to be acknowledged and the best course of action is for the niche to be as strong as possible so that when a window of opportunity does arise it is able to take advantage of this and shift the regime.

6.4 Assumptions and limitations

A key assumption made in this study is that by improving the niche-internal processes this will help *The Food Assembly* develop and grow. This is based on the idea in SNM theory that if by nurturing the niche and guiding the internal processes in the way it suggests this will lead to development of the niche. It is important to remember that the niche will be greater than *The Food Assembly* itself and will involve other intermediaries and projects. Food producers that supply to *The Food Assembly* can and do supply to other initiatives such as farmers markets and are members of other

intermediaries such as the London Farmers Markets so the success of *The Food Assembly* will also be intertwined with the fate of the larger niche and the success of the food producers that supply to it.

Given that this paper is written as part of an Environmental Studies and Sustainability Science Master's course there is an implicit assumption made in this paper that supporting the growth of this initiative is ultimately good for sustainability. This assumption is based upon the values and vision of *The Food Assembly* (see above section 2.3). Although the question of whether it is sustainable will depend on what one understands as sustainability, research could be done to compare the sustainability of *The Food Assembly* on different metrics such as ecological footprint, food miles or carbon emissions of *The Food Assembly*. In addition to environmental sustainability Assemblies also have great potential to contribute strongly to the local economy and community and the argument that they support social sustainability would appear to be strong. Taking a more general view of innovations it is also important to recognise that innovations can have many undesirable and detrimental effects (Sveiby, Gripenberg & Segercrantz 2012) so the benefits for innovations for sustainability should always be questioned.

The fact I wasn't able to interview HQ can be seen as a limitation of this study. Although I was able to get very useful information from hosts, producers and members and got a variety of perspectives on the Assemblies it may have been beneficial to hear from HQ what action they are taking to address certain problems that were found to be arising in the study and how they view possible suggestions of systemic changes at *The Food Assembly*. Nevertheless this limitation doesn't affect the validity of the findings given the importance of the views of producers and hosts. There are however certain issues that I could have discussed with HQ that other actors were not able to help with such as its reasons for not sharing sales analytical data and whether it is able to make certain changes to the online platform system. I was also limited by the number of Assemblies and producers I spoke to. Speaking to a greater number of Assemblies may mean challenges at the Assembly or suggestions for improving the niche-internal processes would arise that I did not observe.

6.5 Further research

Further research could be taken on *The Food Assembly* network comparing a wider number of Assemblies and investigating whether there is a relationship between the implementation of suggestions in this study and success of the Assembly in terms of number of sales and members as well as degree of community. Alternatively a number of successful Assemblies could be compared

with Assemblies that are less successful to see how well the differences relate to the niche-internal processes. The SNM literature would also benefit from further examples of niche-internal process studies in the alternative food niche particular in relation to intermediary organisations. It could prove interesting to apply the typology of intermediary roles contribution to niche-internal processes used by Kivimaa et al. (2014) in their study to an alternative food initiative intermediary and compare the strength of different intermediary roles.

7. Conclusion

This study examined the processes of learning, network building and articulation of expectations within a food initiative in London and found the existence of both first and second-order learning, external and internal network building and shared visions. However a much greater potential for deeper and broader learning could be achieved through greater sharing of information including sales analytics and training on areas such as marketing. Networking could be extended through a mentorship program, regular meetings of hosts, more events for members and greater collaboration with local cafes and restaurants. Expectations of hosts were not always in line with reality especially with regards to time commitment but this could be addressed through introduction of a formal volunteering system. Additionally *The Food Assembly* could take on a greater 'intermediary actor' role aggregating feedback from hosts, members and producers, establishing an institutional infrastructure through meetings and workshops and updating guidelines and reports with the aggregated, generalized knowledge that is useful for all London Assemblies. The application of SNM theory here has been very helpful in suggesting how this initiative could be supported to develop and grow.

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Appendices

Appendix I: Semi-structured interview guide

Host semi-structured interview guide

Learning	Do you feel you've learnt anything through your work with <i>The Food Assembly</i> ?
	Have you learnt anything from other producers of <i>The Food Assembly</i> ?
	Do you think you could learn more from other producers within <i>The Food Assembly</i> network?
	What resources are available for producers from <i>The Food Assembly</i> to help you?
	Could these resources be improved?
	Would you like more information or advice to support a sustainable initiative such as yours?
	Do you feel there is training that <i>The Food Assembly</i> could provide that would be helpful to producers?
Network	Are there meetings gathering producers and other interested groups of <i>The Food Assembly</i> ?
	Are you in contact with the the UK Food Assembly headquarters and would you like more contact with them?
	Do you feel lines of communication could be improved between producers and hosts?
	Do you feel lines of communication could be improved between producers and the members could be improved?
	Do you collaborate with other producers of <i>The Food Assembly</i> ?
	Would you like to see more collaboration between producers?
	What do you think of the online platform?
	Are there any ways you feel the online platform could be improved?

	Are there any organizations you feel might be helpful for <i>The Food Assembly</i> to collaborate with?
	Are you a member of any organization that connects/supports/or regulates sustainable initiatives such as yours?
Expectations	What do you see as the most important values of your organization?
	Have you re-evaluated your values over your time as host? What caused this re-evaluation?
	What do you see as your vision for <i>The Food Assembly</i> network?

Producer semi-structured interview guide

Category	Questions
Opener	What are the main challenges <i>The Food Assembly</i> faces?
Learning	What new skills and knowledge have you gained from your time working as a Food Assembly Host?
	What resources are available for food assembly hosts to help you run the assembly?
	What other information would be helpful to hosts that is not currently provided?
	What kind of training do you feel would be helpful?
	Do you collect information about successful food producers at <i>The Food Assembly</i> ?
	Are lessons learnt from <i>The Food Assembly's</i> work recorded/written down and gathered together in any form for others to learn from
	What lessons and knowledge have you learnt may be useful for other food assemblies?
	Has <i>The Food Assembly</i> adapted responding to advice from members or producers?
	As a host of the xx Food Assembly what contact have you had with other food assemblies?

	Do you rely on volunteers?
Network	Are there meetings that gather different interested parties of <i>The Food Assembly</i> together?
	Do you feel lines of communication of information between producers and members could be improved?
	Do you feel lines of communication of information between producers and hosts could be improved?
	Do you feel lines of communication of information between hosts and the UK Food Assembly could be improved?
	To what extent is there a regional London Food Assembly network?
	What do you think of the online platform?
	As a host have you been collaborated with other organisations
	Have you attended any networking events as a host of <i>The Food Assembly</i> ?
	Are there any organizations you feel might be helpful for <i>The Food Assembly</i> to collaborate with?
Expectations	What aspects of the food production and consumption would you say are most important for you at the xx assembly?
	What is your vision for the future of the xx Food Assembly?
	What do you see as your vision for the future of <i>The Food Assembly</i> network?

Appendix II: Survey questions cited in this study

1) How did you hear about *The Food Assembly*?

- Facebook
- Twitter
- Heard about it from a friend
- Gasholder newspaper
- National coverage
- Food Assembly Flyer
- Poster
- Other

2) Which events would you like to attend at *The Food Assembly*? Select all that apply

- Food Tasting
- Social Meetups
- Farm visits
- Talks
- Electronic waste recycle workshops
- Not interested in events

3) Would you like more opportunities to get to know other members of the Food Assembly?

- Yes
- No
- Other

4) How frequently do you order from the Assembly?

- Weekly
- Fortnightly
- At least once a month
- Less than once a month
- Other

5) Do you feel you need more opportunities to meet producers?

- Yes
- No
- Other