

# Challenging the anonymous carrots dilemma

A qualitative study on AFNs and social sustainability in Skåne

*Ellen Andersson & Louise Bonnevier*

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Master Thesis Series in Environmental Studies and Sustainability Science,  
No 2022:038

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements of Lund University  
International Master's Programme in Environmental Studies and Sustainability Science  
(30hp/credits)



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Sustainability Studies



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Submitted May 9, 2022

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## **Abstract**

The current conventional food system is ecologically and socially damaging, as unsustainable production patterns change people's relationship to food. Alternative Food Networks (AFNs) have been proposed as a potential solution to the problem. This study investigates the relationship between AFNs and social sustainability in Skåne in order to provide policy suggestions on how to develop this interplay. The study follows a qualitative single case study design, based on a literature review on AFNs and sustainability, and semi-structured interviews with AFN actors. Findings show that AFNs in Skåne are concerned with increasing social sustainability in local communities and are most effective regarding spreading awareness. However, profitability and lack of support are two central aspects that seem to hinder development in this area. Further, findings indicate that revitalisation of food relations on the local level could possibly aid to strengthen the Swedish food system as a whole, although more research is needed.

**Keywords:** social sustainability, alternative food networks, participation, awareness, social cohesion, equity.

**Word count: 11 850**

## **Acknowledgements**

First and foremost, we would like to thank our interviewees who took precious time out of their work schedule to participate in this study and share invaluable insights that helped us in conducting this thesis. We would also like to give a big thank you to our supervisor, Eric Hoddy, for being there for us at all times with quick responses and extensive feedback. His words of encouragement inspired us to make the best that we could out of our time with this research. Thirdly, we want to thank Frida Hansson from Miljöbron Skåne and Håkan Rasmusson from REKO-ring who collaborated with us on this project and gave us the inspiration to do research in this specific field, as well as giving advice on people to contact. Finally, we would like to thank the people around us, our families, friends, and peers who in many ways supported us through this whole process.

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# 1 Introduction

## 1.1 Background

### *1.1.1 The current food system*

Alternative Food Networks (AFNs) focus on alternative modes of production and/or distribution that support sustainability in the food system. They provide a novel set of practices in the context of the current global food system, which is characterised by logistically sophisticated mass distribution systems that usually entail long-distance travel for fresh produce and distribution by large retailers (Hawkes et al., 2017). This type of organisation for food production and consumption is often referred to as the conventional food system, as it conforms to accepted standards for the majority of food supply chains (Michel-Villarreal et al., 2019). Contrary to AFNs, the conventional system is based on large-scale, highly mechanised, and industrialised agriculture, with extensive use of monoculture crop use, fertilisers, and pesticides (Michel-Villarreal et al., 2019). These practices have been developed to meet the global demand for certain foods. Global food trends are incredibly diversified, but the majority of middle-income countries are heading toward the consumption of more unsustainable and unhealthy foods (Clark et al., 2019). Additionally, the increasing demand for large quantities of specific foods can lead to environmental degradation and mistreatment of agricultural lands (Ingvarsson & Meyer von Bremen, 2015). The conventional food system is currently responsible for approximately 70% of annual global water consumption and 30% of yearly global greenhouse gas emissions. It also aggravates deforestation (Di Paola, 2017).

### *1.1.2 The Swedish context*

In line with global food system developments, Sweden has experienced a rapid transformation from a society with widespread agriculture and strong self-sustenance to an industrial country unified with the global consumer goods market (Gruvaeus & Dahlin, 2021). Since the beginning of the 1980s, 300 000 hectares of Swedish arable land have ceased to be cultivated and the number of farms has halved (Ingvarsson & Meyer von Bremen, 2015, p.52). Instead, Sweden is currently reliant on imports for many food items and the agricultural sector itself is dependent on imports such as grains and cereals (Gruvaeus & Dahlin, 2021). This change was made possible through new technology, packaging, and increased trade between countries. Today, a supermarket in Sweden contains about 20 000 foods, which is almost 10 times more than 30 years ago (Ingvarsson & Meyer von Bremen, 2015, p.24). It is mainly large supermarkets that, by virtue of their size, control both what is available for the consumer as well as the profitability of agriculture. Generally, large food chains want large

suppliers, which makes it difficult for small-scale producers to get in (Ingvarsson & Meyer von Bremen, 2015). This has resulted in a decrease in the number of people having a connection with Swedish food production during the past 70 years. Consequently, the distance between crop and table has increased, and producer and consumer are now further away from each other both in a literal and an allegorical sense (Gruvaeus & Dahlin, 2021).

Large-scale agriculture is admittedly good at producing large quantities of food, but the social and environmental costs associated with this approach are too great. Unfortunately, small-scale, more environmentally friendly agriculture is seldom an alternative for a majority of farmers since the current food system does not make it a financially viable option (Ingvarsson & Meyer von Bremen, 2015). Research shows that a small but increasing amount of Swedish consumers want organic, locally produced food, and small-scale farmers and niche consumers are trying their best to minimise the gap and reduce anonymity in the food system (Ingvarsson & Meyer von Bremen, 2015). One way of challenging the conventional food system and making it more ecologically and socially sustainable is through promoting AFNs.

### ***1.1.3 Alternative Food Networks (AFNs)***

AFN is an umbrella term used to label emerging networks of producers, consumers, and other actors that offer alternatives to conventional modes of food supply (Hunter et al., 2022). The enterprises involved are predominantly small and medium-sized. The 'alternative' in the name refers to some form of innovation in terms of how activities in the networks are organised. This often relates to logistics or supply chain management (Hunter et al., 2022). AFN supply chains are characterised by a limited number of actors, emphasising social and geographical proximity between producers and consumers. They are most often rooted in a particular locale, i.e. production, processing, retailing, and/or consumption is taking place in a prescribed geographic area, in contrast to the 'rootless' nature of food from conventional systems, whose origins are ambiguous or multiple in nature (Tregear, 2011). The approaches often entail a commitment to environmentally friendly agricultural practices and local economic development, and generally have a good reputation for being ecologically and economically sustainable (Vittersø et al., 2019). AFNs are often regarded as a more transparent way to distribute food, as it makes it easier for the consumer to know where it comes from, how it was grown and who produced it (Vittersø et al., 2019). The distribution is often associated with the face-to-face distribution of locally grown produce (Vittersø et al., 2019). According to multiple researchers, AFNs play an important role in developing the capacities of



communities to respond to locally identified problems, and may contribute to the transformation of the dominant system (Favilli et al., 2015; Vittersø et al., 2019)

Hunter et al. (2022) outline five different kinds of AFNs that they have identified in the Swedish context; REKO-rings, (local) food nodes, farm stores, Community Supported Agriculture (CSA), and farmers' markets. REKO-ring is a model for producers to sell local foods directly to consumers through closed Facebook groups. Products are sold based on pre-orders and distributed via a predetermined time and meeting place. The food nodes system is based on a digital tool where food producers present their food, local consumers order what they like and payments go straight from consumer to producer. Similar to REKO-ring, deliveries and pick up of food takes place at a predetermined place and time, called a node. Farmers who wish to sell their produce without preparing pre-orders can use farm stores, which are usually family-owned stores most often located adjacent to a farm that sells a range of fresh fruits, eggs, vegetables, dried goods, honey, and other agricultural products. A similar process takes place at a farmers' market, with the main difference being that the producers come together at an open meeting spot, where consumers can get an overview of different producer assortments. The last type of AFN is the Community Supported Agriculture (CSA) network. This refers to a marketing strategy where consumers are able to purchase shares in a farm before planting and receive a share in the harvest (Hunter et al., 2022).

## **1.2 Purpose and research questions**

Previous research has mainly focused on the ecological and economic sustainability dimensions of AFNs (Michel-Villarreal et al., 2019; Tregear, 2011). This research focus has provided perspectives on small-scale farmers' application of ecological cultivation principles, the potential for reducing GHG emissions through decreases in transport, as well as farmers getting fair wages for their work (Forsell & Lankoski, 2015; Michel-Villarreal et al., 2019; Tregear, 2011). Researchers have focused on community benefits from AFNs in terms of economic improvements and to some extent through health benefits by highlighting increased availability of healthier foods (Forsell & Lankoski, 2015). However, there appears to be a gap in AFN research when it comes to research on the benefits of increased social sustainability. While existing approaches tend to present the social pillar in terms of national welfare objectives for current populations, a larger understanding of the social is useful to incorporate international and intergenerational dimensions of sustainability (Murphy, 2012). This is because the selection of social measures in sustainable development indicator sets are often a function of power rather than policy coherence, reflecting the interests of influential political groups (Murphy, 2012). The relevance for sustainable development (SD) in general and sustainability science

in particular, is straight-forward: if environmental factors are not taken into consideration in the formulation and implementation of the policies that regulate social organisation (and vice versa), SD in the long term cannot be achieved (Murphy, 2012).

Additionally, there is a gap regarding how researchers are addressing the lack of social sustainability (SS) focus in AFNs, since previous claims have failed to provide concrete examples on how to improve the situation. The novelty of the approach for this study lies in the application of a concrete framework for social sustainability, as outlined by Murphy (2012). The framework incorporates four different categories to assess SS in order to provide policy suggestions: participation, awareness for sustainability, social cohesion, and equity. These concepts will be further explained in section 3. The aim of this thesis is to understand the extent to which AFNs in Skåne are currently contributing to SS and what potential there is to enhance these practices. RQ1 will provide context surrounding what AFN actors are currently doing, RQ2 outlines how they understand the social pillar of sustainability and how they value their own contributions, and RQ3 has a practical, applied focus on the measures that could be taken to develop the work. The purpose is to highlight the social benefits of AFNs in the hopes of inspiring change in the food system in Skåne and Sweden in general. The research questions read as follows:

**RQ1:** In what ways are AFNs currently contributing to social sustainability in Skåne?

**RQ2:** How do AFN actors value their own contribution(s)?

**RQ3:** How can these practices be developed to increase social sustainability?

### **1.3 Disposition**

Having laid out the background of AFNs within the context of a general introduction to the global conventional food system and the situation in Sweden, section 2 outlines the existing literature on AFNs. This is done in relation to the different dimensions of sustainability, highlighting both critical voices and praising remarks. The section has an overarching focus on the lack of SS in existing literature, emphasising the need for further research on this topic. Section 3 outlines the conceptual framework of social sustainability. The methodology of the thesis process is accounted for in section 4, including reflections on the process and ethical considerations. In section 5, the empirical research is summarised. Thereafter, section 6 discusses the material in relation to previous research and theory in order to answer the chosen research questions. Here, the theory of revitalisation is introduced. Section 7 offers concluding remarks on the issue as well as suggestions for further research.

## 2 Previous research

Local food systems have a general commitment to sustainability throughout the production chain by focusing on the season- and region-specific goods (Di Paola, 2017). They allegedly provide economic viability for actors involved, as farmers may benefit via increased product margins or opportunities for diversification and entrepreneurship, and consumers may gain via fresh and healthy, reasonably priced foods (Brown & Miller, 2008). Usually, they also claim to have a basis in ecological sustainability through reduced food miles and carbon emissions (Mundler & Laughrea, 2016). Regarding the social dimension of sustainability, the previous research within AFN literature is sparse (Michel-Villarreal et al., 2019). Many authors touch upon social aspects when classifying different AFNs, mostly regarding dimensions of proximity (Renting et al., 2003; Watts et al., 2005). This refers to the geographical distance between the point of production and point of sale as well as the so-called social proximity between producer and consumer (Malak-Rawlikowska et al., 2019). Social proximity refers to both the organisational structure in terms of the limited number of intermediaries involved as well as the social closeness associated with short food chains, such as territorial cohesion or personal connections between producer and consumer (Mundler & Laughrea, 2016; Wittman et al., 2012). However, few studies place emphasis on social sustainability. In their recent literature review on AFNs and sustainability, Michel-Villarreal et al. (2019) establish that approximately 10% of the analysed papers use SS as their main focus. Looking specifically at studies with producers as participants, this number decreases to 3% (Michel-Villarreal et al., 2019 p. 9).

Evidently, social benefits such as strengthening relations between actors in the AFN sphere or contributing to local development are often highlighted in the research, but claims are often general and seldom go into detail on how exactly these social dimensions relate to sustainability or turn out to provide questionable results (Tregear, 2011). For example, coming from a critical viewpoint, Kirwan (2006) provides a tangible example by demonstrating that AFNs are often depicted as a useful platform for producers and consumers who are marginalised by mainstream food systems. Although in reality, many actors are affluent, professional, or retired people that are far from marginalised, causing the movements to perpetuate rather than overturn historical iniquitous social relations (Kirwan, 2006).

Furthermore, AFNs have been found to exhibit some problematic features in terms of ecological and economic sustainability as well (Tregear, 2011). Regarding environmental impacts, there is a lack of agreement in the literature due to the complexity of the trade-offs among different priorities (Mundler & Laughrea, 2016). For example, it may be more carbon-intensive for consumers to drive to

an AFN pickup point compared to their ordinary shopping (Mundler & Laughrea, 2016). Some researchers have pointed out that there is an underlying assumption that actors who engage in AFNs exhibit values and motivations which are radically different from those in mainstream food systems, like a passion for sustainability. In reality, this is not always the case. Many farmers cite better profit as their main reason for engagement and may utilise intensive production regardless of a switch to distribution through local channels (Kirwan, 2006). Additionally, many producers engage in both AFN and conventional food system activities. This is because many farmers cannot sustain their incomes off AFN activities alone and are forced to rely on diversified practices or external input such as state support (Brown & Miller, 2008). Another economic critique is that they may not be sufficiently potent as tools for the regeneration of disadvantaged regions. To date, the countries with the highest number of initiatives have been those with a diverse agricultural base and rich in resources, implying that AFNs are the product rather than the driver of regional socio-economic development (Dupuis & Goodman, 2005).

Despite this, AFNs have been widely promoted in agricultural policy, particularly in the European Union due to their predominant social benefits (Malak-Rawlikowska et al., 2019). AFNs have been identified as having the potential to increase profitability on account of the way they may be treated as less competitive by conventional markets (Vittersø et al., 2019). Studies have revealed positive perspectives on AFNs among their participants that reflect a) perceptions of fairness among food chain actors and community vitality (Malak-Rawlikowska et al., 2019), and b) enhanced social capital and economic viability of farms, which is needed to ensure more fair distribution of incomes and create better values in the food system (Vittersø et al., 2019). Also, AFNs may also contribute to the revitalisation of local communities. Partly through the generation of additional employment, but mostly through showcasing the value and importance of the product and its origin, which gives rise to a sense of pride, social cohesion and belonging to a certain area and community (Malak-Rawlikowska et al., 2019). Further, it has been argued that AFNs contribute to SS through improved relations between producers and consumers. They do this by bringing people closer and enhancing mutual understanding, respect, and trust (Sonnino & Marsden, 2005; Tregear, 2011; Michel-Villareal et al, 2019).

To conclude, research focusing on SS and AFNs is still lacking as the majority of papers discuss either all three dimensions of sustainability or zoom in on ecological or economic sustainability (Michel-Villarreal et al., 2019). No previous research has applied a SS framework with the chosen dimensions to AFNs within a regional context. This research seeks to address the following gaps in

understanding the social dimensions of AFNs: a) the lack of attention to the four SS dimensions of participation, awareness, social cohesion and equity within AFN research, and b) how understanding the four dimensions may yield suggestions for increasing SS within AFNs in Skåne.

### **3 Conceptual framework**

This thesis will situate the lack of social focus in AFNs by using Murphy's (2012) conceptual framework for social sustainability. According to the author, "the framework may be employed to conduct an empirical analysis of how different states and organisations understand the social pillar and to what extent they develop social/environmental links." (Murphy, 2012), p.16). In the context of this study, the organisations will be the AFNs of Skåne. The proposed framework defines SS using the four conceptual classifications of participation, awareness for sustainability, social cohesion and equity (Murphy, 2012). Applying Murphy's framework to AFNs in Skåne can be considered challenging in the sense that even though the four dimensions are to be treated as separate, many real life aspects of the AFNs practices falls under more than one SS dimension. Nonetheless, the framework is useful in the sense that it conceptualises the dimensions of SS by providing categories that can be explored through qualitative inquiries. This conceptualisation allows the development of tangible measures to strengthen these dimensions, which will be elaborated on in the discussion. The four dimensions of Murphy's SS framework will be unpacked below.

#### **3.1 Social sustainability**

SD refers to achieving a balance between the three pillars of sustainability; environmental, economic, and social. The social pillar has historically been contested and partly, for this reason, the social dimension to sustainability has been given less attention and value (Agyeman, 2008; Agyeman et al., 2003; Agyeman & Evans, 2004; Cuthill, 2010; Dobson, 1999; Lehtonen, 2004). The environmental and economic dimensions have been more broadly developed and seen to create synergies and opportunities for environmental policies and reforms (Boström, 2012). SS can be interpreted in different ways, something that encourages discussion among different actors. Nevertheless, this flexibility requires a clear definition of how the concept is used in every context (Boström, 2012). Usually, it refers to different dimensions of justice, which when broken down covers unarticulated concerns relating to culture, identity & lifestyle, among other aspects. It also incorporated the equitable distribution of access, risks, benefits and capacities (Saunders et al., 2020). Murphy (2012) has outlined a conceptual framework for SS which will be used in this paper. This approach links SS to environmental implications which is essential in order to make policy recommendations. To the extent of our knowledge, Murphy's framework has not been applied to AFN research in the past.

##### **3.1.1 Participation**

Firstly, participation is a concept commonly referred to in the SD discourse, referring to the inclusion of numerous social groups in various positions of decision-making. Through this, the possibility of

social inclusion for both individuals and groups is enhanced, which in turn has the potential to legitimise government policy decisions. The inclusion of diverse voices and advanced public engagement further promotes social cohesion and SS (Murphy, 2012). Participation also plays an essential role in promoting environmental goals as it has been shown that more diverse participation in decision-making can increase the legitimacy and support of environmental reform (Murphy, 2012). Having said that, this link between increased participation and environmentally benign results can also be problematic. Due to power relations in participation processes, some groups have more power than others which can result in the promotion of ends that undermine environmental goals instead of encouraging them (Baker, 2015; Lafferty & Meadowcroft, 1996). On account of such qualifications, a “smart mix” of a strong state and diverse stakeholder participation tends to be advocated in current perspectives (Baker, 2009). This requires funding available for less powerful groups in order to corroborate genuine participation capability (Amajirionwu & Bartlett, 2009; Connaughton & Quinn, 2008).

### ***3.1.2 Awareness for sustainability***

Secondly, awareness for sustainability is an essential concept used in the SD discourse. This refers to the improvement of public awareness regarding sustainability issues with the aim to encourage alternative patterns for sustainable consumption. This might include ecolabelling, education programs, and sustainable advertising campaigns with the goal of encouraging engagement in environmentally benign behaviour. Awareness for sustainability has been somewhat ignored in the SS literature despite the fact that “access to education” is perceived as a key objective (Boström, 2012). Comparably, education in its own end is a key indicator in international SDIs, however, this does not include gauges in measuring engagement in environmental awareness (Murphy, 2012). This lack of focus on the environmental aspects of sustainability regarding education is contradictory as all SD literature articulates a need for awareness (Murphy, 2012).

### ***3.1.3 Social cohesion***

Social cohesion is widely used and defined in various ways. It has been connected to objectives such as “promoting happiness/well-being; minimizing social strife; reducing crime; promoting interpersonal trust; and combating suicide, bullying, and antisocial behavior” (Murphy, 2012), p.25). Dempsey et al. (2011) make the connection between social cohesion and “sustainability of community” and define five interrelated dimensions: “social interaction/social networks in the community, participation in collective groups and networks in the community, community stability, pride/sense of place, and safety and security.” (Dempsey et al., 2011, p. 294). This definition of social

cohesion focuses on generating opportunities that encourage peaceful coexistence, strengthening community networks, promoting tolerance and integration as well as fostering shared social purpose (Murphy, 2012). Initiatives for social cohesion exist where both social cohesion and environmental objectives are promoted. These initiatives can be assessed based on four commitments: “1) to infrastructure planning that concurrently promotes social integration and environmental sustainability, 2) to the promotion of social activities that have an environmental focus, 3) to the development of “transition towns” or initiatives of a similar nature, and 4) to combating the kinds of environmental conditions that cause civic strife.” (Murphy, 2012, p. 25).

#### **3.1.4 Equity**

Finally, equity is also a key concept in the SD discourse and is in Murphy’s framework quite broadly defined. Equity applies to national, international, and intergenerational contexts and mainly refers to the distribution of welfare goods and life chances on the basis of fairness. This broadly means that everyone should have the same opportunity to live and reach their development potential. Examples of equity can both refer to equal access to clean water, education, and essential medicines as well as freedom from discrimination on the grounds of race, gender, or religion (Murphy, 2012).



## **4 Methodology**

### **4.1 Research design**

This study follows a qualitative single case study design. The research method was employed to answer the research questions firstly because a qualitative study allows for exploration and explanation of contextual phenomena and enables the researcher to gain a comprehensive understanding of the focus area through the lenses of the research participants (Creswell, 2013). Secondly, given our object of study is to establish a deeper understanding of the complexity of the relationship between AFNs and SS in the specific context of Skåne, our research design naturally took the form of a case study (Creswell, 2013). The research project is situated in a social constructivist ontology using a methodological approach that captures data about how people subjectively view and appraise the world, their beliefs, ideas, and assumptions (Bryman, 2012). The goal of this research is, therefore, to measure the four components (participation, awareness for sustainability, social cohesion, and equity) with the interviewees' subjective understanding of these concepts as an empirical base.

### **4.2 Data collection methods**

A literature review and a qualitative data collection approach in the form of interviews were applied for the purposes of this study. Firstly, the literature review of previous research on AFNs and sustainability was compiled. The review provided an overview of existing focus areas and previous theoretical entry points in the field, helping to shed light on the chosen research 'niche' and helping to adapt the chosen research questions into ones that would address this gap. Second, empirical research was conducted in the form of semi-structured interviews with actors within the AFN-sphere. The limitation of Skåne county was decided because it is the most agriculturally active region in Sweden (Jordbruksverket, 2021), facilitating access to different kinds of actors within the AFN sphere. All in all, we contacted approximately 50 AFN actors who are active in Skåne via mail, and 15 of them were willing to participate in an interview. The data, therefore, consists of 15 interviews, where all but two were conducted digitally via zoom or teams. The interview length ranges from 25-70 minutes. The interview format (digital or non-digital, as well as time spent) was decided based on the preferences of the interviewees. All of the interview sessions were digitally recorded with the expressed consent of the interviewees.

The interview sample for this study was selected using purposeful maximal sampling, meaning that we selected different types of AFN and different actors within the AFN to include varying

perspectives. Using multiple sources of information in the data collection provided us with a detailed in-depth understanding of SS efforts in the chosen AFNs in Skåne. A conscious mindset that we applied during the search for interviewees was to find at least one representative from each category of Swedish AFNs outlined by Hunter et al (2022), namely REKO-ring actors, local food nodes, farmers' market actors, farm stores, and CSA. During the empirical research, however, we found that we needed to expand this categorisation. In addition to the five original categories, we interviewed representatives from two organisations engaged in facilitating the administration and distribution surrounding AFNs; Mylla Mat and Bondens Skafferi. Additionally, we talked to an employee from the foundation Botildenborg (an eco-friendly city farm and social meeting point in Malmö) as well as an agricultural advisor/CSA expert. We also interviewed representatives from The Federation of Swedish Farmers (LRF), The Swedish Public Employment Service, and Malmö Stads environmental governance department. The interviewees are outlined in Table 1 below.

**Table 1.** Table of interviewees.

Interviewee number	Active in AFN	If yes: which one?	If not: what are they doing?	Role in the operation
1	No	x	Agricultural advisor/CSA expert	Advisor
2	Yes	Farm store	x	Owner, customer manager
3	Yes	Farm Store, REKO, Digital REKO	x	Founder, owner, entrepreneur, farmer
4	Yes	Farm Store, REKO	x	Farmer, owner
5	Yes	Digital REKO	x	Founder, partner
6	Yes	Local food nodes	x	Founder
7	Yes	Farm store	x	Part-owner
8	No	x	Retailer for/to AFNs	Founder
9	Yes	Farm store	x	Founder, farmer
10	No	x	Social gastronomer	Supervisor
11	No	x	Company cultivation	Founder
12	Yes	REKO, Farm Store	x	Board member

13	No	x	Mer mat, fler jobb	Assistant project manager
14	No	x	Mer mat, fler jobb	Project manager
15	No	x	Food Malmö	Project manager

*Note:* The table provides an overview of the interviewees' relation to AFNs and their respective roles in the operations. Authors' own creation.

### 4.3 Data analysis

The data collected from the interviews were analysed through coding and thematic analysis, following the approach outlined by Saldana (2021). The interviews were transcribed manually into text and the transcripts were then read thoroughly several times in order to identify codes, categories, and eventually themes that would give meaning to the empirical material. Being two researchers in the project, we were able to optimise the coding substantially. We started out the first cycle by coding the interviews that the other person had transcribed before switching back during the second one. After counting the frequency of the codes we perceived to be central for the analysis, we went over our respective lists of codes, excluded ones that were irrelevant, and merged those that were similar. After this step, we ended up with 43 code words. Figure 1 below shows a word cloud that depicts these codes, where some are so-called *in-vivo-codes* (the interviewees' own formulation) and others are our interpretation. The size of the words correlates to their occurrence in the empirical material. From the 43 codewords, we focused our analysis on a few key themes derived from these code words, not for generalising beyond the case but rather for understanding the complexity of the case. By identifying issues within each case, we could look for common themes that transcend the cases (Yin, 2009).



**Figure 1.** Word cloud with central codes. The words are weighted based on frequency in the interviews. Authors' own creation.

While having started out with Murphy's framework before the collection of empirical material, we were open to theoretical influences during the data collection and analysis stages, on the basis that extant theories could help shed more light on our data. After having mapped the central codes and categories of our case, we sought to combine the empirical material with existing theoretical knowledge in an effort to gain new ideas and critical perspectives, inspired by principles of grounded theory (Thornberg, 2012). The theory of revitalisation was applied after our data collection and analysis rather than before to avoid theoretical forcing, meaning it is an extant theory that guided us to our conclusion. This theory will therefore be introduced more extensively in the discussion as it has been a heuristic tool that was discovered through the data collection and thematic analysis for focusing attention on certain phenomena, aspects, or nuances. The theory of revitalisation will be used as a complement to the SS framework in order to develop relevant policy suggestions and highlight what role AFNs might play in the Swedish food system in the future. Because of this, the

thesis is building on principles of grounded theory as outlined by Charmaz (2006), although it did not strictly follow grounded theory guidelines.

#### **4.4 Methodological reflections**

The interview sample presented in this project is Swedish (apart from one), and is based on convenience. We are aware that this limits the potential to generalise the findings and apply them in a wider context. Nevertheless, we are unaware of any database that contains the total number of actors working within the AFN sphere in Skåne. As a result, we decided to create our own convenience sample based on secondary information, internet searches, and the snowball effect. Due to this data collection method and time limitations for the project, we acknowledge that the interview sample most likely is non-representative of all AFN actors in Skåne. Additionally, qualitative research is interpretive, and the interpretation represents the subjective and theoretical understanding of the studied phenomenon (Zhang & Wildemuth, 2009). We are aware that our research is shaped by cultural and socio-political norms that influence us; or as Creswell (2013 p. 215) notes: "All writing is 'positioned' and within a stance". Hence, the analysis can never be completely objective. Nonetheless, we strived to conduct an as unbiased and scientifically viable study as possible by continuously reflecting on the impact of the research on the researcher, participants, and readers.

#### **4.5 Ethical considerations**

The protection of human subjects through ethical consideration is particularly important in qualitative studies, due to the in-depth nature of the study process (Arifin, 2018). This study aimed to abide by four main ethical principles: (a) minimising the risk of harm, (b) obtaining informed consent, (c) protecting anonymity and confidentiality, and (d) providing the right to withdraw (Başerler et al., 2016). To fulfil these promises, study participants were informed about ethical principles and the purpose of the research twice during the process: first in writing, when emails were sent out inquiring about potential participation in a semi-structured interview, and second orally, right before the interview started. Emphasis was placed on the optionality of the informants, i.e., their voluntary participation, the right to stop the interview, and their possibility to decide the length and to some extent also the discussion topic. Additionally, participants were ensured that their answers are anonymous and strictly confidential.

## 5 Analysis

### 5.1 Findings

#### 5.1.1 AFN contributions

From the empirical material, it becomes clear that all actors who were interviewed are concerned with SD in the food system in Skåne. When asked about how they incorporate sustainability in their work, many talked about holistic views on the matter. One example of this is the emphasis on food grown with ecological principles, in a small-scale agricultural establishment, close to the consumers, and with great transparency. Sure enough, locally produced does not necessarily mean that it is ecologically sustainable as it does not necessarily abide by organic principles (Kirwan, 2006). Although some of the actors interviewed advocated engagement in conventional food systems as well as alternative ones, this did not mean that they are in favour of environmentally unsustainable cultivation practices, but rather points to the problematic dimension of profitability within AFNs. The question of organic certification provides a tangible example. The empirical research shows that 3 out of 8 primary producers we interviewed were certified for organic production, although all of them talked about the importance of applying organic cultivation principles. Almost all of them thought it was too expensive, in combination with other factors. Some felt that food production needs to entail both alternative and conventional production methods in order to be sustainable in the long run. Others emphasised personal connection with their customers allowed transparency of the cultivation process and made a certification superfluous. Nonetheless, the profitability aspect does not rule out that the actors involved in AFNs indeed do have a heightened sense of social responsibility. As a matter of fact, all of the interviewees mentioned the importance of strengthening SS in alternative food systems, and they had different approaches on how to achieve this goal. Findings are presented below in terms of the four sustainability conceptualisations outlined by Murphy (2012).

#### *Participation*

One approach to increasing SS that entails both economic viability and elements of participation is for farmers to invite people to work on the farm. Although, depending on the size of their enterprise, few AFN actors have the economic muscle to hire many waged employees, as they often only consist of one or a few people to begin with. Instead, many actors in Skåne turn to hiring interns as an option, for example from agricultural education programmes in the area. Others have tried collaborating with the public sector in accepting interns who are labour training through the Swedish

Public Employment Service and Malmö Stads labour market department. Different kinds of projects have also been developed where collaboration between actors in AFNs has been essential to work towards changing the food production system in Sweden and Skåne as well as increasing the attraction value for farming and food production. For example, primary producer interviewee 4 outlines a project they conducted in collaboration with the Swedish Board of Agriculture in 2014. The aim of the project was to see how the farmer could cooperate with the public sector (such as the Red Cross or IM) to use cultivation, preparation, and sales as a work-integrating, language training, educational and rehabilitative tool. In the project, the cultivation would be subordinate to the other aims, placing so-called *human cultivation* at the centre, i.e. how to get people to grow through learning these skills. Participation in the form of involving people in the production process was the most prominent approach for the actors interviewed.

During this study, two different projects were investigated in more detail, the regional project *Food Malmö* and the national endeavour *Mer mat, fler jobb*. *Food Malmö* was a collaborative initiative by Malmö Stads labour market department with the aim of spreading knowledge about local and sustainable food and also making it more available to the people of the city. According to interviewee 15 who was in charge of the project, there was a large interest in organising a platform where local actors could collaborate around local food issues in Malmö. *Mer mat, fler jobb* (more food, more jobs), is a project developed by the Federation of Swedish Farmers (LRF), the Swedish Public Employment Service, and Krinova. The driving force behind the project was the need to find ways to implement the Swedish Food Strategy that was presented in 2017 (Regeringskansliet, 2017). The project revealed that many farmers were in great need of labour and were willing to expand their activities through participatory approaches. The project was a success, much due to the dynamics of project work, as it allowed the actors involved to work independently from the bureaucracy of larger organisations. According to interviewee 13 who worked at the Swedish Public Employment Service, this is good for employment within the agricultural sphere. Out of the 600 people who participated in the project, approximately 75% have gotten jobs.

### *Awareness for sustainability*

Awareness for sustainability is a key concept in SD discourse, most notably it refers to raising public awareness of environmental issues through encouraging alternative, sustainable consumption patterns (Murphy, 2012). Mainly, the actors interviewed were concerned with making information about their cultivation processes available for everyone through varying approaches such as lecturing at companies and expos, inviting schools or the public for study visits, and most commonly through

marketing on their social media. Many of the interviewees pointed out that there is a lot of ignorance in society today regarding sustainable food practices, claiming that there is a need for education and knowledge sharing within the AFN sphere. This is an important goal because increasing knowledge about food practices can inspire people to make responsible food purchase choices. As interviewee 12 points out, if you know much about a process, you are more likely to care, especially if the process aims for a positive change of some sort.

“This way of growing is the opposite of the anonymous carrots. A big part of my fortune and what is fun with this job is to do it for people you have met and recognize. I think people have a much harder time throwing away these carrots in the compost if they have received them from me personally and know that I have grown them here.” (Interviewee 12)

Another important dimension of awareness is to make information available for everyone, not only a niche group of people who are already interested in AFNs. However, few of the interviewees had concrete approaches to achieving this goal. One AFN that leads by example is the foundation Botildenborg, where SS is at the centre of all activities. The idea of the foundation was originally to match new arrivals with already established Swedes, and even though anyone is welcome at this point, the idea is still to bring people from different cultures together through cultivation of food.

### *Social cohesion*

To many of the interviewees, SS in particular is deeply rooted in a vital local community. Several actors expressed personal values and ambitions to uplift the locals, either in terms of the economic advancement of the small-scale agricultural sphere or the social relations within the local community. One way to do this is by taking advantage of the short food chain and promoting a personal connection between producer and consumer in order to achieve territorial cohesion. Achieving this goal requires transparency in the production chain, and the ability of the producers to interest the consumers in what they are doing and why. The most accessible way to do that is to focus on the local community firsthand. One interviewee phrased it like this:

“This is not just a garden for myself, I am trying to build something that will attract people who also want to see how production works. That is why we must work more towards the local community out here.” (Interviewee 3)



Many of the interviewees talked about the distance in the food system, both between producer and consumer, but also between consumers and food in general. The reason why the actors focus so much on spreading awareness of AFNs is the hope and expectation that it would bring actors closer together and enhance mutual understanding, respect, and trust. Others expressed hopes that it would help revitalise the public interest in and general respect for food. They believe that showcasing the value and importance of a product and its origin gives a sense of pride and belonging to the community. Focusing on the social dimension of sustainability creates what one interviewee called added value or positive outcomes that are not necessarily measurable in an economic sense. It could refer to positive aspects for the individual actor or for society at large. One interviewee pinpoints the essence of added value while talking about a community project on urban gardening for people who have been on long term sick leave:

“What I think is great about this is that people can be outside and work for a whole day, it does a lot for people. Being outdoors, exercising, getting fresh air, and being in a nice environment where everything grows and is full of life, affects people's health very much. And it makes it possible for people to feel a little better and get a little more energy, and with our help also get a job later on.” (Interviewee 10)

Here, the participants get personal gains from participating in the program, and society will later benefit when they are able to return to work. Another interviewee shared a similar perspective when emphasising the benefits of incorporating more social aspects into agricultural practices. It may be costly at first, but the worth of succeeding with rehabilitation and integration through cultivation is worth it in the long run. Additionally, focusing on added value creates a point of attraction for social cohesion in the local community, and is essential to focus on striving for all dimensions of sustainability.

### *Equity*

The literature on sustainable development discusses equity in the context of equal opportunity for all citizens to fulfil their development potential, regardless of factors such as gender, ethnic background, or age (Murphy, 2012). In the context of this study, a central equity dimension is that everyone should have equal access to social networks. The empirical material underlines that engagement in AFNs is by and large a sustainability hobby for a niche group of people. This group consists mainly of middle-aged women, families with young children, and foodies, all from the middle class, and all

educated. Some of the interviewees saw this lack of diversity and its socio-political causes as a serious problem:

“I see that there is a need for different types of consumers. It is still a niche, we cannot get away from that. It is an extremely small niche we are working with so far, and it attracts a certain type of consumer. You have probably mapped it and seen what kind of consumers there are at REKO-ring. But it will be a while before we get everyone in here. It's partly about awareness, but also about class issues, it's about economics.” (Interviewee 3).

The general trend in the empirical material seemed to be the will to diversify the educational programmes, internship positions, and project-based initiatives to include people of more varying backgrounds. However, many actors were reluctant about hiring immigrant workers, out of fear of exploitation. Currently, there are many people coming from eastern Europe to work in Swedish agriculture, but more than one interviewee expressed the opinion that in order to be a socially, ecologically and economically sustainable agriculture, it is not viable to rely on cheap labour from other countries. Interviewee 9 points out that if the aim is to produce the products in Sweden, it is more sustainable to find young people who already live here, and integrate them into the job market early. However, interviewee 14 claims that not everyone can become a farmer, it is hard work and requires competence. Still, several interviewees pointed out the potential benefits of putting in the effort to integrate young people with different cultural backgrounds into this type of activity. More than one also emphasised the importance of established AFN actors to assume the responsibility to make this effort. Nevertheless, none of the interviewees reflected on the potential exploitative aspect of hiring unpaid interns to work in the production, highlighting the need for continued evaluation of what equitable participation actually means.

### **5.1.2 Valuation of contribution**

The majority of the AFN actors that were interviewed for this study expressed a sentiment that SS is important, not only in AFNs but in society as a whole. The focus was mainly on their contribution to *participation* and *awareness for sustainability* while *social cohesion* and *equity* were not as commonly discussed as valued contributions to social sustainability. Therefore, this section will be organised using two overarching themes from the empirical material that cover mostly participation and awareness, but also aspects of social cohesion and equity. The themes are here referred to as *collaboration* and *valuation and appreciation of food*.

Many actors expressed frustration regarding the difficulties of combining a social focus with what it currently takes to be a small-scale farmer in Skåne. Challenges included lack of time, too much administration work, unprofitability, and non-effective collaborations with the public sector. However, the ambition to find strategies to develop their potential to contribute to social sustainability, even if only on their own farm or in their local community, was evident.

“We see a lot of problems in society that have to do with food production and ecological sustainability. There is a lot that could be done much better in society and the world regarding this, and we feel that we contribute to doing that. Even if it is small scale, we show that it is actually possible to do it this way.” (Interviewee 10)

### *Collaboration*

AFN processes require participation and collaboration between many different actors in order to be successful (Favilli et al., 2015). This collaboration can happen on the individual level between producers and/or consumers, or on a larger scale between governments, actors in the public sector, or non-profit organisations. Many interviewees said that well-functioning collaboration was beneficial for their business, and also a way of connecting to people in their local community, which helped them to spread awareness about sustainable agriculture. Through this, the relationship between consumer and producer could be strengthened when they were able to connect, something that could contribute to a changed perspective and respect for the food they have bought. The collaboration between producers was also mentioned as a positive aspect since it benefits everyone and they can help each other out in difficult times. Additionally, since many small-scale farmers, especially peri-urban farmers, are located close to each other, this created a sense of community. Finally, the collaboration between small-scale producers and Malmö stad was described like this:

“The small-scale producers or actors are always very easy to work with because they are all passionate about the same thing and are very excited and committed, it is very easy to talk to each other and so on. The difficulty for them is to develop and get financing.” (Interviewee 15)

Still, the collaboration between small-scale producers was also described as difficult at times. Interviewee 14, who was active in *Mer Mat*, *Fler Jobb*, said that it was difficult to reach out to producers and gain their trust in entering their project. Collaboration overall was challenging in this project because when many different actors are involved, continuity is very important in order for it

to be successful, something that at times was challenging to uphold. Nevertheless, a collaboration between many different actors promotes learning from each other and finding new perspectives that can contribute to new levels of awareness that can favour AFNs in Skåne.

As seen in the previous question, several AFN actors worked with labour training and while some expressed positive experiences of this, others explained why it did not work out so well for them. Interviewee 3 claimed that if the AFN is dependent on subsidies and free labour, it is not economically sustainable. However, it can still be a contribution to SS since it gives opportunities to those that, for various reasons, are outside the labour market. Participation in small-scale farming might also result in an elevated level of respect for food since it clarifies how much work it requires. One main reason why labour training did not work out for interviewee 5 was due to people being forced to apply for jobs to remain in the system and therefore did not have adequate ambition for the workload necessary. People who are in labour training often have long time health reasons for not working, which can make them unreliable in the workplace. Providing yet another perspective, interviewee 4 pointed out the difficulty of mixing different people without adequate competence on how to integrate them properly. The farmer might have the infrastructure to allow people from different backgrounds to come and learn about cultivation, but there might be an extended need for other people who focus on educational or social integration aspects as well if a project is to succeed.

### *Valuation and appreciation of food*

The empirical research clearly states that awareness for sustainability is one of the biggest contributions AFNs want to make. The actors emphasised the need for more knowledge about where the food comes from, what the food production process looks like, and who produces it has the potential to change the valuation and appreciation of food in general, and local food specifically. Many of the interviewees believed that there is a lot of ignorance in society today regarding sustainable food practices. The project coordinator for Food Malmö talks about this as one of the main reasons for the initiation of the project to begin with:

“When we started organising lots of workshops about issues that have to do with food in Malmö, we saw that a common thread was, among other things, the need to increase knowledge and awareness about pretty much everything that has to do with food. Sustainable food, agriculture, it really does not matter what. That was the big keyword we saw very clearly when talking to the actors.” (Interviewee 15)

Many interviewees believe that they can and should share their knowledge as much as possible but this requires support from consumers as well. If consumers do not have general knowledge and understand that food will become more expensive and with the continuing global crisis, less accessible, they might not be prepared for it if or when it happens. Most interviewees agreed that people have become more aware and for some consumers, this has resulted in a changed mindset where they are more appreciative of eating a tomato that is grown locally rather than eating an exotic imported fruit. However, all interviewees agreed that the increased awareness among consumers was limited to a niche group that showed great interest and with whom the relationship was relatively strong. This group is oftentimes privileged in the sense that they have time to go to, for example, REKO-rings (in addition to going to the supermarket to get supplementary ingredients), can afford to buy the more expensive environmentally friendly alternatives, and have the situated knowledge to prepare and cook the food. The large group of people that do not have contact with AFNs, even if they have every opportunity to do it, are very difficult to reach according to the empirical research.

According to interviewee 9 the biggest problem today in Sweden and in the Western world is not that we have too little food but rather that we eat the “wrong” food. Interviewee 4 agrees with this and adds that we spend only approximately 12% of our disposable income on food, which is a lot less than it used to be. Consumers must therefore understand that their buying patterns have an effect and if they continue to not favour decentralised food production, such as AFNs, the centralised system will be further cemented, making it difficult for small-scale producers to continue.

“Food must have a face, we have lost so much about food and its origin and how it is produced and what it does to the individual and the planet. We need to value food in many different ways and one way is to make the people behind food production simply visible. In this way, I think you can value the food much higher, from the fact that you can reduce your food waste, and there are lots of other things as well. You strengthen the relationship, and you get a greater interest in how the food is produced in a sustainable way. It can also be the case that now in troubled times with pandemics and war, it can also lead to you becoming invested yourself, it can be a form of war preparedness, education-enhancing effort. ” (Interviewee 15)

The empirical research showed that AFNs have the ambition to be a part of reclaiming the Swedish food industry, educating people about the work that it requires and what difference ecological production makes. Through this, interviewee 13 believes it could be possible to redefine what it

means to work in the food industry, prioritise it differently and have an easier time recruiting to these industries.

“It will be a good circle where profitability also increases for the producer and this, in turn, makes it even more attractive. It is basically about the fact that we need to become more self-sufficient in Sweden on food. If we did not think that question was so relevant when the food strategy was accepted, we can say that what happened with the pandemic during the project and with the current world situation we experience, it has made us see that we are quite vulnerable.” (Interviewee 13)

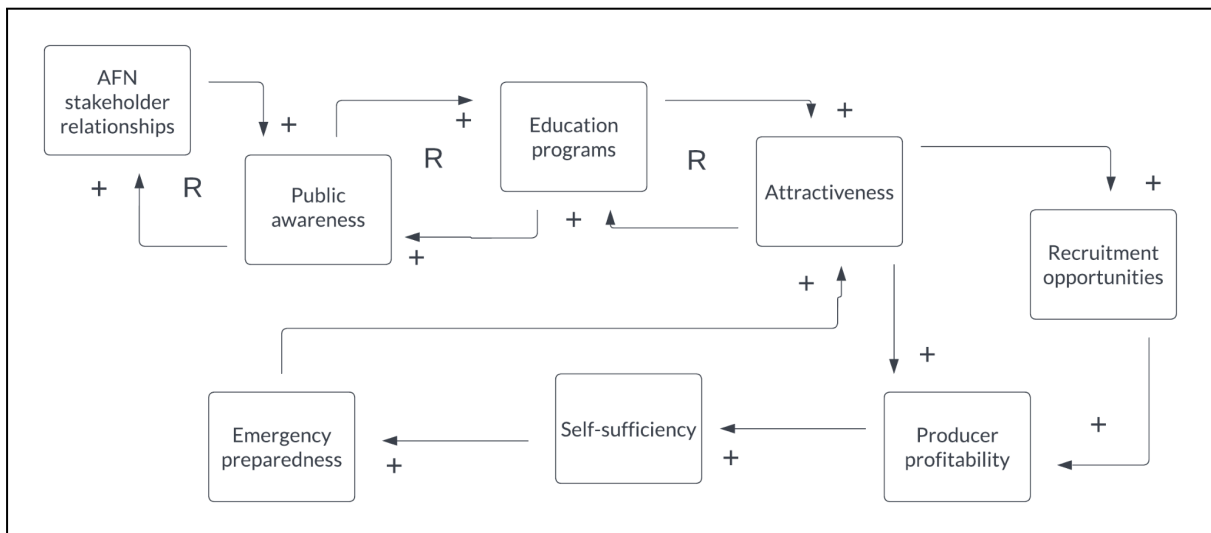
### ***5.1.3 Development potential***

From what has been established in the previous sections, small-scale farmers in Skåne feel that they are not adequately supported and prioritised by society at large. They have a clear idea about how they want to contribute to SS as well as what they value in their networks. However, regarding their potential to develop these practices to increase social sustainability, there are no clear guidelines on how to do so. As presented in RQ2, awareness for sustainability was stated as one of the most valued contributions that AFNs wanted to make to social sustainability, and the empirical material indicated that many actors believe that they are already contributing in this dimension. Interview questions on the dimension of equity did not yield many answers either, but more likely due to a lack of knowledge about why this dimension is important to develop. However, the interviewees had a clearer picture about the importance of developing participation and social cohesion.

To increase AFNs’ capacity to contribute to SS, many of the interviewees described that they need more time, knowledge, and support in order to improve their contribution. There is a need for a cultural and/or structural change regarding prioritisation and general perceptions of AFNs and their potential to contribute to society. Interviewee 12 supports this claim and adds that the progress that is being made in order to support AFNs is happening too slowly. It was not until four years after the REKO-ring started in Skåne that the tax authorities reached out in order to help REKO producers to know what tax legislation they need to comply with. According to interviewee 15, the support programs that exist are mainly adapted for civil society, non-profit organisations, etc., but are rarely focused on food in relation to this. It is therefore difficult to receive funding for projects and/or business plans because they are not fully aligned with what the funding organisations want to support. Regarding social cohesion, many interviewees talked about opening up their space as a place where people can gather, not only for sales or educational purposes but also to meet each

other in the community and for example have a coffee in their farm café. To further develop these kinds of initiatives would not only promote social cohesion but also environmental objectives.

Figure 2 shows a causal loop diagram aimed to visualise the key areas that could contribute to change within the alternative food system, according to the empirical material. The figure displays ways of increasing stability for AFNs, which in itself increases their potential to contribute to social sustainability. Increased public awareness is among the interviewees believed to lead to better relationships in the AFN sector, but also potential to develop more educational programs that will result in a higher level of attractiveness in the society for this sector. This would increase the stability of producers as they can expand their business and make a profit. Consequently, with more profitability opportunities, more people will want to go into this field, meaning that self-sufficiency is strengthened. Another direction this could take according to the empirical data is that with current and future potential crises, this question of raising the attractiveness of local sustainable food that AFNs provide will come naturally because it will be more pressing. The arrows show the direction of the developments, the plus signs indicate increases and the R's specify positive reinforcements.



**Figure 2.** Visualisation of the interviewees' ambitions for change. Author's own creation.

## 5.2 Discussion of findings

The social and environmental challenges that accompany the development of the global food system call for innovative food practices on the regional and local levels. Piccoli et al. (2021) claim that the logic guiding these reorganisations refers to the principles of food sovereignty meaning the right of people to choose their own kind of food and food system (Piccoli et al., 2021). The empirical material shows that a prevalent goal among AFN actors regarding the organisation of Sweden's food system is

the need to increase self-sufficiency and not rely as much on imports as it currently does. The food strategy that was accepted in 2017 established that more should be grown within the country's borders, and according to interviewee 13, the gross number of people working in this field must be much larger in order to achieve self-sufficiency. Increasing the SS efforts in AFNs is therefore not only relevant to strengthen relationships between actors but also to facilitate national self-sufficiency efforts in Sweden. This should preferably be done through small-scale agriculture since it more easily enables sustainable practices (Beitel, 2012). Not many square metres are necessary in order to make a significant contribution. This is not to say that Skåne should only have small-scale agriculture but rather even out the current playing field to have a more balanced and secure system. An increase in the number of small-scale, sustainable producers incorporated into the food system would mean both ecological and self-sufficiency benefits. Interviewee 12 phrased it like this:

“I think that [small-scale] is the only way forward. We need to think a little more about ecological sustainability and a little less about economic short-term goals. I think that in order to strengthen our food security and our food sovereignty within the limits of the earth, we need to have many more people producing food for the local area.” (Interviewee 12)

Simultaneously, the small-scale agricultural sector is oftentimes perceived as risky to get into. It is hard for new producers to find sufficiently profitable sales channels due to competition with the conventional market. As some interviewees have pointed out, the AFN sphere may be less competitive, but pose other challenges. It takes lots of time, money, and effort to start a business, and the small-scale farmer then needs to be knowledgeable about administration, economics, and customer contact in addition to knowledge about sustainable cultivation. AFNs that simplify these processes by providing a platform where farmers can reach consumers more easily can be seen as important tools to give small-scale farmers the support they need in order to tackle these issues. This brings us back to the key finding that local food needs to be better valued. If more people are to enter this sector, consumers also must be willing to pay what it actually costs and the public awareness needs to increase in order to inspire change.

### ***5.2.1 Policy suggestions***

Tendencies show that the time for transformation is possibly now. According to Favilli et al. (2015), the interest in innovation in the food system that is not top-down has been increasing during the last decade and is emerging from below. The innovation is not necessarily technical but occurs at the level of social practice (Favilli et al., 2015). Social innovation originates from a common interest in



transformation by a variety of actors that aim to create networks, an organisational model that has become increasingly important to achieve objectives of sustainability in recent times. Cooperation between different actors is considered a key factor confronting the challenge of sustainable food production and consumption (Favilli et al., 2015).

### *Participation*

According to Murphy (2012), environmental decision-making processes must include mechanisms that reflect the needs of future generations. Therefore, policy approaches must also include these perspectives of future generations and weaker groups in ultimate decisions so that their preferences are reflected. Although AFNs are working on rebuilding and strengthening local communities and food security in Skåne, the governmental support does not reflect that, according to many interviewees. Enabling AFNs to get direct support more easily would thus be one potential effort to facilitate the development of their contributions to social sustainability. This would allow AFNs to further strengthen producer-consumer relationships, revitalise local communities, work with integration on their farms, and increase the availability of ecologically sustainable foods.

### *Awareness*

Education as an end is perceived as a key objective in the SD framework, but still, this category often receives less treatment in the SS literature (Murphy, 2012). As can be seen in the analysis, AFNs are striving for increasing awareness for sustainability through talking to customers face to face, showcasing their social media, arranging workshops and study visits, etc. This is a contribution to the informal education sector which is stated by Murphy (2012) as a policy approach. This can be developed even further through conveying more of the emotions, the soft values, in what they do. More and more people are aware of sustainability issues but might not react as much to the information they receive on a daily basis due to the sensory overload of doomsday rhetoric (Beitel, 2012). A different approach might therefore be to focus on a positive narrative by receiving this information from an actual farmer who is describing their life and passion and what an increase in these types of alternative food strategies might bestow.

### *Social cohesion*

Policy objectives related to social cohesion focus mainly on creating possibilities to foster harmonious coexistence (Murphy, 2012). Promoting social activities that have an environmental focus, which AFNs naturally have, is an important policy approach to increasing social cohesion and SS (Murphy, 2012). The regional and national projects outlined in the Analysis section can act as

relevant examples of how to develop the inclusion of SS in AFNs. These projects highlight the idea of increasing participation through co-production of knowledge and collaboration, emphasising the process dimension, the political implications of this process, and its associated structures of democratic control, in line with literature on the topic (Saunders et al., 2020). The underlying premise here is that people are more likely to support alternative food systems and environmental reform if they are involved in the decision-making (Murphy, 2012). Additionally, increasing public engagement could help promote social cohesion and SS by including different perspectives on how to solve these complex issues (Chan & Lee, 2008; Dempsey et al., 2011).

### *Equity*

It has been established in previous sections that AFN engagement is somewhat of a privileged hobby for a niche group of people. Even though this might not be considered a socio-environmental issue at the moment, it has larger implications for SD. Equal access to knowledge about and access to alternative practices is essential to ensure equity in food security, especially in times of crisis such as a pandemic or during the threat of war. Policy approaches relating to equity could be understood in terms of commitment to assisting vulnerable groups in adapting to the effects of environmental and social change (Murphy, 2012). It is thus important to make educational and integrational efforts to diversify the AFN sphere. AFNs trying to work more with integration through for example labour training where people could get an opportunity to practice language and integrate into the community expressed many concerns about how to succeed with this. More established programs on how to succeed with this, for example, Botildenborg, might help small-scale farmers that want to make this contribution but do not have enough time and/or knowledge to do this successfully.

### **5.2.2 Revitalisation**

During the analysis process we continuously searched for theories that could support and explain the empirical data and the emphasis on softer values and cultural transformation that was expressed by the interviewees. The majority of interviewees support the claim that the interest in quality foods, local foods, and organic foods is increasing. Albeit in a relative niche group of consumers, interest is still on the rise for alternative food practices. Gruvaeus & Dahlin (2021), were helpful in making these connections by theorising that this engagement and the consequent success of AFNs can be understood as dependent on the extent of the felt dissatisfactions with the mainstream food system and the ability of AFNs to address them. If the problems seen with the mainstream are widely felt, the potential to scale these alternative value networks is larger and will then be met with different propositions to solve the problem. Basically, AFNs could potentially be used as a tool to achieve a

more desirable food system in the future, by having local initiatives influence national structures (Gruvaeus & Dahlin, 2021). Essentially, AFNs hold a pocket of potential futures whose feasibility is dependent on how widespread the cultural dissatisfaction is, and the scalability of the conventions the solution suggests. The empirical data revealed that in order to increase SS in AFNs and through this strengthens its position in the Swedish food system, there is a need for this type of transformation based on cultural dissatisfaction, and a theory that supports this claim is the theory of revitalisation (Dahlin & Svensson, 2021).

The theory of revitalisation is by its originator, Anthony FC Wallace, defined as a “deliberate, organised, conscious effort by members of a society to construct a more satisfying culture.” (Wallace, 1956, p.265). When a societal system is placed under pressure, the options are to continue with business as usual or to make revitalising changes. This requires specifying new relationships and traits in order to create a new cultural system (Wallace, 1956). The revitalisation process consists of five somewhat overlapping stages: 1. Steady-state; 2. Period of Individual stress; 3. Period of cultural distortion; 4. Period of revitalisation, and finally; 5. New steady-state (Wallace, 1956). In an attempt to modernise the original theory, Gruvaeus and Dahlin (2021) have applied the theory to the alternative food network of REKO-rings in the Swedish context. Interestingly enough, the popularity of REKO-rings has increased rapidly in Sweden in the last few years, despite it being a more expensive and less convenient way to buy food compared to conventional markets (Gruvaeus & Dahlin, 2021). The authors discuss how revitalisation can be used to highlight the moral and cultural values of the network and here, the focus does not lie on consumer and producer relationships, but rather on the network as a whole, allowing for an analysis of both “ground up” and “top-down” desires of change to the food system (Gruvaeus & Dahlin, 2021). In short, “If the values of a revitalization movement correspond to a felt dissatisfaction with the culture, then values of an alternative food network can be understood as an organisational vector to solve a particular cultural unsustainability.” (Gruvaeus & Dahlin, 2021, p.5).

On this account, the current food system's unsustainability should thus not only refer to ecological or social aspects but cultural sustainability must also be considered for SS to develop. With increasing environmental degradation as a consequence of agricultural practices, cultural transformation in the sense that the theory of revitalisation describes is increasingly voiced as a requirement for SD (Dahlin & Svensson, 2021). While reviewing the empirical material, it becomes clear that AFN actors are striving for change in the Swedish food systems through appealing to softer values such as personal consumer contact, mediating an experience, and raising the general appreciation of food. According

to Dahlin & Svensson (2021), “the revitalisation of traditional practices is also presented as having a bearing on social relations, where the more satisfying culture is thought of in terms of community” (Dahlin & Svensson, 2021, p. 5), exemplifying that it makes sense to promote revitalisation in order to enhance social sustainability. More concretely, revitalisation is to be achieved through socially oriented initiatives at the local level that aims to strengthen the feelings of the community. Revitalisation operates locally to preserve specific customs and resources, but ideally, the process also takes effect on the structural level, which could eventually inspire systemic change (Dahlin & Svensson, 2021). In the context of AFNs, this could refer to individual choices that eventually inspire a transformation of the market, but also the previously suggested policy promotions that facilitate making these choices.

To conclude, using Murphy's conceptual framework and the theory of revitalisation to analyse the empirical data shows that there is potential to develop in all four categories but that this development benefits from including a cultural perspective in all dimensions. The theory of revitalisation lacks the tangible aspects that Murphy's conceptual framework entails while Murphy's framework lacks a cultural focus that incorporates the *softer values* expressed by the empirical material. In this specific context, there is a lack of reflection on how the cultural values of the local context can aid to strengthen SS and transform the food system. For that reason, the theory of revitalisation is useful in combination with the framework to highlight the need for a shift in the valuation and appreciation of local food on all levels. Applying a revitalisation lens to AFNs in Skåne is useful as it, according to observations made in the analysis, is already integrated into many of the four dimensions of the SS framework that the actors wish to enhance. All in all, AFNs in Sweden could be used as a tool in the revitalisation process as they can be considered a crisis response in times of stress and uncertainty. In many cases, it allows people to turn away from the business-as-usual mentality that characterises the current food system to look for more sustainable alternatives that could help protect and develop other, softer cultural values.



## 6 Summary and conclusions

The current conventional food system is not sustainable and there is a need for alternative ways to operate within this system. The interest in these alternative practices is slowly increasing and AFNs have the potential to be a useful part of this transformation in Sweden. In order to create a more sustainable food system, it is necessary to put effort into all three pillars of sustainability. While the economic and ecological aspects of sustainability in relation to AFNs have been explored quite extensively, SS is under-researched and therefore needs more place in these discussions. The empirical research in this study showed that different AFNs in Skåne have different ways to contribute to SS. In terms of participation, the most common contribution referred to public involvement in the form of internships and different types of collaboration projects. Actors also put a lot of effort into transparency and emphasised the importance of informal education to spread awareness. Through the ambition of strengthening the local community, actors work on minimising the social and geographical distance between the consumer and producer, which contributes to the social cohesion and equity dimensions. The most valued contributions according to the empirical data were collaboration processes and appreciation and valuation of food.

Many actors had the ambition to achieve more than what they currently do in terms of SS. The main obstacle is currently a lack of societal support. AFNs are not sufficiently valued and they need help in terms of time, knowledge, and financial support. One way of doing this is through policy implementations that promote cultural transformation. Participatory measures can be attained through increased support and policy approaches that incorporate intergenerational needs. Another measure could be enhancing the education sector, both formal and informal with positive narratives that inspire change which can foster a more harmonious co-existence in the local community. Further educational and integrational efforts to diversify the AFNs might also contribute to the development of SS performances. Finally, revitalisation can be used as a heuristic tool and a complement to the policy suggestions in the conceptual framework to achieve the cultural transformation needed in order to enhance SS in AFNs. Increased stability in AFNs in Skåne would not only have social advantages for the local community but will also play an important role in self-sufficiency endeavours in Sweden. Finally, further research would benefit from focusing on connecting the broader policy suggestions on SS to the existing legislation around AFN practices and tailoring them to enhance current efforts.

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