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PERSPECTIVES ON THE SUSTAINABILITY PROMISE OF
ALTERNATIVE FOOD NETWORKS

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ACADEMIC DISSERTATION

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ABSTRACT

This doctoral dissertation examines the phenomenon of alternative food networks (AFNs) from the perspective of food system sustainability. AFNs are seen as a promising response to the sustainability issues associated with the conventional food system, but have also attracted criticism. Criticisms include uncertainty over AFNs' actual sustainability impacts; arguments that many AFNs are hybrid rather than purely alternative; and that their impact on food system sustainability is limited, due to their marginal position.

In this dissertation, comprising three original research articles and an introductory section, I explore the above-mentioned criticisms to advance understanding of AFNs' sustainability. I seek to i) understand what sustainability claims we can make for AFNs based on their characteristics, ii) to develop understanding of AFNs' hybrid nature and their complex relationship to the conventional food system through empirically examining the negotiation of acceptable practice in AFNs; and iii) understand how this negotiation can be understood to drive wider food system sustainability transitions by shaping norms. The main theoretical framework used is convention theory. This theory examines the deployment of different notions of worth in coordinating economic activity, as actors navigate in different situations, and shape these situations through their negotiation of acceptable practices. I also apply convention theory to the framework of sustainability transitions, to frame the examination of norm-shaping within the niche of AFNs. The empirical focus of this study is an often-overlooked AFN actor, alternative food retailers, involving a qualitative, multiple case study research covering nine cases of alternative food retail in Finland and the UK.

My findings suggest that AFNs may potentially contribute to sustainability, but their sustainability should be critically assessed on a case-by-case basis. The findings also suggest a plurality of shared ideals in the domain of AFNs and several areas of tension in AFN practice that AFN actors must navigate. In doing this, the actors may also shape the norms and ideals in the sector. The conceptual examination contributes a clarified overview of AFNs' potential sustainability impacts and limitations, and provides a practical framework to assess different food networks' sustainability. The empirical analysis challenges certain underlying assumptions in the previous literature, and contributes a new understanding of AFNs' hybridity, its causes and consequences, and the challenges involved in adopting sustainable practices. The analysis can help practitioners understand consumer considerations, and opportunities and obstacles to more sustainable practices. It also deepens the understanding of how new norms are negotiated in the sector, and suggests an alternative view of AFNs' potential to drive change, besides scaling up and gaining a larger share of the food market. It uncovers the deeper ideals that the alternative food retailers

promote, and how these are different from or similar to conventional food system norms and ideals. This understanding can also help practitioners in their norm-shaping work. Theoretically, the study contributes a more dynamic application of convention theory to agri-food studies. The use of convention theory contributes a new understanding of the human and cultural aspect of sustainability transitions.

AFNs are ultimately both more and less than their promise. They are not automatically sustainable, or always purely alternative, but can challenge the conventional food system. Their indirect impact on the wider food system may be greater than suggested by their small size and reach. AFNs operate in a dialogue between different parties, and the general direction of this dialogue is instrumental in shaping what AFNs might be or become, and the achievement of sustainability in AFNs.

Keywords: alternative food networks, sustainability, retail, convention theory, transitions

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Before starting this work, I lived and worked in London, and was very excited about the local food scene: the many farmer's markets, receiving my organic vegetable box every Friday, and the community gardens, such as Growing Communities in Hackney. I grew organic tomatoes in our small back garden, read books about the issues with the industrial food system, and volunteered on a small biodynamic farm in Southern France. With this enthusiasm, I moved back to Helsinki to pursue this doctoral research on alternative food networks. Now, some years later, rose-tinted visions have turned into curiosity and an awareness that I have only scratched the surface of all there is to know.

An interesting companion to this work has been my involvement in my local alternative food community, particularly The Urban Co-operative Farm, Finland's first Community Supported Agriculture project. I have at times struggled with my researcher role, which has involved thinking critically about something that I consider, in principle, to be a good phenomenon. I found consolation in DuPuis and Gillon's (2009, 44) view that 'critical analyses of alternative social movements are in fact the best contribution academia can make to positive and effective social change'. Further, by attempting to think in an open way about alternative food networks, I have found some unexpected positive angles.

Food sustainability is an ongoing concern. When I started this work, there was a lot of enthusiasm about local food and small, artisanal producers. Other issues, such as veganism and reducing food waste, have risen to the fore since. 'Doing food differently' continues to interest people, and hopefully we will continue to witness positive changes.

This work has benefited from the expertise and support of many wonderful people. Dr. Leena Lankoski has acted as my supervisor and co-author, and I am ever grateful for her encouragement and guidance throughout this process. With her enviably sharp mind, she has always asked the right, challenging questions that have helped keep this work focused and relevant. I have always left our meetings inspired and with a clearer vision of the path forward. Leena has also been a wise mentor in all things related to the world of academia. I am also grateful to professors Markku Koskela and Pekka Mäkinen and everybody at the Department of Economics and Management for welcoming me to their community, and to Sari Ollila, Chiara Lombardini, Laura Salmivaara and Aino Immonen for all the lunchtime discussions.

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LIST OF PUBLICATIONS

This thesis is based on the following publications and manuscripts:

- I Forssell, S., & Lankoski, L. 2015. The sustainability promise of alternative food networks: an examination through “alternative” characteristics. *Agriculture and Human Values*, 32(1), 63-75.

- II Forssell, S., & Lankoski, L. 2016. Navigating the tensions and agreements in alternative food and sustainability: a convention theoretical perspective on alternative food retail. *Agriculture and Human Values*, doi:10.1007/s10460-016-9741-0

- III Forssell, S., & Lankoski, L. Shaping norms. A convention theoretical examination of alternative food retailers as a niche actor in food sustainability transitions (manuscript)

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Author’s contribution

This thesis consists of three articles, all offering different perspectives on the sustainability promise of alternative food networks. Article I is a conceptual article, while articles II and III are based on empirical research.

Sini Forssell has been responsible for the overall study conceptualisation, theoretical framing, research design, data collection and analysis, writing and project management. Leena Lankoski has provided guidance during all stages of the research.

In article I, Sini Forssell was responsible for the collection of the literature on which the conceptual work was based, and the synthesis of the literature, as well as most of the writing work. Leena Lankoski contributed to developing the conceptual frame, and thus the main arguments in the article, writing the article, and developing visual representations of the conceptual frame.

For articles II and III, Sini Forssell developed the theoretical framing and research puzzles, collected and analysed the data, and conducted the writing work. Leena Lankoski participated in the development of the text and overall argument of the papers, and in article III, contributed to the visualisation of findings.

1 INTRODUCTION

Concerns about the sustainability of the mainstream, conventional food system have contributed to a strong interest in alternative, potentially more sustainable forms of food production, distribution and consumption, collectively known as alternative food networks. Reflecting this idea that they may represent a more sustainable solution to food provisioning, conceptualisations of AFNs often emphasise the differences between AFNs and conventional food networks and focus on characteristics such as more ecological production methods, smaller scale, localness, and more direct relationships between producers and consumers. AFN participants are often also considered as having altruistic or sustainability-related values and goals (for reviews, see Forssell & Lankoski 2015; Tregear 2011).

However, the true nature and sustainability promise of AFNs have come under critical scrutiny. Their concrete sustainability impacts have been questioned (see Tregear 2011), along with the extent of their impact on food system sustainability, due to the marginal share of the market held by AFNs (e.g., Mount 2012). Further, the binary view of AFNs and the conventional food system as separate spheres has been challenged in view of empirical studies that have shown AFNs to be hybrid, that is, partially overlapping with the conventional system in terms of practices, structures and participants' logics and goals. This has led to debates over what to make of these 'disappointing realities' (Tregear 2011, 425), and whether and what types of AFNs may actually challenge the unsustainable mainstream food system. Consequently, AFNs' sustainability promise is unclear.

In the literature, between aspirational declarations of AFNs' sustainability benefits and counterarguments to these, there has been a relative lack of systematic empirical research into AFNs' sustainability. Analyses have often been limited to a specific type of AFN or aspect of sustainability, making it difficult to form an overview of AFNs' sustainability potential (Forssell & Lankoski 2015). Further, there has been a tendency in the literature to focus on what AFNs are pure enough to merit the label and dismissing from examination those not deemed alternative enough. To advance our understanding of AFNs, scholars have called for examination of diverse, hybrid, imperfect real-life AFNs, the forces that shape them, and their actual impacts on sustainability. (e.g., Holloway et al. 2007; Tregear 2011; Maxey 2006.) A central emerging direction is seeing AFNs as relational to and necessarily influenced by the dominant food system (Mount 2012), through the expectations and limitations the conventional system has created. To my knowledge, few studies (excepting Nost 2014) have explicitly focused on the dynamics of how actors deal with these expectations. The relational view also implies that AFNs may influence the wider food system. There is increasing

research attention to the possibilities of scaling up AFNs to increase their impact (e.g., Mount 2012; Beckie et al. 2012). An equally pertinent question may be how AFNs might influence the food system indirectly, suggesting a need to focus on other things than just quantitative growth (Brunori et al. 2011).

In this study, I examine AFNs' sustainability, by addressing these gaps in the literature and exploring the new directions suggested. I aim to understand the possible sustainability benefits of AFNs through a conceptual analysis and literature review. I also aim to understand AFNs' hybrid nature, and their complex relationship to the conventional food system, by empirically examining the negotiation of acceptable practice in AFNs. Furthermore, I investigate how this negotiation may influence the wider food system in terms of sustainability, by shaping norms and ideals related to food production and consumption. With its formulation of questions, the study takes a largely actor-oriented approach to the study of food system sustainability (see e.g. Becker et al. 1999).

In line with the network view of AFNs (DuPuis & Gillon 2009; Raynolds 2002, 2004), I take a relational view both of actors in AFNs influencing each other, and the alternative and conventional sectors influencing each other. The study is positioned among what Tregear (2011, 421) calls the network and governance perspectives in the research on AFNs within the social sciences. In this study, I employ convention theory, an economic sociological theory focusing on the negotiated interchange between actors in coordinating economic action. It takes a view of actions as chosen and justified so as to be acceptable in specific situations, rather than actors having fixed, wholly individual dispositions (Boltanski & Thévenot 1991/2006). Practices and outcomes are seen as shaped through continuous negotiation (Rosin & Campbell 2009). Analysing this negotiation allows us to identify the agreements and tensions that may guide action in the field (Raynolds 2002). Finally, convention theory sees a plurality of legitimate ideals in use in guiding and justifying actions (Boltanski & Thévenot 1991/2006), further breaking down binary views of the alternative and the conventional. The convention theoretical perspective also sees the negotiation of alternative practice as constructive. This means considering the negotiation of shared ideals and norms as also shaping understandings in the field, as actors seek to promote specific understandings of worth and enroll other actors. To develop this idea, I use the framework of sustainability transitions, which recognises the potentially significant role of niches, such as AFNs, in changing dominant systems. I draw on the idea in sustainability transitions theory that change percolates from niches where actors develop new ways of doing things and new collective understandings.

The empirical context of this study is alternative food retail. Retailers are particularly interesting to this study, due to their position at the interface of production and consumption. They are directly exposed to consumer expectations, but also have the potential to influence them. The empirical

study is a qualitative, multiple case study research covering nine cases of alternative food retail in Finland and the UK.

The research questions in the study are:

1. What is it in AFNs that is seen to distinguish them from the conventional food system, and how do these characteristics possibly translate into sustainability in food networks?
2. How do alternative food retailers navigate their way through various considerations and perceived expectations at the interface between food production and consumption and what does this reveal of AFNs' potential to contribute to sustainability?
3. What notions of worth in the food system do alternative food retailers promote and how, and what are the implications for transitioning to a more sustainable food system?

This dissertation comprises three original research articles, corresponding to the research questions outlined above, and an introductory section. This introductory section starts with a literature review in which I examine the concept of AFNs, the sustainability promise of AFNs as presented in the literature, and the problematic features in the AFN literature that this study partly seeks to address. I then introduce the theoretical framework of the study. I start by presenting an overview of how food system sustainability can be conceived. I follow this by introducing convention theory and the sustainability transitions framework and how these relate to the key ideas of this study. I then turn to a presentation of the research design, materials and methods. After this, I briefly summarise the three articles and their findings. I end with a reflection on the findings; the theoretical and practical contributions of the study; and limitations and suggestions for further research.

2 ALTERNATIVE FOOD NETWORKS - THE CONCEPT, THE PROMISE AND THE SEARCH FOR NEW UNDERSTANDINGS

Alternative food networks have attracted significant attention and caused debate in the agri-food literature over the past few decades. In this chapter, I introduce the concept of alternative food networks and review the debate around their promise of greater sustainability. I will also outline the directions and theoretical perspectives the literature on alternative food networks has taken in understanding the sustainability promise of AFN, as well as calls for new directions. I end with a closer look at alternative food retail as the focus of interest in this study and the environment for alternative food retail in the two countries studied.

2.1 SEEKING SOLUTIONS TO THE PROBLEMS OF THE INDUSTRIAL FOOD SYSTEM: THE RISE OF ALTERNATIVE FOOD NETWORKS

The sustainability of food systems is seen as one of the most pressing global challenges (eg. Eakin et al. 2016). The status quo of our food system is causing concern. The mainstream, conventional global food system, with its industrial scale production and processing and transportation of food across long distances, has provided choice and abundance to consumers in industrialised countries. However, it is also increasingly criticised for its negative impacts on producers, consumers, and the environment. Criticisms include the system's reliance on fossil fuels at all stages of the food supply chain, and the resulting pollution, including greenhouse gas emissions. Other concerns raised are loss of soil health and biodiversity, problems with animal welfare, and negative impacts on consumer health due to the marketing of unhealthy, nutritionally poor foods. (e.g., Kloppenburg et al. 1996; Sustain 2001; Anderson 2008; Sage 2010.)

There is concern about the concentration of power in the hands of a few large agribusiness companies and large corporate retailers (Kloppenburger et al. 1996; Grey 2000; Hendrickson and Heffernan 2002; McCarthy 2006; McMichael 2009a), as well as over loss of biodiversity and genetic diversity due to control of seeds, and about global food security being controlled by a few corporations (Grey 2000). Supermarkets exercise significant power over producers (e.g., Lawrence and Burch 2005; Hingley 2005), which has led to unfair practices towards, and an increasingly difficult economic situation for,

food producers (see e.g., Duffy et al. 2003; Anderson 2008; Grey 2000). The increasing length and complexity of food supply chains has also led to a lack of transparency in the food chain and disconnection between food and farming, producers and consumers (Grey 2000; Ilbery & Maye 2005a; Chiffoleau 2009). This may exacerbate the unsustainability of the food system, as the realities of production become ever more distant to consumers (Kloppenborg et al. 1996).

While the conventional food system has reacted to these criticisms through various sustainability initiatives of its own (e.g., Hartmann 2011), various smaller scale, alternatively configured networks of food provisioning, often called alternative food networks (AFNs), are arising as a counter-reaction to the perceived problematic aspects of the conventional food system (e.g., Maye & Ilbery 2006; O'Hara & Stagl 2001; Selfa & Qazi 2005). AFNs have evoked interest among consumers, activists and policymakers alike (e.g., Thilmany et al. 2008; Zepeda 2009; Cone & Myhre 2000; Sustain 2013; Norberg-Hodge et al. 2002; DEFRA 2002; Ministry of Agriculture and Forestry 2013). On the consumer side, these developments have been linked to a general rise in more conscious consumption and consumer awareness of food system issues (e.g., Ilbery & Kneafsey 2000; Hinrichs 2000; Ilbery & Maye 2005a). Food scares have caused health and food safety concerns (Renting et al. 2003; Ilbery & Maye 2005a; Whatmore et al. 2003; Harvey et al. 2004), Associated is a growing general consumer distrust of the conventional food system and the foods it provides (Marsden et al. 2000; O'Hara and Stagl 2001; Whatmore et al. 2003; Renting et al. 2003; Goodman 2004). Also related is the increasing number of affluent, discerning consumers who seek high quality food and express their tastes through distinctive foods (Higgins et al. 2008; Goodman 2004; Harvey et al. 2004), in what scholars have termed 'the quality turn'. On the other side of the supply chain, the increasingly economically challenging position of farmers (Renting et al. 2003; Maye & Ilbery 2006) has led to efforts to reconfigure food supply chains.

2.2 THE CHARACTERISTICS OF AFNS

What, then, are these alternatives to the conventional food system? AFNs include direct selling, farm shops, farmers' markets, Community Supported Agriculture, food cooperatives, specialist retailers box schemes, and fair trade (Allen et al. 2003; Renting et al. 2003; Goodman 2004; Ilbery & Maye 2005a; Venn et al. 2006). Sometimes production practices such as organic farming are also placed under the umbrella of AFNs (Goodman 2004; Renting et al. 2003; O'Hara & Stagl 2001). Alternative food networks include both commercial businesses and non-commercial models, as exemplified by

food buying clubs. In the academic literature, they have been also been conceptualised using terms such as short food supply chains (SFSC) (Renting et al. 2003), alternative food initiatives (Allen et al. 2003), or local food systems (LFS) (Mount 2012, Feagan 2007). A common categorisation of AFNs (or SFSCs) is face to face, spatially proximate and spatially extended (Marsden et al. 2000). The first two categories relate to the notion of relocalisation of food systems and the third relates to notions of ecological and ethical production, typically verified through formal certification systems (as in the case of fair trade) (Higgins et al. 2008).

The concept of AFN is thus wide and varied, and its real-life manifestations diverse, making its definition and boundary demarcation challenging. Indeed, the first analytical step in Article I of this dissertation/thesis (Forssell and Lankoski 2015) was to build a synthesis of AFN characteristics from conceptualisations of AFNs in prominent literature (Marsden et al. 2000; Renting et al. 2003; Whatmore et al. 2003; Sage 2003; Ilbery & Maye 2005b; Sonnino & Marsden 2006; Jarosz 2008; Morgan et al. 2006), in order to better understand the nature of AFNs. I will briefly summarise the results here.

Conceptualisations of AFN focus on the foods that are produced, bought and sold in AFNs, the production methods used, and the networks used to arrange the supply of food. Some characterisations of AFNs also ascribe certain characteristics to the participants in AFNs, such as morality, participants' commitment to sustainability and a non-industrial logic driving how AFNs are operated. These participant characteristics can be thought of as background characteristics. The actual, concrete changes to food provisioning, or the core characteristics, of AFNs are:

- alternative products and production methods: naturalness, quality, traditional production methods, ecological production. Manifestations of these notions of quality include organic or low input agricultural production, so-called speciality or niche gourmet foods typified by artisanal production methods and know-how, and so-called locality foods, or foods with an identifiable geographical provenance (Ilbery and Maye 2006). This links quality to how, where and by whom foods are produced.
- reduced distance between producers and consumers, more direct supply chains with fewer intermediaries, localness, small size of networks, transparency and various ways of conveying trustworthy information about products and production.
- new, different forms of governance in the networks, redistributing power in the food network and sharing economic risk or resources, or both.

Finally, conceptualisations of AFNs often included outcome characteristics, or aspects that are seen to result from AFN activities, for example social

embeddedness and trust. Thus, the concept of AFNs is sometimes linked to the benefits they are believed to deliver.

Two aspects of how AFNs are defined are noteworthy for this study: the tendency of definitions to contrast AFNs to the conventional food system, and the role of assumed participant motives and goals in conceptualising AFNs. The first aspect, as the term alternative suggests, relates to the concept of AFN needing a counterpart, something to be alternative to. As McCarthy (2006, 810) writes, 'alternative economies arguably depend upon shared notions of the conventional economy for their premiums and for their very constitution'. Accordingly, many conceptualisations of AFNs, in popular and academic accounts alike, highlight their differences to the conventional food system (Tregear 2011). The relationship of AFNs to the conventional food system is described through expressions such as 'challenge' (Sonnino & Marsden 2006), 'opposition' (Maye et al. 2007), 'resistance and counter-pressure' (Feagan 2007), or 'short-circuiting' (Sonnino & Marsden 2006).

In more specific terms, perceived differences between alternative and conventional food networks include specialised food production as opposed to bulk commodity production (e.g., Murdoch & Miele 1999; Marsden et al. 2000; Sonnino and Marsden 2006; Goodman 2004; Renting et al. 2003), small scale over large scale (Jarosz 2008), local over global (La Trobe & Acott 2000; Feagan 2007) and trust-based, more personal relationships juxtaposed with the commercial, technocratic relationships associated with conventional markets (Hendrickson and Heffernan 2002; Sonnino and Marsden 2006; Higgins et al. 2008) (see also Murtagh 2015 for other examples).

The second aspect, the role of assumed participant motives and goals in conceptualising AFNs, has been widely discussed. As some authors (DuPuis and Goodman 2005; Tregear 2011; Jarosz 2008) have observed, AFNs are sometimes also defined and their creation explained through the altruistic motives and goals of AFN participants. This mirrors activist rhetoric, which emphasises that ethical, sustainability-related values and norms underlie the creation of AFNs. Many, particularly earlier, conceptualisations of AFNs or local food systems highlight the putative sustainability-related values and goals of AFN initiators or participants, such as environmental concern, social justice and economical viability for the farmers involved (Feenstra 1997; Kloppenburg et al. 1996; Grey 2000; Hendrickson & Heffernan 2002; Kirwan 2004). AFN participants are believed to have considerations that extend beyond self-interest (Kirwan 2004; Sage 2003). These are contrasted with the perceived orientations of the conventional system, such as profit making, a focus on maximum efficiency and utility, and self-interest (e.g., Kloppenburg et al. 1996; Follett 2009; Hendrickson & Heffernan 2002).

Sometimes the focus on values and goals even extends to normative views of what AFNs goals and participant values should be (DuPuis and Goodman 2005). As Tregear (2011, 425) observes, there is a view in some literature that AFNs 'inherently attract and retain, or should attract and retain, participants

who prioritize goals of social justice, equality and sustainability'. DeLind (2002), for example, warns of civic agriculture turning into just another consumer market, and in some of the literature there is discernible a separation between true alternatives and their more superficial counterparts based on perceptions of participants' values and goals (Follett 2009; Gregory & Gregory 2010).

2.3 THE PROMISE OF ALTERNATIVE FOOD NETWORKS – IS IT REALISED?

The benefits associated with AFNs are closely tied to their characterisations, to the point that, as Tregear (2011) argues, AFNs are sometimes defined and conceptualised through their desired outcomes. AFNs have been linked with potential positive sustainability outcomes across the economic, social and environmental dimensions of sustainability, particularly in the earlier literature. On the economic dimension, AFNs have been thought to contribute to the economic welfare of producers through the increased product price margins of differentiated production (e.g., Marsden et al. 2000; Sonnino and Marsden 2006) and fewer middlemen (Jarosz 2008; La Trobe 2001; van der Ploeg et al. 2000; Marsden et al. 2000; La Trobe & Acott 2000), and potentially contribute to rural development on a wider scale (e.g., van der Ploeg et al. 2000; Renting et al. 2003; Morris & Buller 2003). Indeed, policy makers in EU countries have put hope in the development of shorter, more direct food supply chains and a stronger focus on the quality of food as a means of revitalising economically struggling rural areas (see Morris & Buller 2003; DuPuis and Goodman 2005; Illbery & Maye 2005a). Regarding environmental benefits, AFNs have been linked to production practices that are more ecologically sustainable, and thought to lower the transport-related impacts of food through reduced food miles (La Trobe & Acott 2000; La Trobe 2001; Renting et al. 2003). On the social dimension of sustainability, AFNs have been seen as trading in foods that are healthier than those in the conventional food system (La Trobe 2001; Little et al. 2009; Maye et al. 2007).

Slightly more abstract benefits have been linked to the notion of reconnection in AFNs, that is, the closer relationships between producers and consumers associated with them. This has been argued to increase the social embeddedness of the economic relationships in them, bringing more “regard” (Sage 2003), trust and morality to the interactions between producers and consumers (Kloppenburger et al. 1996; Hendrickson & Heffernan 2002; Sage 2003; Kirwan 2006; Dowler et al. 2010). The increased proximity is also thought to improve the transparency of the food supply chain and the quality of information as consumers can communicate

with producers (La Trobe 2001; O'Hara & Stagl 2001; Morris & Buller 2003; Kirwan 2004; Maye et al. 2007). Finally, reconnection is thought to promote learning and awareness of food sustainability issues among consumers (Torjusen et al. 2008; Milestad et al. 2010a; Dowler et al. 2010; Svenfeldt and Carlsson-Kanayama 2010), which is seen as a crucial element in the quest for greater food system sustainability (Kloppenburger et al. 1996; Svenfeldt and Carlsson-Kanayama 2010).

However, counter to the promise of sustainability outlined above, continued examination of the phenomenon of AFNs has resulted in critical perspectives in the literature (Tregear 2011). This holds for both direct and indirect sustainability outcomes. Starting with the proposed direct sustainability impacts of AFNs, the economic benefits of AFNs to small producers and local economies have been questioned. Studies suggest that straightforward claims about AFNs always being beneficial are inaccurate. For example, direct selling may require too much time and labour to be profitable (Jarosz 2008), or specific AFNs may divert business away from existing small local enterprises (Watts et al. 2005). The environmental benefits of alternative food networks are not a given, but depend on for example the actual production methods used and actual emissions from transportation. Scholars have warned against assuming that localness or reduced food miles translate into environmental sustainability (eg., Edwards-Jones et al. 2008; Mariola 2008; Winter 2003). Benefits to consumers may be overstated, such as the healthiness of foods provisioned through AFNs (Tregear 2011). Studies have also considered the work of food provisioning in AFNs, where the often more labour-intensive processes of sourcing and preparing food create more work for the (female) householder (Little et al. 2009; Som Castellano 2016). Other criticisms have included AFNs' exclusionary nature in terms of social class, income levels and race (Hinrichs 2000; Hendrickson & Heffernan 2002; Allen et al. 2003; Guthman 2008; Goodman 2004; DuPuis & Goodman 2005; Slocum 2006).

The promise of greater consumer awareness, trust and participation is also not necessarily realised. The face-to-face meeting of producers and consumers does not necessarily instil mutual regard or moral sentiment in their relationships (DeLind 1999; Hinrichs 2000). Consumer participation and sharing of responsibility in even the most participatory models, such as CSA, is often found to be weak in practice (DeLind 1999; Cone & Myhre 2000; Feagan & Henderson 2009; Pole & Gray 2013). The informational value of the face-to-face exchange in some AFNs has also been viewed critically. The encounter is typically short, there are many limitations to communication (Tregear 2011), and vendors may have an interest in giving misleading information (Born & Purcell 2006). Also, consumers may rely too much on an alternative sales channel as a 'knowledge proxy', thus forgoing critical evaluation of the product being sold (Eden et al. 2008).

Thus, descriptions of AFNs often highlight their benefits in an idealised way, not reflecting their lived reality (Murtagh 2015). Actual empirical

evidence of AFNs' sustainability is sparse and only few studies, notably Ilbery and Maye (2005b) and Maxey (2007, 2006) have investigated the sustainability of actual AFNs. Ilbery and Maye (2005b) examine various specialty producers' supply chains from a sustainability perspective, using a multi-dimensional sustainability framework. They find that on many of the dimensions, only one or a few of the case businesses met the criteria. Maxey (2006), on the other hand, found the cases he studied highly sustainable in many ways, but also to be in a precarious position in trying to operate sustainably within an unsustainable food system.

Empirical findings of participant motives also show a more complex picture than that suggested in the most enthusiastic accounts. The logics exhibited by actors in AFNs appear to be a mix of alternative and conventional logics, for example small producers may be engaged in alternative food networks at least partially because of economic considerations or necessity; conversely, for the same reason, they may sell through conventional supply chains alongside alternative ones (Ilbery & Maye 2005a, b; Maye & Ilbery 2006; Hinrichs 2000; Andrée et al. 2010). Case studies indicate that producers involved in direct agricultural markets are to some degree driven by economic motives, alongside environmental and social concerns (Follett 2009; Kirwan 2004; Morris & Buller 2003; Andrée et al. 2010). Studies have also suggested that consumers in AFNs may be driven by sustainability-related motivations (see e.g. O'Hara and Stagl 2001), but also consider other aspects, such as convenience and individual health (e.g., DeLind 1999; Hinrichs 2000; Weatherell et al. 2003; Seyfang 2008; McEahern et al. 2010; Pole & Gray 2013; Nost 2014; Brunori et al. 2011).

Further, the supposed distinction between alternative and conventional food networks has come under scrutiny as scholars have examined the actual forms of and practices within food networks (Andrée et al. 2010). Notably, this has included the examination of the hybrid supply chains of alternative foods. For example, specialty products, including local and organic foods, are sold both through conventional retailers and alternative channels (Marsden et al. 2000; Renting et al. 2003; Maye & Ilbery 2006). Additionally, alternative food producers may source ingredients from conventional suppliers (Ilbery & Maye 2005a, b). Conventional supply chains may thus be an obligatory passage point for the network (Renting et al. 2003; Watts et al. 2005). Further, it has been noted that conventional actors are displaying alternative considerations in sourcing, such as using ethical or environmental criteria, with 'most "sustainable foods" nowadays sold through supermarkets' (Oosterveer 2012, 153) and more environmentally friendly production methods (see Andrée et al. 2010). Rarely, then, are alternative food networks entirely distinct from the conventional system.

Some scholars have considered this hybridity a problematic feature in terms of AFNs' capacity to challenge the conventional food system. For example Watts et al. (2005, 27) suggest that AFNs exist on a spectrum of

weaker to stronger AFNs, based on different AFN configurations' ability to 'resist incorporation into conventional [food supply chains]'. Scholars have expressed concerns about the appropriation, incorporation or subordination of AFNs or alternative foods by commercial, mainstream actors with a capitalist logic (see Renting et al 2003; Kirwan 2004; Watts et al. 2005; Eden et al. 2008), particularly as they become economically significant (Kirwan 2004; Eden et al. 2008).

This is seen as problematic for many reasons. The economic benefits, intended for small producers, go to corporate actors (Kirwan 2004). Also, the processes of mainstreaming and increasing the scale of production push prices and quality standards down, thus undermining the concept of AFNs (Goodman 2000). The travelling of products through conventional supply chains has also raised questions about food miles (Ilbery and Maye 2005a). Another concern relates to the dilution of values, principles or underlying alternative philosophy, as in the case of organic production as it becomes more mainstream (the so-called conventionalisation of the organic sector) (e.g., Guthman 2004). Finally, the intentions of corporate actors in introducing alternative foods in their product offering are sometimes viewed with scepticism. Critics have for example argued that supermarkets are merely riding on these trends without real commitment to the principles of the alternative food movement (Jones et al. 2004).

From a broader perspective, some critics have raised the concern that AFNs harness the dynamics of capitalism toward a sustainability project, emphasising for example consumer choice and free markets, resulting in reinforcing a neoliberal logic in the agri-food system (McCarthy 2006; DuPuis et al. 2006), with the existence of AFNs 'softening the edges and [widening] the credentials of the neoliberal agricultural project' (Andrée et al. 2010, 317). AFN participation is seen to produce consumers rather than citizens (DeLind 1999; 2002).

A final point of criticism regarding the sustainability promise of AFNs has been that they are too small and marginal to have any impact on wider food system sustainability, no matter what their benefits on a local scale (e.g., Mount 2012; Aggestam et al. 2017; Friedmann 2007). As Mount (2012, 107) argues, AFNs have to grow and 'engage either more or larger consumers and producers' if they are to have broader impacts on the system as a whole.

2.4 THEORETICAL PERSPECTIVES IN THE AFN LITERATURE - PROBLEMATIC ASPECTS AND NEW WAYS FORWARD

The above review paints an inconclusive picture of AFNs' sustainability promise, suggesting the need for further study. Tregear (2011) has suggested

that there are certain underlying issues in the study of AFNs that contribute to our lack of understanding. She relates some of these issues to the theoretical approaches taken in the AFN literature. In this section, I will review criticisms of the AFN literature relevant to this study, and how some of the shortcomings in the literature can be linked to the underlying assumptions or expectations of AFNs that stem from specific theoretical traditions. Further, I will review the new directions suggested to address these problematic aspects, and how in particular the network and governance perspective, as identified by Tregear (*ibid.*), might be fruitful in studies of AFNs.

To begin with, there is lack of research into the actual sustainability of AFNs on the whole, and only a few studies, notably Ilbery and Maye (2005b) and Maxey (2007, 2006) have investigated the sustainability of actual AFNs. As Maxey (2007, 55-56) points out, this lack of 'critical and sustained attention to sustainability within the field is quite remarkable, as sustainability is an implied feature of AFNs'. Also, Morris and Buller (2003) note that many of the benefits expressed are at the level of advocacy rather than empirical research, while Kneafsey et al. (2013) point to methodological shortcomings in assessments of sustainability, such as studying perceived economic benefits rather than attempting to quantify them, or a lack of consistency in the indicators used to study them. Those studies that do examine AFNs' sustainability are, understandably, limited to examining a specific type of AFN or aspect of sustainability, making it difficult to form a clear overall picture of the sustainability promise of AFNs (Forssell & Lankoski 2015).

Further, the theoretical approaches adopted in studies of AFNs have brought their own angles to our understanding AFNs. Tregear (2011) identifies three broad theoretical perspectives that account for much of the literature: the political economy, rural development, and network and governance perspectives. Work in the political economy tradition has brought certain assumptions to the literature that may impede full understanding of real-life AFNs (Tregear 2011). This work has analysed the change of the traditional food system to an industrialised, globalised system; the rise of neoliberalism and reliance on a market logic in food systems governance; and the power exerted over the food system by large corporate actors. This work has included for example Friedmann and McMichael's (e.g. Friedmann & McMichael 1989; McMichael 2005, 2009a,b) work on food regimes and Burch and Lawrence's (e.g. Burch & Lawrence 2005; Lawrence & Burch 200) work on retailer power, and has contributed to exposing inequalities and unsustainability in the food system (see Rosin & Campbell 2009; Murdoch & Miele 2004).

Consequently, work in the political economy tradition has ascribed anti-capitalist, oppositional features to AFNs (Tregear 2011) and criticised co-optation of AFNs and their values by mainstream actors. This has included debates around conventionalisation of organic agriculture (e.g., Guthman

2004) and 'bifurcation', or the organic sector's supposed division into authentic, social movement actors and commercial actors (see Rosin & Campbell 2009). Literature in the political economy tradition has arguably taken a somewhat purist view of AFNs, not fully corresponding to the lived reality of AFNs (Tregear 2011; Jarosz 2008; Hinrichs 2000; Lockie & Halpin 2005; Holloway et al. 2007), and perpetuated a polarised view of the alternative and the conventional. Scholars have called to question the uncritical, polarised dichotomy between the 'bad' conventional and the 'good' alternative (Winter 2003; Holloway et al. 2007; Rosin & Campbell 2009; Andree et al. 2010; Maye et al. 2007; Parkins & Craig 2009; Wilson 2013) and have linked this to academic discourse following the optimistic activist and policy rhetoric surrounding for example the relocalisation of food systems (Guthman 2004; Sonnino & Marsden 2006).

One extension of this has, arguably, been the tendency to conflate the scalar or structural features of AFNs with certain production practices, relationships; and actor values, motives and goals (for discussions of these confluences, see Born & Purcell 2006; Lockie & Halpin 2005; Sonnino & Marsden 2006; Tregear 2011). Thus, authors have pointed out that the local is seen as being inherently better than the global (Goodman 2004; Dupuis and Goodman 2005; Hinrichs 2003); small scale better than large scale (Lockie & Halpin 2005) and the existence of alternative structures or governance arrangements as inherently connected to more moral considerations (Tregear 2011). Tregear (2011) also observes that studies taking the rural development perspective to AFNs have also tended toward an optimistic view of the local, focusing on notions of for example social embeddedness and trust as underlying the putative positive rural development impacts of AFNs. Yet, as she points out, none of these things are inherent to any scale, including the local. An overly binary conceptualisation of alternative vs. conventional carries with it a risk of limiting our understanding of real-life AFNs, due to the temptation to shut out, or to dismiss as outlying or inauthentic, those AFNs that have some less-than-ideal characteristics.

Parts of the AFN literature could consequently be criticized for displaying wishful thinking rather than views grounded in research of real-life AFNs. To address the problems in the literature outlined above, new approaches have been suggested such as examining sustainability rather than alterity (Maxey 2007) and looking at actually existing, diverse food networks (Holloway et al. 2007; Maxey 2006). To address the issues of overly binary and fixed treatment of AFNs vs. the conventional food system, scholars have called for and sought to advance a more open approach (Lockie & Kitto 2000; Holloway et al. 2007; Rosin and Campbell 2009; Andrée et al. 2010; Tregear 2011).

Scholars have also highlighted the diversity of AFNs, that they encompass very different forms, practices and ideologies (Renting et al. 2003; Venn et al. 2006; Maye et al. 2007; Maye & Ilbery 2006; Ilbery & Maye 2005a;

Smithers et al. 2008) and have different abilities to address sustainability issues (Follett 2009). Also, for a better understanding of AFNs, there have been calls for understanding the actor perspective, or the goals, orientations and strategies of AFN participants (Sonnino & Marsden 2006; Tregear 2011) and, importantly, doing so free of prior assumptions about what these are. Scholars have noted the fluid, shifting considerations and the coexistence of different considerations among AFN actors (Mount, 2012; Dubuisson-Quellier & Lamine 2008; Tregear 2011), thus opening the view that one type of consideration (such as economic) does not necessarily exclude another (Watts et al. 2005; Maye & Ilbery 2006; Andrée et al. 2010).

There is also growing acknowledgment of the realities of building and maintaining AFNs, and the role of necessity in AFN decision-making. For example, the hybridity of supply chains is understood as natural and necessary in many cases. Supermarkets or other large corporate sector actors may be 'obligatory points of passage' (Callon 1986) for some alternative food networks (Renting et al. 2003). Indeed, Kirwan (2004, 395) points to the ways in which alterity might be created despite for example foods traveling through conventional supply chains, for example through the fairness of Fair trade products or the alternative production philosophy of organic foods. Leyshon and Lee (2003, 193) argue that 'all economies are irreducibly material', and activities must meet certain economic requirements or they will be unsustainable (Watts et al. 2005; see also Andrée et al. 2010; Nost 2014).

Indeed, AFNs can be seen as existing squarely within the food system (Forssell & Lankoski 2016; Rosin and Campbell 2009); the economic 'is always embedded within a wider political, cultural and social framework' (Kirwan 2004, 396). As Mount (2012, 111) argues, 'engagement within an alternative food system does not exempt participants from the influences of wider systems and relationships that provide the context for [...] decision making and governance [...]' (see also Maxey 2006). Thus, established norms, understandings and expectations will guide what is possible also in the domain of AFNs. Consumers consider many different things even when engaging in AFNs, including price and convenience. Tensions may arise from the often-higher costs of for example small-scale food production and the possibly less consistent or comprehensive food supply of localised food systems (Jones et al. 2004). This is seen to be at least partly a result of the work by conventional food system actors to promote ideals of low cost, convenience and abundant choice of foods regardless of season (Mount 2012; Harvey et al. 2004; Dixon 2007; Maxey 2006). Thus, a preoccupation with the right motives and goals, and dismissal of those AFNs not considered having these (Tregear 2011), overlooks the fact that we cannot do things in a vacuum. Economic activity requires someone who 'buys it', with all meanings implied. Doing things differently is likely to entail some balancing of different considerations, further calling into question the possibility of being purely alternative or conventional.

On a broader level, there have been calls for examining AFNs in their context, 'considering the specific social, political and economic context in which these practices occur' (Wilson 2013) and seeing them as part of wider "political, cultural and historical processes' rather than as being static and independent of these (Jarosz 2008). Thus, there have been calls for going beyond the study of the internal features of AFNs, with more focus on their competitive relations with the conventional food system (Sonnino & Marsden 2006, see also Marsden & Franklin 2013) and calls for a stronger consideration of the consumer perspective (Goodman & DuPuis 2002; Goodman 2004; Tregear 2011; Wilson 2013; Lockie & Kitto 2000). Fonte (2013, 401) argues that 'more attention is needed to contradictions and conflicting choices inside the movement and the dominant system'.

Another angle to this is the unlikeliness of actors to merely adapt to expectations. Instead, they are likely to engage in shaping them (Sonnino & Marsden 2006). Thompson and Coskuner-Balli's (2007), for example, demonstrate this through their work on legitimacy-seeking and the promotion of new, different ideals in a Community Supported Agriculture scheme. This leads to questions of how we perceive of the wider significance of AFNs.

There have been calls for evaluating the actual potential of AFNs to bring about change in the food system, beyond individual case examinations (Renting et al. 2003). Contributions to the AFN literature are increasingly turning outward to focus on what the broader significance of AFNs is (Marsden & Franklin 2013). Two streams of thinking can be discerned in this. The first one relates to the argument that AFNs are too small and have a too limited share of the market to have any significant effect on the wider food system. This leads the focus of the discussion to the scaling up of AFNs; the practical logistics; the tensions between growth and alterity; and the maintenance of and the transformative potential and legitimacy of AFNs (Mount 2012; Beckie et al. 2012; Blay-Palmer et al. 2013; Nost 2014; DeLind 2011; Brunori et al. 2011).

The second view challenges the notion that AFNs' impact is only in direct relation to their size. Change is envisaged as happening not only through direct, quantitative growth (Brunori et al. 2011), but also through indirect mechanisms. For example, AFNs may send echoes through the food system in the form of growing consumer awareness (Cox et al. 2008; Allen et al. 2003) and modification of existing norms (Brunori et al. 2011). AFNs also send signals to other actors (Kirwan 2004), who, given the dynamism of the food sector, are quick to pick them up (Hendrickson and Heffernan 2002). The view of smaller actors having the potential to shape systems has been developed in sustainability transitions thinking. The sustainability transitions framework has been seen as a fruitful to the study of AFNs (Hinrichs 2014), and is also used in this study.

In sum, there are many calls in the literature for more open approaches toward viewing AFNs and for being less preoccupied with what AFNs should

ideally be, and more with what they are, why, and with what consequences. There are calls for acknowledging AFNs as diverse, inherently hybrid, inevitably relational to and influenced by the conventional food system (and vice versa). On this basis, the third theoretical perspective identified by Tregear (2011), the governance and networks perspective, appears fruitful for advancing understanding of AFNs' dynamics and potential to contribute to sustainability. In this perspective, the development of agri-food networks is explained as the result of interaction and negotiation among different actors and the development and adoption of competing codes of practice in their specific institutional environments, and where 'the job of the researcher is to explain why certain food systems exhibit particular behaviours and impacts, rather than assuming a priori that they should possess them' (Tregear 2011, 421). This study joins this stream in its theoretical framing. In the following section, I shed further light on the network and governance perspective. I describe the concept of networks, theories embracing the network view, including convention theory, which I use in this study, and the implications of the network view in understanding AFNs.

2.5 PERCEPTION OF AFNS (AND THE ENTIRE FOOD SYSTEM) AS INTERCONNECTED NETWORKS

The previous section outlined how AFNs can be seen as both shaped by, and themselves shaping the food system. These questions of power and agency relate to the frames that guide our view of food provisioning and the different influences on it. Concepts of food chains, networks or systems are used in the agri-food literature to depict the relationships and material and non-material flows between different actors who together enact the provisioning of food. With their distinct underlying theoretical perspectives, the concepts offer different perspectives to how we might view the potential of AFNs in driving change in the food system.

The concept of food chains derives from early work in the political economy tradition (eg. Friedland et al. 1981; Fine and Leopold 1993, cited in Jackson et al. 2006), which introduced conceptualisations of agri-food relations as commodity chains, moving the focus beyond agricultural production and onto the entire chain and the power relations governing it (Jackson et al. 2006; Ilbery & Maye 2006). This broad focus is seen as the strength and contribution of the approach (Raynolds 2004).

The commodity chain or food regime perspective, given its roots in the political economy tradition, has tended to emphasise the power of a few actors over other less powerful ones, presenting a structuralist, and, according to critics, somewhat simplistic view of food chain dynamics (Murdoch 2000; Jackson et al. 2006; Rosin & Campbell 2009). Criticisms

include its being too attached to the idea of large capitalist forces and social institutions dominating so that social change becomes something that actor practices cannot influence. This overlooks the 'importance of actors' cultural and knowledge negotiations in defining the meaning of food.' (Arce & Marsden 1993, 296.) There have been calls for new views of governance 'which identifies different sources, forms, and levels of control across the commodity chain' (Raynolds 2004, 727). Another criticism is that the role of consumption is played down in such analyses. The conceptual reorientation from 'commodity chains' to 'food supply chains' is founded on a greater focus on the role of consumption. (Raynolds 2004.) Food chains can be characterised as 'significant production, distribution and consumption nodes, and the connecting links between them, together with social, cultural and natural conditions involved in commodity movements' (Hartwick 1998, 425, cited in Maye & Ilbery 2006).

Further, the calls for a less structuralist and more complex, nuanced understanding of the dynamics involved in food provisioning have been encapsulated in the concept of network, which highlights 'the complexity of social relations connecting multiple actors in dense webs of informational and material interdependence' (Raynolds 2002, 407). It avoids a one-way conceptualisation of production, distribution and consumption 'as a linear sequence of economic activities' (Raynolds 2004, 728). The network concept has been advanced by, for example, Arce and Marsden (1993) and Raynolds (2002; 2004) as a way of showing how actors shape and are shaped by their political, cultural and social environment (Jackson et al. 2006; Granovetter 1985), rather than seeing market activities as purely economic (Raynolds 2004, citing Polanyi 1957). It also highlights the potentially important role of consumers, as well as economic and political actors such as policy makers and NGOs, in 'shaping meanings and practices across agro-food networks' (Raynolds 2004, 727).

Theoretically, the network view has been influenced by actor-network theory (ANT) (Raynolds 2004), which has called for consideration of the role of all participants to the networks, including non-human actants (the environment, the products) (Maye & Ilbery 2006) and for a stronger consumer perspective (Lockie & Kitto 2000). ANT emphasises 'hybridity, the decentred nature of agency, and the deconstruction of the "powerful" into multiple sets of contingent relations' Murdoch 2000, 410; see also Whatmore & Thorne 1997).

However, despite the promise of the ANT approach, scholars have voiced the criticism that ANT studies tend to ultimately focus on the same powerful actors as the political economy approach, leaving unfulfilled the promise of considering the complexity of materials and actors involved (Lockie & Kitto 2000; Murdoch 2000).

Beyond the ANT perspective, scholars have suggested increased attention to the governance of networks, understood 'as the relations through which key actors create, maintain, and potentially transform network activities'

(Raynolds 2004, 728). As part of this, there is the consideration of what ideas and practices are engaged in food networks, which introduces a more political view into the analysis of food networks (Raynolds 2004). Food networks and systems can be seen as formed by ‘the interactions between different actors as well as the ideas that are shaped about "what is a “good” economy (and) a “good” life" DuPuis & Gillon 2009, 45), and these ideas are continuously negotiated (Raynolds 2004). There have been calls for an analysis of ‘competing constellations of knowledge and power and their relational enactment in the construction and potential transformation of networks activities’ (Raynolds 2002, 408). A prominent theoretical approach used in the analysis of these interactions in the agri-food system is convention theory, which is also the main theoretical framework in this study. As Ponte (2016, 14) also observes, convention theory provides an alternative view to the political economy approaches to the study AFNs, which have tended to see the conventional system as necessarily one way and AFNs as necessarily another way. In convention theory, ‘interests are neither permanent nor linked ex-ante to specific social groups.’

The wider concept of food systems can be seen as related to the network approach. While a loosely used term, it indicates the larger whole formed by different networks and individual nodes within them (Stroink & Nelson 2013; see also Eakin et al. 2016). More specifically, food systems have been conceptualised as complex adaptive systems, with dense interactions among the different elements within them and with other systems. Thus, AFNs are nested within other ‘ecological, social and financial systems, and to some degree the dominant food system’, and the alternative and conventional food systems are seen to co-evolve. (Stroink & Nelson 2013, 622.) The advantages of the systems lens are seen to link to an understanding of the complexity and heterogeneity in food provisioning and its outcomes as well as the interactions between different parts of the whole (Eakin et al. 2016), with different parts affecting each other. The concept of systems is also in line with the sustainability transitions framework used in this study, with its focus on changes in socio-technical systems.

In this thesis, the network and systems concepts inform the perspective taken to the position and possibilities of AFNs. These encourage the consideration of AFNs as networks that interact among all their nodes, operating within a wider web of influences, including those from the conventional system, and offer an interesting perspective on the role of alternative food system actors in shaping the overall system. The alternative and the conventional are seen to co-evolve - thus, doing things differently is not easy, but the dominant system is subject to pressures from the trends to which alternative systems respond and also takes cues from alternative systems.

The network and governance perspectives offer a view of the conventional system as less stable and all-powerful, viewing it rather as being subject to constant maintenance and negotiation. Thus, views are opened to the

possibilities and the spaces of resistance opening up (Whatmore & Thorne 1997). The view of food system change becomes less about countering absolute power with more power. In other words, AFNs might have a greater influence than their size and share of the market would indicate. More subtle factors such as information are seen to play a critical role in shaping networks (Raynolds 2004, citing Castells 1996). The 'breakdown of consensus' about the merits of the conventional system creates space and possibilities for AFNs (Hendrickson & Heffernan 2002, 348).

2.6 ALTERNATIVE FOOD RETAILERS AS KEY AFN ACTORS

In this thesis, I have chosen to empirically examine a specific type of AFN actor – alternative food retailers; that is, independent, specialist food retailers focusing on local or organic foods, or both. There were many reasons for this particular choice. Despite being a common type of alternative food network actor, retailers of this kind have been relatively little studied (Ilbery & Maye, 2006). Yet, intermediaries such as retailers may hold a significant potential for the development of alternative food networks. They provide a space in which small producers can get their products sold to consumers, bypassing large retailers (which are seen as a problematic sales channel for small producers, see e.g., Parrott et al. 2002; Hendrickson & Heffernan 2002) but without having to engage in labour-intensive direct selling, for example attending a farmers' market (Jarosz 2008; Kirwan 2004); while offering consumers a convenient alternative shopping channel.

The position of retailers at the interface of production and consumption makes them interesting to this study, due to their important role in guiding consumer decisions (Johnston & Szabo 2011; Gjerris et al. 2016). The role of retailers in driving change has also been noted in the literature on sustainability transitions by, for example, Oosterveer and Spaargaren (2012), who note that retailers act as the 'consumption junction' between producers and consumers and may direct consumer choices significantly through their actions.

Finally, one advantage with studying retailers is the perspective it offers on consumers in AFNs, as retailers are directly exposed to consumer demands. Despite calls to consider the entire network in AFN studies, the consumer perspective has remained weak (e.g. Tregear 2011). Studying how retailers position themselves in the market, what ideals and practices they emphasize and what aspects of their operations they have to justify, offers clues about consumer attitudes. The insights this perspective gives about consumers are indirect; however, they do reflect retailers' long term, day-to-day engagement with consumers and may provide viewpoints consumers

would not necessarily express when asked directly (Forssell & Lankoski 2016). Further, the focus on alternative food retailers is interesting for understanding hybridity. They are arguably a more commercial type of AFN, and likely also to attract consumers who are less wedded to alternative ideals. Thus, they are positioned at the borderlands of the alternative and the conventional domains.

The empirical focus of this study is on two Northern European countries, Finland and the United Kingdom. A crucial point to note about these countries is that the food system is challenging for small, independent retailers. Both countries have a concentrated retail sector, specialty retail is marginal, and the supermarket mode of food shopping dominates. In the UK, the four largest retailers controlled 72.3 per cent of the food and groceries market as of June 2015 (Statista 2015). In Finland, the concentration is even greater: the two largest retailers controlled 78.8 per cent of the market in 2014 (Finnish Grocery Trade Association 2015). Independent retailers' popularity and significance is growing, however, at least in the UK, as consumers look for alternatives to supermarkets (e.g., Andrew 2014; Soil Association 2015). Another similarity is the food culture in these countries: both are Northern European countries with a somewhat similar food culture and notions of food quality (see Sonnino and Marsden 2006).

Consumers and policy-makers in both countries are enthusiastic about local and organic foods. In Finland for example a survey conducted by the The Finnish Innovation Fund indicated that 64% of Finns hope for a greater supply of local and organic foods from Finnish producers in the future (Hellström 2011). The topic has been strikingly prominent in the media, as well as featuring on the political agenda.

3 THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

In this thesis, I have sought to use theories that encourage a holistic network perspective, rather than seeing individual AFNs as operating in isolation, individually determining their practices and only affecting the system in proportion to their direct share of it. Convention theory helps to frame the plurality of possible considerations in AFNs. It also helps to frame how AFN actors navigate among the different pressures encountered in trying to do things differently from the ways of the conventional food system. The sustainability transitions framework allows for an assessment of the potential role of small actors such as AFNs in driving change in the food system. In this chapter, I will introduce these theories as well as outlining the complex concept of sustainability in the food system.

3.1 SUSTAINABILITY IN THE FOOD SYSTEM

The concept of sustainability has seen many definitions and redefinitions (Robinson 2004). However, common to many conceptualizations of sustainability is that they ‘coalesce specifically around the concepts of carrying capacity, futurity, and environmental and socioeconomic long-term quality of life’ (Starik & Kanashiro 2013, 12). Sustainability is typically seen have three dimensions: economic, social and environmental sustainability, which, crucially, must be balanced (e.g., Allen et al. 1991, cited in Hassanein 2003; Maxey 2006, 2007).

Two broad approaches to the study of sustainability, also applicable to food systems, are what can be described as systems- and actor-oriented approaches. While there is some overlap between the approaches, the systems approach is more oriented toward the interactions of different parts of social-ecological (e.g. Ostrom 2009; Ericksen 2008) or socio-technical (e.g. Geels 2004) systems. The systems perspective is holistic and helps to identify the critical factors in different sustainability outcomes (Ericksen 2008). The systems approach can also be characterised as retrospective in its approach, while actor-oriented approaches analyse social conditions and causes of non-sustainability and aim ‘to assist in the development of strategies that enhance the agency of key actors to move in a more sustainable direction’ (Becker et al. 1999, 7). The actor-oriented perspective, also adopted in the empirical part of this study, is thus more focused on actor interests, characteristics, meanings, values, culture, discourses, behaviours and relationships in relation to sustainability, thus bringing in the

perspective of human agency alongside structural factors (Becker et al. 1999; Bury 2008). One of its advantages, relevant to this study, is that it allows for a more complex, rather than essentialist, understanding of actors themselves (Bury 2008).

A debatable point is what exactly a sustainable food system would look like (Hassanein 2003; Ilbery & Maye 2005a; Maxey 2007). Balancing the environmental, social and economic aspects of sustainability may be difficult (Hassanein 2003; Robinson 2004; Ilbery & Maye 2005a) and those involved in defining what a sustainable food system would be like may have mutually different interests (Redclift 2002) and privilege different things (Robinson 2004). Thus, sustainability is a negotiated concept, constructed as actors in the food system express, defend and lobby for their positions on the matter. Science may not bring about consensus on the matter, as there is scientific uncertainty over many issues (Hassanein 2003). There have also been calls for more practice-based, experiential knowledge of what is sustainable in a given place and environment (e.g. Fazey et al. 2006). Maxey (2007, 58) argues that viewing sustainability as a 'given entity which can be measured against a predetermined checklist' is, accordingly, problematic. Considering these concerns, many have argued for a more processual, inclusive and democratic approach to defining and addressing sustainability (Hassanein 2003; Robinson 2004; Kemp & Martens 2007; Maxey 2007), combining expert and lay understanding (Robinson 2004; Hassanein 2003).

Thus, sustainability is a contested concept; priorities, ideas of what is sustainable, and what are considered to be the best means of reaching specific sustainability goals, vary. In the literature, different streams and disciplinary approaches emphasise and prioritise different things. Recently, Eakin et al. (2016) have broken new ground by identifying consensus over certain guiding principles of sustainability over six different streams of food systems sustainability literature. The streams or approaches they analysed include agroecology, individual food security or nutrition, and community food security or local food systems approaches. The principles, identified across these streams, are: diversity, modularity (connectivity, self-reliance, and control), transparency, innovation and congruence ('fit' or alignment among resource institutions and local conditions).

Beyond these more abstract principles, there appears to be broad agreement about the practical issues to be addressed across mainstream 'corporate social responsibility' approaches, grassroots organisation views and government statements. Economic issues include the incomes and livelihoods of producers and others involved in the network, employment, and local economic development, particularly in rural areas. Social issues include labour rights and the safety of workers, consumer health, food culture, and the accessibility, availability and affordability of nutritious food (food security). Environmental impacts of food production, processing, packaging, distribution and consumption, in turn, have to do with the use of resources and with pollution and damage to the soil, water and air (including

greenhouse gas emissions), biodiversity and ecosystems, and animal welfare. (Yakovleva 2007; Maloni & Brown 2006; Forsman-Hugg et al. 2013; Sustainable Development Commission 2005; SUSTAIN 2002.)

3.2 CONVENTION THEORY

In this study, convention theory (CT) offers an open approach to studying AFNs, moving away from a binary of alternative versus conventional and the notion of actors having fixed dispositions, based on individual values and goals. It enables identification of the tensions and agreements in the food system that may guide action. Further, CT is in line with the network conceptualisation of relations in agri-food systems and allows for an examination of the constructive, active role of AFN actors.

Convention theory is an economic sociological approach to examining social behaviour and economic exchange. In line with the economic sociological perspective, which emphasises the socially structured and culturally guided nature of markets (e.g. Swedberg 1991), CT sees economic exchange as a form of social interaction. Convention theorists are interested in how economic coordination happens, given uncertainty and the plurality of possible aims and ideals among the actors involved. They examine the underlying systems of negotiation that drive economic coordination. (Boltanski & Thévenot 1991/2006; Murdoch et al. 2000; Biggart & Beamish 2003.)

Convention theory emerged in the 1970s and was developed by French sociologists and economists including Luc Boltanski, Laurent Thévenot, Alain Desrosières, Francois Eymard-Duvernay, Olivier Favereau and Robert Salais (Dosse 1999; Diaz-Bone & Salais 2011). It stemmed from a dissatisfaction with the two prevalent explanations of social and economic activity and coordination: one assuming situations of certainty and entirely rational, individual actors; the other assuming social structures as determinants of action (the Bourdieusian and Marxist approaches) (Boltanski & Thevenot 1991/2006; Benatouil 1999; Rosin and Campbell 2009; Diaz-Bone 2011). Convention theorists sought a middle way between the two existing approaches to explaining economic and social behaviour, seeing it as emerging through active, constructive negotiation between competent, strategically thinking actors who draw on a plurality of possible considerations to coordinate their way forward (eg. Biggart & Beamish 2003; Rosin & Campbell 2009; Diaz-Bone 2011). Thus, CT challenges many views in standard economic and sociological theory.

3.2.1 KEY FEATURES OF CONVENTION THEORY

CT is characterised as representing pragmatist sociology. Diaz-Bone (2011) lists, among others, the following features as characterising the pragmatist methodological position: dynamical world view, with the world in constant change; radical pluralism, with the world structured through an existing plurality of principles; viability, with actors trying to adapt to their environments; and permanent fitting and testing. This position is visible in many of the characteristic features of CT, which I will outline below.

Away from individualism and structuralism

In CT, actors are not seen as solely 'rational', acting in isolation from a predetermined position. CT represents a move away from methodological individualism (i.e., the view that 'there are only individuals, their aims and decisions as explaining principles [for action]' (Diaz-Bone 2011, 50) and instead toward a recognition of the part that collective rules and institutions play in individual rationality (Wilkinson 1997). However, actors are not seen as powerless individuals at the mercy of social structures (Diaz-Bone 2011; Jagd 2011; Biggart & Beamish 2003). Rather, they are seen as competent individuals holding strategic positions and negotiating among these (Rosin & Campbell 2009). Actions are chosen based on an evaluation of what will be acceptable and in line with the expectations of others (Thévenot 2002); 'likely to result in fiscal and social gain' (Biggart & Beamish 2003, 444). This brings a social, relational view to how actions are chosen without losing sight of the certain self-interest involved in any action. Economic actors are seen as both shaped by and themselves strategically shaping the shared understandings that drive social and economic exchange to ensure their interests (Raynolds 2002; Rosin & Campbell 2009). As Jagd (2011, 345) writes, 'the social world does not appear as a place of domination suffered passively and unconsciously, but more like a space intersected by a multitude of disputes, critiques, disagreements and attempts to produce [...] agreements'.

In terms of the level of examination, then, CT is representative of 'attempts to create middle-range economic theories in sociology'; a meso-level, rather than micro- or macro-level, approach (Biggart & Beamish 2003). It may study individual actors, but locates them in their relations to others in a given situation, aiming at 'explanations located in the negotiated interchange [among actors]' (Rosin & Campbell 2009, 36). It is compatible with the perspective taken in this study, of the retailer as embedded within a network of suppliers, customers and other stakeholders, and navigating in these networks and the constraints or incentives they pose.

Plural considerations and ambiguity instead of 'rationality'

CT posits that economic exchange is encased in ambiguity and complexity. Convention theorists see uncertainty, and lack of complete information about what is being exchanged, as inherent to, rather than anomalies of, market exchange and all social interaction (Rosin 2007). Thus, situations are considered more complex than those assumed in economic models centred on the idea of rational actors. Related to this, CT addresses what its developers perceived as the narrowness of traditional economic analysis, by introducing the idea of plural justifiable considerations in economic coordination rather than narrowly economic considerations (Boltanski & Thévenot 1991/2006; Wilkinson 1997; Thévenot 2002; Kirwan 2006). A single universal principle, such as market coordination, does not necessarily apply (Thévenot 2002).

The notion of quality troubles the idea of regulation by price (Sylvander 1995, cited in Renard 2003). The idea that there are different evaluations of quality is one of the key ideas in CT (Renard 2003), and has been central to applications of CT in agri-food studies (see below). If price alone cannot evaluate quality, other quality conventions must be adopted for economic coordination (Eymard-Duvernay 1989, cited in Ponte 2016).

Focus on situations rather than permanent positions

Further on the point of plural considerations, convention theory sees actors as navigating among these in a fluid, strategic manner. It challenges the notion of fixed dispositions, i.e., of actors acting out 'by means of a programme inscribed in people in advance [...] no matter what situation is confronted' (Boltanski & Thévenot (2006, 216). In fact, people must move from one set of justifications to another according to the requirements of the situation, in order to meet the requirements of the situation at hand and the orders of worth that are appropriate to it (Boltanski & Thévenot 1991/2006; Thévenot 2002; Murdoch & Miele 1999; Wilkinson 1997), even 'on the same day and in the same social space' (Jagd 2011, 346). CT, then, examines actions as justifiable in a given situation rather than 'as the consequence of [...] given interests (Wilkinson 1997, 318). It avoids allocating ownership of the principles to specific persons or groups, 'pinning down persons in a single form of worth' (Boltanski & Thévenot 2006, 215), thus departing from the typical sociological focus on social classes and groups (Wilkinson 1997; Diaz-Bone 2011).

Shaping

The developers of CT disagreed with the view of individuals' agency in the prevailing economic theories; either rational individualistic actors, or actors under the power of social structures, with little agency. CT, rather, considers

actors as capable of reforming social structures by strategically challenging the conventions affecting them (Boltanski & Thévenot 1996/2006; Wilkinson 1997; Raynolds 2002; Rosin 2008; Rosin and Campbell 2009). Actors are seen as “both shaped by and themselves shaping [...] shared understandings” (Raynolds, 2002, 409), driven by vested interests (Patriotta et al. 2011). Harmonious arrangements of people and objects are always ‘up for grabs’ (Patriotta et al. 2011, 1806).

Conventions are seen as the product of strategic negotiations and public debate among competent actors (Rosin & Campbell 2009; Patriotta et al. 2011), through collective enrolment in particular conventions (Raynolds 2002). New social norms may thus be created through negotiation. This negotiation is continuous, making the prevailing agreements in a field always unstable (see also above in relation to political economy and actor-network approaches). (Patriotta et al. 2011.) Thus, powerful actors cannot simply dictate conventions, but must secure the collaboration of other actors (Rosin 2007).

Overall, CT links to a more general return within sociology to questions of the normative dimensions of social life in ordinary, routine and practical ways (Ponte 2016). Notably for this study, CT can be seen as related to practice theory, which has been used in studies of sustainable consumption and sustainability transitions (Evans 2011). Practice theory has similarities in its approach, turning its focus ‘away from discretionary individual actions and toward “blocks” or “patterns” of actions’ (McMeekin & Southerton 2012) as its unit of analysis, its interest in shared behavioural routines, and its view of actors as ‘knowledgeable and capable agents who [draw] upon sets of virtual rules and resources’ (Spaargaren 2011, 815). Evans (2011, 110) sees CT as a useful complement to the social practices approach, as it ‘provides a useful way of considering the cultural conventions through which practices are contextualised and either reproduced or changed’.

3.2.2 CONVENTIONS AND THEIR ROLE – PLANNING, EVALUATING, JUSTIFYING

What, then, are these 'conventions' in convention theory? Conventions have been described as shared understandings, agreements and practices, reflecting what people consider to be normal and right (Biggart & Beamish, 2003). Conventions also incorporate common systems of evaluation (Renard 2003), commonly recognised meanings and standards (Rosin & Campbell 2009), and systems of reciprocal expectations about the behaviour of others (Ponte 2016, citing Salais 1989). They function as guides or shared templates to plan action, and to evaluate and justify the appropriateness of actions (Biggart & Beamish 2003; Ponte 2016). They are a shared social, cultural,

and cognitive resource, a common knowledge for all members of society (Diaz-Bone 2011, citing Dupuy 1989).

Conventions allow actors to make sense of situations (Nyberg & Wright 2013) and guide their action (Ponte & Gibbon 2005; Biggart & Beamish 2003). Conventions act as heuristics: they are described as practices, routines (Salais & Storper 1992; Biggart & Beamish 2003), or implicit, taken-for-granted templates for interpreting situations and planning action (Biggart & Beamish 2003). This aspect of conventions can be seen as related to the concept of logic of action (eg. Bacharach et al.1996; Dequech 2008). Logics of action serve the internal purposes of making sense of situations and of reducing uncertainty but can also provide external rationalisation or legitimisation of actions (Shrivastava & Schneider 1984, Bacharach et al. 1996).

Adherence to conventions ‘allows people to move forward without actively calculating and defending each action’ (Biggart & Beamish, 2003, 244). Conventions bring predictability to situations by establishing expectations about behaviours, thus reducing uncertainty and facilitating the efficient operation of markets (Biggart & Beamish 2003; Rosin 2007, 2008; Rosin & Campbell 2009). Economic coordination is enabled by agreement upon and adherence to certain conventions (Thévenot 2002; Parrott et al. 2002).

Conventions are also tools for the external positioning of actors and legitimation of actions (Ponte & Gibbon 2005; Rosin 2007), ‘securing public support for positions of negotiation’ (Rosin 2007, 121). Actors may emphasise the alignment of their actions with those conventions that they estimate to meet with acceptance in a given situation, or they may appeal to such conventions to justify something that could otherwise be controversial or unacceptable (see Forssell & Lankoski 2016). I will expand on the notion of justification below, after first outlining the different ‘worlds of justification’ that actors may lean on navigating social interaction and economic exchange.

3.2.3 WORLDS OF JUSTIFICATION

CT posits actions are justifiable when they are linked to general, commonly accepted principles or notions of the ‘common good’; that is, what is desirable, right or good (Boltanski & Thévenot 1991; Thévenot 2002; Wilkinson 1997; Kirwan 2006). The convention theory literature often employs the term ‘worth’ to refer to this general notion of good.

Possibly the best-known frame in convention theory, by Boltanski and Thévenot (1991/2006), proposes six ‘worlds of justification’ (also called ‘orders of worth’), each representing a unique view of the common good. The worlds of justification are based on systematic expressions of the common good in various works of political philosophy, which Boltanski and Thévenot consider rigorously developed and argued treatises that mirror the ‘ordinary sense of justice which people implement in their disputes’ (Boltanski &

Thévenot 1999, 364; see also Wagner 1999). The worlds of justification can thus be considered frames that all members of society can easily deploy in navigating their everyday situations (Latour 1998). This claim has met with some suspicion (Latour 1998), but empirical work has demonstrated the usefulness of the framework for understanding actual justifications that actors use (Rosin 2008).

The worlds of justification outline how the notions of common good, the grand principles outlined in these political philosophies, concretely unfold in the real-life negotiation of conventions (Jagd 2011, citing Nachi 2006; Rosin 2007). The worlds provide 'a fully-fledged and coherent account of what humanity should be' (Latour 1998, 223), acting as 'grammars' (Boltanski & Thévenot 2006, 140) that actors draw on in choosing, evaluating and justifying actions. The worlds outline the 'relevant mode of evaluation of worth, the kind of test and the relevant kind of proof to evaluate the worth [and] the types of objects and human beings involved in these worlds [...]' (Patriotta et al. 2011). Despite the seemingly classificatory nature of the worlds, they are drawn on flexibly, even simultaneously (in keeping with the notion of plurality). Actors can engage with different worlds, all according to the situation, or even engage with several worlds simultaneously in the same situation (Boltanski & Thévenot 1991/2006; Nyberg & Wright 2013; Ponte 2016). For example, Parrott et al. (2002, 246) note that in economic coordination, market conventions are always present to some degree or 'nothing would be made or sold'.

The original six worlds elaborated by Boltanski and Thévenot consisted of the inspiration, domestic, renown, civic, market and industrial worlds (see Table 1). As later additions, they have outlined green (to account for conventions that place particular worth on nature), information and connectionist worlds (see Thévenot 2002). As Thévenot (2002) notes, this list is not necessarily final, and this is demonstrated in for example Kirwan's (2006) conceptualisation of a convention of regard in farmers' markets. In this study, I have focused on the six original worlds, and the green world of justification, given the sustainability focus ascribed to AFNs.

Boltanski and Thévenot (1991/2006) conceptualise the worlds of justification as frames that include:

- The higher common principle: the dominant ideal in that world, such as tradition and hierarchy in the domestic world, collectivity in the civic world, and efficiency in the industrial world
- States of worthiness: qualifiers or characterisations of beings that adhere to this principle. For example, states of worthiness in the domestic world include benevolent, well brought up, trustworthy; and in the industrial world, efficient, functional and reliable.
- Human dignity: the capacities in human nature that enable the enactment of the common principle. For example, good sense and

character in the domestic world, participation in the civic world, work in the industrial world.

- List of worthy subjects (people)
- List of objects and arrangements that are the 'trappings and mechanisms of worth' (Boltanski & Thévenot 2006, 142). For example, etiquette or titles in the domestic world; legislation and policies in the civic world, and methods, standards, and tools in the industrial world. Objects are the concrete manifestations of the underlying worth invoked, giving shape to the abstract philosophical notions underpinning the worlds.
- Natural relations among beings, often expressed as verbs (e.g., buying, electing, controlling)
- Tests and their related judgments and evidence. For example, in the industrial world, a trial or launch is a test, 'effective' or 'in working order' might be the judgement, and the result of a measurement is the evidence.

Table 1 *The worlds of justification (Boltanski & Thévenot 1991/2006; Thévenot et al. 2000)*

World of justification	Work of political philosophy	Higher common principle	State of worthiness	People	Objects	Tests
Domestic	Bossuet	Generation Hierarchy Tradition	Benevolent Well brought up Trustworthy Honest	Parent Ancestor Boss Leader	Good manners Etiquette Rank Title	Ceremonies Conversations The view of an authority
Civic	Rousseau (Contrat Social)	The collective	Representative of the collective Fair Legal Democratic	Collective persons and their representation Citizen	Rights Legislation Policy	Meetings Demonstrations for a cause
Market	Smith (The Wealth of Nations)	Competitiveness	Profitable Competitive Winner	Businessperson Client Buyer Seller	Desirable products Luxury items	The deal
Industrial	Saint-Simon	Efficiency	Efficient Functional Productive	Expert	Tool Method Standard Factor Variable	Trial Achievement The view of an expert
Green	-	Value of nature	Ecological			
Inspiration	Augustine's (City of God)	The outpouring of inspiration	Unusual Creative Spontaneous Emotional	Visionary Artist Child	Mind Dream	Lived experience
Renown	Hobbes (Leviathan)		Reputed Visible Persuasive	Celebrity Opinion leader	Brand Names in the media Interview	Presentation

Negotiation can thus occur with an array of possible legitimate stances. It is helpful to remember that all the worlds are equally political (rather than 'true'), even for example the industrial world with its emphasis on rationality, measurement and objectivity ('despite its impressive array of technological objects', Boltanski & Thévenot 1991/2006), or the market world, despite its reflecting the dominant discourse of our current era.

The green world of justification has been criticised as not being sufficiently distinct or developed. It has been seen as closely linked to the civic world, based on the view that the protection of the environment is protection of the general good of the collective of humans (Latour 1998; Parrott et al. 2002). Indeed, since the worlds have a common humanity at their core, they cannot address an entity like nature in any other than such an instrumental way (Latour 1998). In this study, I have however decided to include the green world in order to enable a more nuanced analysis that separates social and environmental sustainability issues.

3.2.4 NAVIGATING IN AND SHAPING A FIELD: STRATEGIC POSITIONING, JUSTIFICATION AND CRITIQUE

In the preceding subsections, I introduced the background and aims of convention theory, as well as the central framework within it, the worlds of justification. I will now turn to how convention theorists see negotiation happening. Different approaches identified are: positive claims and position statements (Thévenot et al. 2000), justification and criticisms.

Conventions, as outlined above, can function as guides for action and help actors to position themselves externally. Actors may emphasize their actions' alignment with conventions estimated as acceptable in a given situation, thus indicating an area of agreement in that situation. In what Boltanski and Thévenot (1991/2006) call 'a situation that holds together', it is sufficient to demonstrate alignment with the relevant notions of worth.

Beyond these situations of agreement, so-called natural situations (Boltanski & Thévenot 1991/2006), there is particular interest in CT in situations of real or potential disagreement, where actions must be legitimized. The demand of justification is necessarily linked to the possibility of criticism (Boltanski & Thévenot 1991/2006) and thus enables identification of tensions in a given domain (Raynolds 2002). Boltanski and Thévenot (1991/2006; 1999) use the notion of 'critical moment' to depict situations where a disagreement arises, there is a conflict or challenge to the coordination of activities, and justification is needed to establish a way forward (Nyberg & Wright 2013, citing Lamont & Thévenot 2000). These critical moments set in motion a series of criticisms and responding to criticisms, which together advance the situation.

Thévenot et al. (2000, 236) define justification as ‘an attempt to move beyond stating a particular or personal viewpoint toward proving that the statement is generalisable and relevant for a common good, showing why or how this general claim is legitimate’ (see also Boltanski & Thévenot 1991/2006; Patriotta et al. 2011). Justification thus links a situation of disagreement to a broader area of agreement (Forsell & Lankoski 2016). Justification must also involve more than mere talk. To be convincing, claims must be backed by engaging the objects and people present in the world of justification in question, that is, the material aspects of the world (Boltanski & Thévenot 1991/2006; Thévenot et al. 2000; Patriotta et al. 2011; Ponte 2016.) Focusing on material, stable constituents of a specific world, and not just the abstract ideals involved, allows people to better deal with uncertainty and reach a grounded agreement (Boltanski & Thévenot 1999). For example, in a situation where something is defended on scientific grounds (the industrial world), actors may draw on objects such as scientific studies.

How actors justify their actions in these situations, in turn, sheds light on the dominant notions of worth held by those actors and their networks (Boltanski & Thévenot 1991/2006; see also Evans 2011; Nyberg & Wright 2013). Given the plurality of legitimate notions of worth, the justification of an action may also require engaging with other proposed or possible notions of worth in the same situation (Patriotta et al. 2011).

Notably, actors do not just respond to criticism, but may criticise others, either directly, as part of justification, or as part of an active, strategic negotiation of their position, as an attempt to destabilise a prevailing agreement in a given domain. This suggests an opportunity for active influencing, and is an interesting point to consider regarding actors who are trying to negotiate an alternative way of doing things in their field.

Boltanski and Thévenot (1991/2006) propose two basic types of criticisms, and, correspondingly, responses to criticisms: those internal to the world of justification invoked, and those external to it. In internal criticisms, the notion of worth involved in the situation is accepted, but the fulfilment of the worth is questioned, perhaps by questioning the presence, adequacy or credibility of the objects or elements that would be necessary for it. Here, critics conduct what Boltanski and Thévenot call a reality test. In a situation of responding to criticism, the corresponding mechanism can be called clarification: agreeing in principle with the worth invoked by the criticism, but clarifying why the elements of the criticism are not valid. Reality tests and clarification thus deal with the fairness of situations (Nyberg & Wright 2013).

The second type of criticism, and response to criticism, denunciation, relates to the relevance of the test. It questions the notions of worth underlying it, subsequently invoking another world (Boltanski & Thévenot 1991/2006). This is a more radical form of criticism. This existential test challenges established order, questioning how we should evaluate the situation in the first place. (Nyberg & Wright 2013.) Additionally, actors may

solve the dispute through compromise, where elements from multiple worlds are balanced to reach an understanding (Boltanski & Thévenot 1999, 1991/2006), requiring people to 'recognise a plurality of goods' (Nyberg & Wright 2013, 406). Indeed, the existence of plural legitimate notions of worth often makes compromises necessary to resolve disputes (Diaz-Bone 2011; Barham 2003) and facilitate moving forward along an agreed-upon path. Compromise happens when criteria from different worlds are considered together in evaluating the situation (Wagner 1999) and people cooperate 'to keep present beings relevant in different worlds, without trying to clarify the principle upon which their agreement is grounded' (Boltanski & Thévenot 1999, 374). Thus, a course of action is created that satisfies tests within both the worlds being accommodated, such as being both environmentally friendly and good for business, in Nyberg and Wright's (2013) example.

3.2.5 CONVENTION THEORY IN AGRI-FOOD STUDIES

CT has been welcomed in agri-food studies as a useful framework, with the increased focus on specialised, rather than mass, production and rising interest in food quality (e.g., Reynolds 2002). It has been found useful for the examination of a sector with varying notions of quality. CT has been applied to examining the emergence of market niches based on new indicators of quality such as place of production, ethics and ecological production (e.g., Reynolds 2002; Barham 2002; Renard 2003; Parrott et al. 2002). It has also been used in the categorisation of agri-food company strategies (Murdoch & Miele 1999; 2004); in examination of the negotiation of quality conventions among food network actors (Ponte & Gibbon 2005; Kirwan 2006); and examination of consumer decision-making in relation to organic food (Andersen 2011) (for a review see Ponte 2016).

Typically, these studies have suggested that AFNs draw on different worlds of justification than actors in the conventional system in communicating what they stand for, differentiating from the industrial food system, and representing new notions of quality in food. They have associated the civic, green and domestic worlds of justification with the alternative domain and the market and industrial worlds with the conventional domain (see Rosin and Campbell 2009; Ponte 2016). AFNs are seen to challenge the predominant conventions in the food sector and create different expectations, based on different conventions (Rosin 2007).

Table 2 *Worlds of justification in the agri-food literature (adapted from Forssell & Lankoski 2016)*

World of justification	Notions of worth (drawing on Boltanski & Thévenot 1991/2006; Thévenot et al., 2000)	Interpretations in agri-food literature (Rosin & Campbell, 2009; Murdoch et al., 2000; Renard, 2003; Ponte & Gibbon, 2005)
Domestic	Importance of relationships Tradition Trustworthiness Honesty Continuity The rejection of selfishness Not taking advantage of the weak	Face-to-face contact Trust, long-term relationships Brands (as builder of trust) Geographical indications Small scale
Civic	Social movement Solidarity Justice Principles, rejecting the dilution of principles	Healthiness of foods Fair Trade
Market	Opportunism Self-interest, profit, doing business Success, challenging oneself Competitiveness	Coordination by price
Industrial	Scientific methods Technology Productivity Professionalism, reliability Work, achievement Control Standardisation	Standardised products Third-party certification
Green	Value of nature	Ecological production
Inspiration	Emotions, passion, enthusiasm Spontaneity, creativity Rejection of habits, norms Independence Risk, adventure	Creativity
Renown	Recognition, visibility Reputation	Third party endorsement

The emphasis on domestic world considerations, linking quality also to more moral, considerate relationship with food producers echoes the perception of greater social embeddedness in AFNs. Kirwan's (2006) idea of the convention of regard, which has been seen as closely resembling domestic conventions (Ponte 2016) is an example of this.

Rosin and Campbell (2009), however, criticize the tendency to conceptualise the alternative and conventional food systems in such separate ways, overlooking the possibility of more diverse notions of worth at play in both domains, and perpetuating the binary view of AFNs and the conventional food system. They also observe that analyses in agri-food studies tend to focus on a limited number of worlds of justification, typically overlooking the renown and inspiration worlds, which may equally be significant (see also Ponte 2016).

CT, however, can offer precisely the tools to transcend this binary view and explore the diversity and hybridity of the sector. As Ponte (2016, 19-20) suggests in his review of CT studies within the agri-food field, one emerging new direction is acknowledging actors' engagement with multiple worlds, demonstrating a 'plurality of moral orders', demonstrated by, for example, Murdoch and Miele (2004) and Rosin and Campbell (2009).

Another gap identified by Ponte (*ibid.*) is the lack of examination of 'critical moments'. Addressing this gap, as I demonstrate in this study, can bring new understanding of both of the tensions and agreements in the domain of AFNs, and the construction of conventions in the agri-food system. Indeed, the question of how AFN actors act to change shared understandings of worth in the food system has received limited attention. The perspective has been that alternative agri-food products and networks can appeal to consumers who ascribe to the domestic, green and civic worlds of justification (Raynolds 2002). However, this is a static view. We may also ask, how do consumers come to ascribe to these worlds, since these 'conventions are not innate, but continuously negotiated' (Nost 2014, 154). The possibility of shaping shared understandings of worth in the food system links to questions of wider food system change, which can be usefully examined with the frames provided in the sustainability transitions literature.

3.3 FOOD SYSTEM SUSTAINABILITY TRANSITIONS

The literature on sustainability transitions focuses on the enactment of changes in production and consumption patterns in a more sustainable direction. It offers a frame for considering a relevant question to this study, that is, how seemingly marginal actors, such as AFNs, might contribute to greater sustainability. Indeed, there have been many applications of sustainability transitions thinking to the study of AFNs (e.g. Wiskerke & van der Ploeg 2004; Brunori et al. 2011; Roep & Wiskerke 2012b; Kirwan et al. 2013; Crivits & Paredis 2013; Fonte 2013). Of particular interest for this study is how the negotiation of new shared rules and norms, as conceptualised in convention theory, might act as a driver of transitions.

The concept of sustainability transitions is used to describe longer term, fundamental, deep-structural changes, alterations in the configuration of systems of production and consumption, in a more sustainable direction (Geels 2011; Spaargaren et al. 2012). Two major streams of transitions thinking have been applied to the study of AFNs and food system change: the multi-level perspective (MLP) and the social practices approach. Increasingly, there are also attempts to combine these two approaches. (Hinrichs 2014.)

The multi-level perspective (MLP) on sustainability transitions sees transitions as outcomes of the interaction of socio-technical developments at niche, regime and landscape levels (Geels 2002). The landscape represents major, macro-level contextual trends while the regime is the structured complex of more 'established practices and associated rules that stabilise existing systems' (Geels 2011, 26). Niches are spaces in which actors develop and demonstrate new ways of doing things and influence others to adopt similar approaches (Brunori et al. 2011; Roep & Wiskerke 2012b) and in which there is typically 'the intention to alter or reform the regime and create space for more desirable practices' (Roep & Wiskerke 2012b, 207). The description by Smith (2006, 441) is illustrative in the context of this study: 'In these niches, potentially superior qualities are appreciated and valued (for example, higher environmental performance) even if the niche performs poorly in more conventional terms (for example price, convenience, speed)'. AFNs can be seen as a niche in MLP terms (Brunori et al. 2011; Roep & Wiskerke 2012b; Crivits & Paredis 2013).

Transitions are essentially shifts from one regime to another regime. Consequently, changes to the regime are the main focus in the MLP, with niches and landscape factors examined in relation to how they may affect the regime (Geels 2011, 26). Landscape factors may put pressures on the regimes, or the 'growing success and uptake of an innovative niche can also engender regime shift, by destabilizing regime logics and assumptions' (Hinrichs 2014, 148).

The social practices approach takes a different approach to transitions, moving away from thinking in terms of levels and toward a 'flat ontology' (Geels 2011) of practices. The perspective here is on changes to social practices, which Reckwitz 2002, 249) has defined as routinized behaviours consisting of several elements: 'forms of bodily activities, forms of mental activities, "things and their use", a background knowledge in the form of understanding, know-how, states of emotion and motivational knowledge'. In the social practices approach, the question is how the emergence and enactment of more sustainability-oriented food practices shift the 'rules and resources of a new regime-in-the-making' (Hinrichs 2014, 150, citing Spaargaren et al. 2012). Given its collective nature, changes in social practices can be seen as 'social innovations' (see Kirwan et al. 2013), as a complementary focus to technical innovation.

Although practices exist in all nodes of production-consumption networks (Spaargaren 2011), the social practices approach has tended to move the perspective more toward the area of sustainable consumption, which is seen as an important part of sustainability transitions (McMeekin & Southerton 2012; Fonte 2013). In this thesis, sustainable food consumption is also a key aspect as I examine intermediaries close to consumers in how they interact with consumer expectations, responding to them as well as seeking to shape them.

Finally, there are increasingly attempts to combine these main perspectives, acknowledging their ‘vertical and horizontal cross-connections’ (Hinrichs 2014,150). While, as Hinrichs (2014, 150) argues, there is ‘potential in a more horizontal and actor-centered view of transitions to sustainability’, social practices cannot be seen as entirely separate from the socio-technical regime; indeed, they are reproduced within it and under its influence (Spaargaren 2011; Hargreaves et al. 2013).

The social and human aspect is increasingly recognised as central to sustainability transitions, alongside technological and material aspects (Spaargaren et al. 2012; Geels 2004; Hinrichs 2014). According to Spaargaren et al. (2012), actors within a system have certain values, behaviours and motives, and changes to these drive transitions, constrained or enabled by structural forces. As part of the social and human aspect, the notion of shared ideals, rules and norms, that is, what is considered normal, desirable and right, cuts through the MLP as well as the social practices approach. Shared rules and norms are the foundation of the regimes that govern socio-technical systems. Geels (2004; 2011), for example, describes regimes as semi-coherent sets of rules, with cognitive routines and shared beliefs as examples of these regime rules, while Crivits and Paredis (2013, 6) see the concept of regimes as ‘a depiction of the dynamic stability of a contemporary dominant functioning within the interaction of societal domains, actors and rules’. In niches, on the other hand, ‘alternative norms, values and rules’ are articulated and institutionalised (Roep & Wiskerke 2012b, 207). Shifts in norms, rules, perceptions and practices are seen to drive change alongside shifts in technologies (Geels 2004; Brunori et al. 2011, Hinrichs 2014). In the social practices approach, social norms are also a central consideration as it deals with ‘recursive practices reproduced by knowledgeable and capable agents who are drawing upon sets of virtual rules and resources’ (Spaargaren 2011). Figure 1 illustrates the role of norms in sustainability transitions.

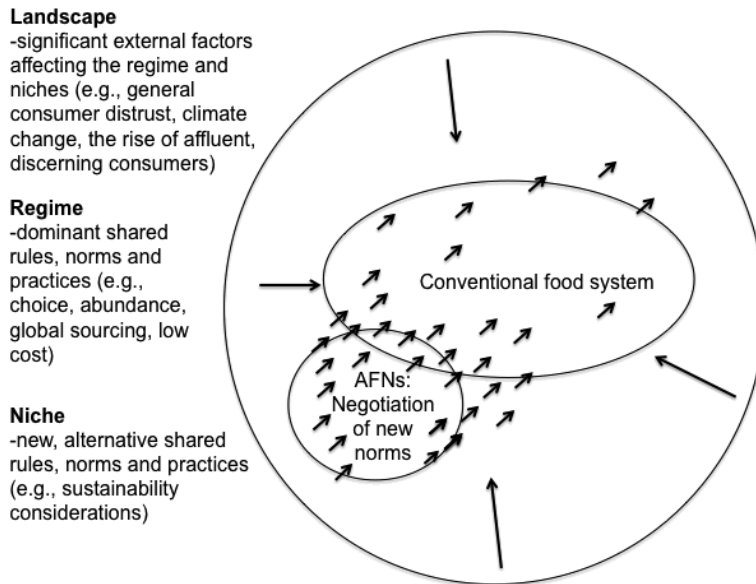


Figure 1 AFNs as a norm-shaping niche in food system sustainability transitions (drawing from Geels & Schot 2007, 401)

Frank Geels and colleagues have explored the role of norm-shaping work in transitions (Elzen et al. 2011, Geels & Verhees 2011), based on the insight that new technologies and ways of doing things need societal embedding, including cultural legitimacy (Geels & Verhees 2011). They also note that particularly in sustainability transitions, normative pressures may come from 'regime outsiders' or non-market actors, such as social movements, as sustainability-related issues are unlikely to be driven by private market interests (Elzen et al. 2011, 264). Thus, sustainability transitions are 'purposive' rather than 'emergent' (Geels 2011; Smith 2005). Drawing from cultural sociology and social movement theory, Geels and Verhees (2011, 912) examine the production of cultural legitimacy, arguing that it arises from the creation of linkages to the existing cultural framework". They build on the discursive view of how cultural legitimacy is built, but also on the 'interpretive' view, which they characterise as focusing on agency, with actors interpreting issues by drawing upon 'cognitive deep structures' or 'repertoires' and actively using 'symbols and categories for sensemaking'. They also point to the notion of plurality in interpretive approaches to culture, which see culture as a 'fragmented and (sometimes) contradictory

set of repertoires that actors can mobilize in different ways'. Elzen et al. (2011), in turn, draw partly on Goffman's (1974) concept of framing in explaining how regime outsiders may challenge normative orientations as part of driving sustainability transitions.

The notion of niche has fruitfully portrayed AFNs' role within the wider food system. AFN scholars have engaged with the sustainability transitions literature in making sense of the role AFNs might play in it. This has included various perspectives. Scholars have for example examined social innovation in niches, which includes attitudinal and behavioural changes (Kirwan 2013); the human aspects of path dependencies, or obstacles to change within the prevailing regime (Smith 2006); and how new social practices around food consumption are developed in AFNs (e.g. Fonte 2013, Crivits & Paredis 2013). Notably, the notion of AFNs as niches in transitions counters the notion of AFNs being unable to have any significant impact on the food system.

3.4 APPLYING THE THEORIES TO THE EXAMINATION OF ALTERNATIVE FOOD NETWORKS' SUSTAINABILITY PROMISE

This study takes as its point of departure the notion of AFNs as networks, convention theoretical notions of actors as both constrained by and shaping the conventions in their field, and the sustainability transitions approach that acknowledges the power of smaller actors in driving change as well as offering a frame for examining the socio-cultural aspects of change.

CT offers a useful theoretical frame for this study in many ways (see also Forssell & Lankoski 2016; 2017, manuscript). First, it offers a more nuanced view of the drivers of AFN practices. It rejects the position of methodological individualism, instead offering a relational, inter-actor view to how actions are chosen. This replaces notions of individualistic actors with good or bad dispositions, attributing all good things and, conversely, shortcomings to the intentions of the individual actor. Indeed, CT takes an agnostic view of the inner values or motives of actors (Dequech 2008), as called for in AFN research by Tregear (2011). Instead, CT helps to consider the exposure of AFN actors to the shared rules and norms strongly promoted by the conventional system, holding that actors are constrained to some extent by dominant conventions (Dosse 1999). This study moves from a preoccupation with actors' individual values and goals to a focus on what is possible to do. CT thus provides a different perspective on AFN practice and its sources (Forssell & Lankoski 2016), challenging expectations of purity in the domain of alternative food.

What is emphasised and what worlds of justification are drawn on by actors in the field of AFNs gives a picture of the expectations and notions of worth in the field; or what is considered, or thought to be considered, desirable, right and acceptable (Forssell & Lankoski 2016). Considering that the worlds are also guides for action, this also enables assessment of what courses of action might generally be taken in AFNs. Conversely, what is justified, or what the critical moments are, sheds light on the tensions in AFNs (Raynolds 2002), the areas where actors might meet with resistance. This may be fruitful for understanding what practices, and thus sustainability outcomes, can be expected from AFNs.

CT recognizes a plurality of legitimate ideals and logics (Boltanski & Thévenot 2006; Diaz-Bone 2011), helping to open up the binaries of alternative and conventional in terms of the notions of worth involved, advancing the emerging understanding of hybridity in the domain of AFN. With this idea of plurality, we can recognise other legitimate notions of worth at play in AFNs than just those typically linked them (ie. civic, domestic, green worlds of justification). Further, CT rejects the notion of actors operating with fixed 'scripts', focusing instead on how actors navigate different situations with different requirements. Thus, we can see AFN practice as fluid, situational, and evolving, rather than attributing characteristics to them in a finalistic, fixed way.

Finally, an interesting aspect of CT for this study is its examination of the constructive aspect of negotiations among economic actors, as they strategically pursue 'preferred relationships and rules of exchange' by drawing on shared rules and norms (Rosin and Campbell 2009, 37). CT posits that actors are endowed with the power to disseminate new shared norms and understandings through critique. Whatever the dominant conventions in a sector are, they are not 'innate and universal but are instead continually negotiated' (Nost 2014, 154), open to change because of the constructive, shaping aspect of negotiations among social actors (Forssell & Lankoski 2016). As Rosin and Campbell (2009, 46) suggest, 'CT offers [a] means of conceptualising change (contested, incremental, and potentially rapid) toward more sustainable practice in agri-food systems'. Importantly, in this study, I bring focus to what Boltanski and Thévenot (1991/2006) call critical moments, in order to examine on the one hand the navigation of tensions and agreements in the domain of AFNs, and on the other, the shaping of conventions in it. With these, I also bring a new contribution to the use of convention theory in the study of AFNs.

The sustainability transitions perspective provides a useful overall frame for an examination of the wider significance of AFNs in contributing to a more sustainable food system. Rather than taking a static view, with stable systems determined by the actions of powerful actors, transitions theory sees system-level change as an interplay of various forces, including grassroots-level negotiation of new norms and new ways of doing things. With the convention theory approach of this thesis, I focus on the socio-cultural and

normative aspects of transitions, using CT as a theoretical tool to examine how AFN actors might drive this as they negotiate their position in the food system.

The acknowledgement of the role of rules as deep structures ‘on which knowledgeable actors draw in their actions’ and that are both the ‘context and outcome of actions’ shows the connections of the MLP to neo-institutional theory (Geels 2011, 26). In my opinion, there is also a clear resonance in these ideas with convention theory. Also, the other socio-cultural and normative aspects of transitions theory, such as legitimacy, collective sense-making and shared moral understandings, link to convention theory. In this study, I use convention theory as a way to frame the shaping of norms within the niche of AFNs. I consequently propose a theoretical linkage that, to my knowledge, has not previously been made, despite the recognition of the value of a sociological approach to understanding transitions (Geels 2004; Geels & Verhees 2011; Elzen et al. 2011).

Figure 2 illustrates the relationship between the key theories, concepts, and the research questions in this study.

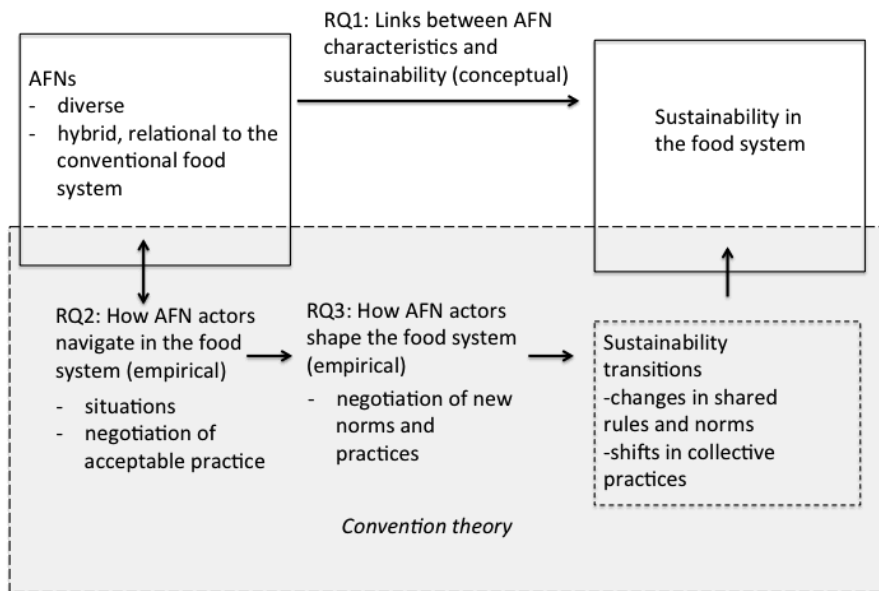


Figure 2 The theoretical framework of the study

4 RESEARCH DESIGN

This research contains both conceptual and empirical approaches. In this chapter, I outline the overall research approach as informed by calls in the AFN literature and by the theoretical framework of the study, followed by a description of the collection and analysis of the data, and ending with reflections on the methods used.

4.1 RESEARCH APPROACH

The first part of the study, article I, has features of a conceptual analysis and a review article. Rather than demonstrating the argument through collection and analysis of empirical data from the field, the argumentation is based on the intuitive and reflective process brought to the analysis or synthesis of what is already known. This consequently creates new frames for thinking about and understanding the phenomenon. (Kallio 2006.) The examination of AFNs' sustainability promise based on their alternative characteristics first analysed the component parts of the concept of AFNs and then synthesised earlier arguments of their sustainability in the literature in a structured framework.

For the parts of the study where I have collected and analysed empirical data, I adopted a qualitative research approach, in line with the convention theory perspective of the study. The negotiation and justification of conventions is performed through verbal expressions that require qualitative interpretation. The study is descriptive, seeking to provide nuance and increase understanding of the phenomenon.

For the empirical part, the choice of giving a certain theory a prominent role in the research calls for consideration of that theory in the selection of methods. Methodological choices should be aligned and compatible with the theoretical approach taken in the study. This is known as methodic holism: theory and methods form a coherent, integrated package (Diaz-Bone 2014, 2011). In this study, this is visible in considering situations, not individuals, as units of analysis, and the notion of public justification, that is, taking the stance that everything said or written is to some degree strategic in nature (see Rosin & Campbell 2009).

Underpinning research in the social sciences are fundamental assumptions about the nature of reality and knowledge. These assumptions guide the types of research questions asked and the methodology employed in answering them. Following the position of convention theorists, I adopt a

realist stance to reality and knowledge (Boltanski & Thévenot 1991/2006; Diaz-Bone 2011). Realism can be described as an understanding of ‘social phenomena existing in the human mind and in the objective world and that some lawful relationships exist between social phenomena. These phenomena, such as language, decisions and hierarchies exist objectively and influence human activities because people construe them in common ways’ (Miles & Huberman 1994). Miles and Huberman agree with interpretivists that knowledge is a social product and that so-called facts are laden with theory. Maxwell (2012) has been inspired by Miles and Huberman’s propositions and argues for a critical realistic approach to knowledge, that is, a combination of ontological objectivism or realism, and epistemological constructivism. In their work on conventions, Boltanski and Thevenot (1991/2006, 17) also take a realist stance, or what they call ‘dynamic realism’, which ‘seeks to bring the work of construction to light yet without reducing reality to a purely labile and local agreement about meaning’.

Following these notions in my study, I understand the nature of the social world as a reality, existing independently of the knower, although believing that people construe things differently. The realist approach also allows me to say something about practices and sustainability impacts in the real world. This position has implications for research design and methodology. For example, accounts given in interviews are considered to provide, besides a direct view of justification and negotiation, also information about what aspects of sustainability the interviewees focus on, what kind of practices there are, and so on. For the study of the retailers’ navigation in and shaping of the food system, there are elements that have to be fixed in reality for the inquiry to be meaningful, for example the practices of the retailers. Thus, if someone says they sell organic foods, I would take this as reality, perhaps checking in the shop that this is the case, rather than being just concerned with the self-identification of the respondent as someone selling organic food.

4.2 CASE STUDY

The approach in the empirical part of my study is a case study. Case study research is particularly suitable for holistically examining phenomena in its interaction with its context and for answering ‘how?’ and ‘why?’ questions (Yin 2014). It is ‘valuable for exploring and explaining processes, interaction and the dynamics of system evolution’, and is thus particularly suitable for the study of AFNs (Tregear 2011, 429). Case studies often draw on many sources of material (e.g., Eisenhardt 1989). Examining many sources of data related to the different retailers is helpful in gaining a rich picture of their

positioning and justification in different situations, thus making the case study approach particularly suitable.

To gain a rich picture of the retailers' navigation and norm-shaping work in the food system, I used a multiple case study research strategy (Stake 2006), covering altogether nine case companies. In an instrumental, multiple case study 'the main interest lies in investigating, elaborating and explaining a phenomenon, not the cases themselves' and 'mapping common patterns, mechanisms and properties in a chosen context for the purpose of developing, elaborating, or testing theory' (Eriksson & Kovalainen 2008). Thus, I looked for something specific in and across the cases, rather than focusing on the cases as a whole. In this case, I looked at instances of navigating in and shaping the conventions of the food system as the unit of analysis. The choice of the unit of analysis can be likened to a lens that focuses the investigation on a specific aspect, and defines and is informed by what general discussion the study intends to contribute to (Yin 2014). This focus is also reflected in how the findings of the study are presented.

The definition and selection of the type of cases that will enable an investigation of the research questions is another issue in case study research (see also below, on sampling). While AFNs are difficult to define (see e.g. Holloway et al. 2007), empirical examples of what AFNs are largely agreed upon, and retailers of the type I have studied are included in many conceptualisations. For this study, I chose to study retailers as they represent an arguably more commercial type of AFN, thus examining an actor on the borderlands between alternative and conventional. As stated in Forssell and Lankoski (2016), business enterprises are considered to be a particularly fruitful subject for CT studies as they face tensions between different orders of worth (Patriotta et al. 2011). In this case, there might be tensions between the sustainability-related expectations typically linked to the sector and the commercial considerations linked to running a business.

The empirical focus of this study is two Northern European countries, Finland and the United Kingdom. I chose to study retailers in these two countries to get a more comprehensive picture than just studying one small country. I chose these particular countries because of my familiarity with the country contexts, including an understanding of the food sector in these countries, and also so that language barriers would not be a problem in the research.

Within this context, I selected cases that together would give a rich and balanced picture of the alternative food retail phenomenon. According to Stake (2006), the cases in a multiple case study should be selected to provide diversity across contexts. This reflects the idea of theoretical replication (see e.g. Eisenhardt 1989), where cases are selected to reveal different aspects of the phenomenon. To select the cases for study, I made use of two main sampling strategies, operational construct sampling and heterogeneity sampling. Operational construct sampling (Patton, 2001, 239) means that 'one samples for study of real-world examples of the constructs one is

interested in'. The concept of the alternative food retailer is a somewhat tricky one (reflecting, perhaps, the unclarity of the entire AFN concept). I operationalised the concept 'alternative food retailer' as: independent retailers who are not part of large retail chains, and who focus on organic or local foods, or both, in their product selection. Usually, the retailers sold a range of products, usually a mixture of organic, local, speciality products and products from small producers.

Within the group thus identified, I employed heterogeneity sampling, selecting case retailers so that they represent variety in terms of the size, age, type and location of the business, to provide variation and richness. The common patterns emerging will then be 'of particular interest...in capturing the core experiences and central, shared dimensions of a phenomenon', deriving their significance from having emerged out of heterogeneity (Patton 2001, 235; see also Eisenhardt 1989). The inclusion of diverse businesses in the study also reduces the likelihood of findings being skewed. For example, older and more established retailers might have a different view to younger businesses on just how alternatively they can do things and still remain commercially viable.

I sought to introduce diversity to my sample in several ways. First of all, there is diversity in shop types. Five of the retailers selected had bricks and mortar shops, out of which one is a farm shop, with own products sold as well as other producers' products. Four retailers operated entirely or primarily via home deliveries of food and offered some type of fixed vegetable and fruit boxes as well as individual products. Of these four, two had own farm production, complemented by products from other producers. In terms of product selection, all of the retailers had a relatively complete selection of products, with fresh produce, dairy, bread, dry goods. Apart from one vegetarian shop, the retailers also sold meat or fish, or both. The companies were all privately owned and ranged in size from one-person businesses to companies with over 400 employees. The oldest businesses had been founded in the 1980s while the youngest business was only founded in 2013. Mostly, the retailers in Finland were younger and smaller, so including UK businesses in the sample enabled studying larger and older businesses. Businesses were also selected from both the capital or main urban regions and more rural or small town areas.

4.3 DATA COLLECTION

A convention theoretical study requires study data in which actors themselves express and explain their views and actions. The main body of data consists of communications content created by the retailers studied, varying from publicly available material on websites, including social media,

to marketing material. Particularly interesting for this study were websites and social media content, including blogs, Facebook, Twitter and Youtube. Consumers and companies increasingly interact through online and social media channels (Bos & Owen 2016) and they represent a channel through which AFNs can potentially extend their influence far beyond their immediate reach. Of those retailers having a social media presence (the majority), most appeared to have an active following. These data offered an efficient way of gaining oversight of the norm-shaping work of retailers, and is unaffected by the presence of the researcher. I collected material relevant to the research questions: any content with a normative or educational tone, commentary on actors in the conventional food system, on food policy and on consumer behaviour. Sometimes, content was reproduced across platforms, such as Facebook and Twitter, in which case data were collected from only one of these. Data from social media were collected up to mid-2015, dating back two to six years, depending on the volume of content. This type of data allowed direct examination the outward communication of the retailers, including the justifications employed by them. Additionally, the ubiquity of social media and other online channels has led to calls for additional research on virtual reconnection alongside the face-to-face reconnection emphasised in the AFN literature (Bos & Owen 2016).

A second data source was semi-structured interviews, conducted between February 2012 and September 2014. I interviewed the nine retailers, five in Finland and four in the UK. Interviews lasted between about 1 h 15 mins and 2 h 30 mins. The interview questions were designed to be quite open, to provide a loose framework for exploring the 'big picture' of the businesses, their reasons for being, their positioning in the field, their possibilities and challenges, and what the retailers expressed as being important to them. The interviews sometimes started with a tour of the shop, which provided an opportunity to ask questions about the products and get an overview of the business. I first asked the interviewees to describe the beginnings of the business, which often resulted in quite long and rich responses. The ensuing questions explored how respondents wish to develop their businesses, what they feel is going well and what could be improved. I also asked some questions about their operating environment. I particularly explored the more specific themes of product selection, sourcing and logistics in the interviews. I avoided explicitly guiding the discussion to alternativeness or sustainability, to avoid artificially pushing the responses in this direction. The topic of sustainability may invite people to exaggerate their commitment to it. If I had directly expressed that the study includes an interest in sustainability aspects, or that I'm studying alternative food retailers, this could have led to respondents focusing unduly on how they are different from conventional food retailers and emphasising sustainability aspects.

At the time of the first interviews, my research questions and theoretical frame were still in progress. However, having kept the interviews quite open, I felt I got a good understanding of what the retailers particularly emphasise

and justify in the running of their business. Indeed, not having the worlds of justification frame in my mind may have helped keep the interviews open. The interviews also provide contextual understanding for the analysis of the written materials.

There are a number of organisations studied, so some standardisation of data gathering is necessary, to allow for comparison (see Silverman 2005, 110). The semi-structured interview helps with this, as this involved asking a defined, if flexible, list of questions. The open-ended nature of my interview questions allowed for an exploration of complex thinking and practices.

Table 3 *Overview of the study data*

Data source	Description	From how many retailers	Total quantity
Websites	Selected contents from retailers' websites	8	219 pages
Facebook	Selected content from retailers' Facebook pages	8	112 pages
Blogs	Selected contents from retailers' blogs	3	70 pages
Twitter	Selected tweets from retailers	2	22 pages
Videos	Most popular Youtube videos from the retailers' Youtube channels	2	40 videos
Printed materials	Customer magazines from one retailer, brochures and booklets from one retailer; selected content	2	9 pages
Interviews	Transcripts of recorded interviews	9	186 pages

4.4 DATA ANALYSIS

Qualitative data analysis ‘is undertaken by means of a variety of procedures that facilitate working back and forth between data and ideas’ (Schwandt 2007, 6). For the first article, the data consisted of literature on AFNs and food system sustainability. The first step in the analysis was to tabulate conceptualisations of AFNs and to identify the characteristics of AFNs presented in them. The characteristics were then grouped into a framework (see Forssell & Lankoski 2015). The second step was to assess the potential sustainability impacts of the characteristics. This involved a long process of

listing out the potential benefits and drawbacks identified with the characteristics, drawing from a wide range of literature related to food system sustainability. These were summarised in a table (see Forssell & Lankoski 2015). The final step was to inductively develop a framework for assessing the overall sustainability promise of AFNs through contrasting these potential impacts with the criticisms voiced toward AFNs.

The analysis of the empirical data was theory-led qualitative content analysis. Qualitative content analysis is a form of qualitative data reduction, undertaken to ‘identify core consistencies and meanings’ (Patton 2002, 252). The aim is to find patterns or categories of data. In the theory-guided approach to analysing case study data, existing theory is used to guide the analysis while allowing new avenues of thought and new foci to emerge as the analysis proceeds (Timmermans & Tavory, 2012). In convention theory, the focus is on the justification of practices based on shared rules and norms, what actors ‘consider valuable or worthy and [...] how they go about expressing and implementing these criteria of worth [...]’ (Thevenot et al. 2000). The analytical framework was based on Boltanski and Thévenot’s (1991/2006) notion of justification (or negotiation), something that can appear as ‘positive “arguments”, claims, or position statements, or critical “denunciations” of opposing views’ (Thévenot et al. 2000, 237). The guiding questions in the analysis for article II were: i) what types of things the retailers emphasise as important in their activities ii) what practices or aspects are justified and iii) what kinds of ideals or notions of worth are deployed in these processes of positioning and justification; and for article III, i) what do the retailers communicate as being good and worthy? ii) what do the retailers criticise? and iii) of these criticisms, where is the criticism internal to the world of justification (reality test) and where is it external to the world of justification (denunciation)? The worlds of justification framework has generally been found intuitive, easy to get a feel for, and thus helpful as a frame for analysing empirical data (Cloutier & Langley 2007) and I also found this to be the case.

I analysed the data using both coding and categorising approaches, and holistic analysis of narrative passages. As Maxwell (2012) argues, ‘(by coding) we are much better able to look across a data set within single or multiple cases. But we may lose the contextual information that tells us how and why the pattern appeared specifically. We also run the risk of combining codes for analysis, when the context of the code would have told us that they are not in the same thematic or conceptual family’.

The coding process was iterative and gained more focus as my theoretical and conceptual framework sharpened. Codes evolved from the first ‘substantive’ or descriptive codes to more theoretical or interpretive codes (Maxwell 2012). Throughout the analysis, I documented the code development process, through memos explaining the rationale for codes and noting ideas and questions that arose in the process. I organised the coded material into themes within the frame of the worlds of justification and made

connections between practices and their justifications. I made use of within-case and cross-case data displays (Miles & Huberman 1994), built in Excel spreadsheets, to facilitate identifying key findings within and across the cases (Stake 2006). For the analysis in article II, the final data display consisted of one sheet for what is emphasised, and one for what is justified, listing the issues, their related justifications and worlds of justification. I also indicated which retailers' data had this content, to see the prevalence of the issue or justification. For the analysis in article III, I partially built on the analysis and codes already created for article II, and partly created new codes. I grouped the positive claims and criticisms in the data into approximately 20 subthemes, which I then further grouped into the four overarching ideals presented in the findings.

4.5 RESEARCH QUALITY AND ETHICS

There are several different perspectives on the evaluation of the quality of research, stemming from different paradigms of inquiry (Guba & Lincoln 1994) and related to the ontological and epistemological position taken on reality. In the positivist paradigm, the notion of a knowable reality guides inquiry and how it is evaluated, typically with criteria of reliability, validity, objectivity and generalisability of research (e.g., Miller 2008). Qualitative researchers representing other paradigms have proposed alternative views of quality in research (Seale 1999; Miller 2008.) For constructivists, the socially constructed nature of reality guides the views of how research might be evaluated in a very different direction from the positivist stance (Maxwell 2012). Indeed, constructivists have proposed quality criteria compatible with the notion that there is no 'reality' that research can be evaluated in relation to (Denzin & Lincoln 2005). Validity, for example, is determined instead by the resonance of research accounts with the communities studied (Miller 2008). An influential set of criteria for constructivist research, proposed by Lincoln and Guba (1985), comprises trustworthiness (credibility, transferability, dependability and confirmability) and authenticity (for instance, fairness, empowerment and stimulus to action). The criteria underpinning authenticity thus have parallels to the quality ideals in the critical research tradition, such as action for social change (Miller 2008), or fulfilment of political aims (see Seale 1999). While authenticity is more focused on the outcomes of research, Maxwell (2012) and Miller (2008) note that the criteria underpinning Lincoln and Guba's (1985) ideal of trustworthiness centre on prescribed procedures, such as member checks, prolonged engagement in the setting studied, and the audit trail. Taking a realist stance, (Maxwell 2012, 130) argues that validity should instead be approached as 'inherent, not in the procedures used to produce and validate

it, but in its relationship to those things that it is intended to be an account of and calls for considering validity as something to be assessed as unique to the study in question, with its aims and circumstances, rather than something to be gained through standard procedures.

The commitment to realism as outlined in 4.1 has guided my considerations of quality in undertaking this research. Maxwell (2012, 131) states that the challenge for realists in making validity claims relate to the recognition of our understandings as 'fallible constructions rather than "objective" perceptions or interpretations of actual phenomena', but he suggests that we can aim for an understanding of reality by approaching it from different angles, through assessing validity threats or potential alternative interpretations to the conclusions drawn. Thus, quality assessment centres on the conclusions drawn in a study, rather than on following set procedures in undertaking the research.

Maxwell (2012) proposes a set of research quality considerations compatible with the realist view, mirrored here against my study: descriptive validity, interpretive validity, theoretical validity and generalisability, particularly internal generalisability. Descriptive validity pertains to the question of accuracy of accounts, avoiding the distortion of things seen and heard. In this study, descriptive validity is strengthened by recording interviews. The retailers' public communications existed as ready texts and were analysed as they are. Of course, they were selectively collected from among a larger body of communications, for example, posts in social media, but this was necessary for efficiency and I have applied a consistent filter to the selection as outlined in section 4.3. Interpretive validity, in turn, concerns understanding the participant's perspective, or meanings, thoughts, beliefs and values, and their inference by the researcher, based on the participant's own accounts. In this study, I feel that this issue is sidestepped because of the agnostic view of the convention theoretical approach. For example, I do not claim retailers have certain values, rather I state they express these values.

Maxwell's (2012) notion of theoretical validity incorporates what has elsewhere been called construct validity and causal validity, and is concerned with the theoretical labels and explanations researchers give about what they observe. In this study I might ask, am I really looking at justification, or negotiation, or norm-shaping? Theoretical validity is, rather than being about 'facts', a matter of consensus about whether these are reasonable framings of the phenomenon. In this study, I have chosen a specific theoretical lens through which to look at the phenomenon. This has provided the theoretical vocabulary and tools (for example the framework of the worlds of justification), which I have found helpful in making sense of the data. Other theoretical perspectives could, of course, offer alternative or complementary views. Another question involves the appropriateness of the inductively developed explanatory categories (particularly in articles I and III), that is, do they credibly flow from the data (Seale 1999)? To address this,

my classification processes are made visible by elaborating on the categories and giving examples in the articles. Another question pertaining to the explanatory aspect of theoretical validity, related to article II, is whether what I'm claiming to be the objects of justification, really are the objects of justification? My explanations are largely grounded in the literature on AFNs. For example, studies on consumer values and motives in AFNs have suggested that consumers consider issues of price and convenience even when participating in AFNs (see review in 2.3). Additionally, the retailers themselves referred to these linkages, if rarely in such direct terms. For instance, some retailers noted that price is an issue that they must justify to customers. Article I and III do not have the same explanatory focus, so this aspect of theoretical validity is less relevant to them.

My last point refers to the aspect of generalisability, that is, how the things observed might 'differ from those that were not observed, either because of the sampling or because of the observation itself' (Maxwell 2012, 142). Here, I consider the central issues to be sampling, data saturation and interviews as a means of generating data. As regards sampling, section 4.2. discusses my attempts to consider 'the variation in the phenomena of interest within the setting' (ibid.)

Data saturation, which I also consider linked to generalisability, is a debated subject in qualitative research. Data saturation refers to the point at which enough cases and data are analysed to make significant new findings improbable (e.g., Glaser and Strauss 1967), and at which we can be reasonably certain that we have spotted the most important things. Many different views exist regarding the determination of data saturation (see Mason 2010). In my study, I have studied nine case companies, including some of the largest and most well-known and influential alternative food retailers in the countries studied. Stake (2006) suggests that as a general rule, four to ten cases is a suitable amount for a multiple case study, to provide enough insight of the interactions of cases and their context while remaining manageable. Through the use of heterogeneity sampling, I have sought to strengthen the identification of the most relevant, common themes in the sector. While the possibility of some further themes emerging with new data is always a possibility, and depends on the perception of the researcher, I believe that I have been able to capture the central ones given the theoretical framing and the questions in this paper. In the analysis, the key findings, such as retailers justifying doing things differently from the conventional food system, or retailers criticising conventional food system practices, were visible from the first cases analysed and became increasingly prominent as the analysis proceeded.

The aspect of generalisability linked to how observation itself may affect findings, relates in this study particularly to the data generated through interviews. Interviews as a data collection method have many limitations (Alvesson 2011). It is for example possible in interviews, which are a situation of social interaction (ibid.) that the interviewee quickly figures out what the

interviewer wants to hear and speaks accordingly; or emphasises certain things in order to be seen as 'a good person' (which is all the more likely when the topic matter touches on things like sustainability) (Forssell & Houtbeckers 2015). In this study, I have studied conventions, which can be observed directly. The retailers arguing their positions in the interviews with me, in itself a forum for negotiation, gives direct knowledge of the conventions engaged in that situation. Whatever the worth expressed in a given situation, it is not untrue. However, a question to be considered is whether the situation is a typical one; whether for example the positioning and justifications expressed in an interview reflect what the interviewees would typically express in other situations (see Alvesson 2011 for discussion about the localist perspective on interviews). However, my analysis primarily leaned on the retailers' written communications, which reflected their positioning, justification and negotiation of conventions vis á vis consumers, which has been the main aim of the inquiry. Additionally, the retailers often expressed similar things in the interviews and the written data. One exception to this, possibly stemming from the study setting, is when some of the retailers emphasised business considerations and an entrepreneurial mindset in the interviews. This could partly have been caused by the interview situation: the interviewer is affiliated with the Department of Economics and Management and uses the word 'business'. Finally, people are always speaking from a certain position, here as business owners who are probably used to telling their story to journalists and other stakeholders. I noticed in more than one case that the interviewees responded with the same stories that they have told in the media or in their website or social media communications. However, since I focus on public justification rather than inner values and motives, this is actually something that reinforces the findings.

Research ethics is also an important aspect to consider when conducting research. In this study, ethical issues to be considered related to participation and the use of online content. Firstly, participation in a research project should happen on the basis of informed consent, where the individual understands what the goal of the research is and what they are agreeing to do. Participants should have the option to ask questions about the project and understand that participation is voluntary and that they can withdraw from the study. Truly informed consent can be difficult to obtain in qualitative research as the research focus and even questions may change. (Eynon et al. 2009.)

I sought to ensure informed consent in many ways: outlining the purpose of the research when negotiating about participation, debriefing the interviewees on the research questions and process at the end of the interviews and, as the research questions evolved, contacting the retailers again with an updated description of the aims of the research.

The participants were promised anonymity and confidential treatment, and I have been careful to maintain both throughout the research. For

example, I have not described the case companies individually, nor have I used direct quotes from the publicly available materials in reporting on the findings of the study.

Secondly, the use of online content creates new research ethical questions, related to for instance copyright of literary works and the need to acknowledge sources. However, company websites, blogs and other social media content are intended as marketing materials rather than literary works, and analysis of these sources is acceptable for research (Kuula 2011).

5 FINDINGS

In this section, I will summarise the findings of the three research articles in this dissertation. The findings are described in more detail in the respective articles.

5.1 ALTERNATIVE CHARACTERISTICS AND SUSTAINABILITY

Article I (Forssell & Lankoski 2015) examined the sustainability promise of AFNs theoretically, through an investigation of alternative characteristics and how they might impact on sustainability, with what limitations. It had as its starting point the confusing and fragmented picture of AFNs' sustainability in the literature, and the aim was to clarify this picture. Based on a literature review, it examined how AFNs have been described in the literature, and based on this, identified and consolidated the key characteristics of AFNs. This was followed by examination of how the characteristics have been suggested to impact on sustainability; and analysis of the sustainability promise of AFNs through three angles: overall impacts, debates related to individual impacts, and realisation of the promise in real-life AFNs.

Through the analysis of AFN conceptualisations in the literature, it was possible to identify a set of key characteristics for AFNs. They were grouped into background, core and outcome characteristics. The background characteristics, that is, participants' purportedly alternative values and goals, were not included in the analysis of sustainability linkages as they do not directly lead to sustainability outcomes.

AFN characteristics were found to have direct links across all three domains of sustainability, as well as having indirect impacts, such as increased learning and awareness among consumers and other actors in food networks. The great number of the potential direct linkages, covering all three dimensions of sustainability, indicates that the sustainability expectations placed on AFNs are not without grounds. The indirect impacts may also be highly significant for sustainability.

Certain food sustainability issues are, however, absent from the linkages. Consequently, there are sustainability issues that the AFN characteristics identified do not directly address, such as labour rights and meat consumption. Thus, even if the positive sustainability impacts linked to AFNs were fully realized, not all food sustainability issues would necessarily be

addressed. Also, the suggested sustainability impacts linked to AFN characteristics have been criticized of not materializing in all cases, or not having a sufficient positive impact; of being potentially accompanied by counter-effects; or of being of limited relevance. For example, localness may not equate with sustainable production methods, or food miles may not be the most relevant aspect of the carbon footprint of food.

Finally, the promise of specific real-life AFNs is limited by what AFN characteristics they actually exhibit. The often hybrid nature of both AFNs and conventional food networks - that AFNs might have conventional practices, structures or logics, and vice versa - should also be kept in mind. In relation to the alternative practices or characteristics exhibited by some conventional food networks, there have however been concerns about the way in which they are adopted. This is due to the perceived profit logic of conventional actors, as opposed to the perceived alternative, ethical, sustainability related logic of alternative food system participants.

Article I thus contributed an inductively developed frame for assessing the sustainability promise from different perspectives, helping to think critically through what the sustainability impacts of a specific AFN might be and avoiding biases such as conflating a characteristic with an unrelated impact, ascribing sustainability impacts of one type of AFN to all AFNs, or overly focusing on aspects that are of limited relevance from a sustainability perspective.

5.2 NAVIGATING THE TENSIONS AND AGREEMENTS IN ALTERNATIVE FOOD AND SUSTAINABILITY

Article II (Forssell & Lankoski 2016) examined how alternative food retailers navigate their way through various considerations and perceived expectations at the interface between food production and consumption. The aim was to better understand the hybridity of AFNs and the challenges in upholding sustainable practices, essentially asking what is possible for AFN actors to do. This was done through analysing what ideals and considerations they emphasise, which may reflect personal ideals, or strategic positioning, or both; and what practices and decisions they justify and how.

The retailers positioned themselves as different from conventional supermarkets, but this was articulated in many different ways, drawing on a broad set of ideals. They engaged with not only the expected, 'alternative' civic, domestic and green worlds of justification, but also the market and industrial worlds, which have typically been associated with the conventional food system, and the inspiration and renown worlds. Notions of localness, small scale, transparency, moderation, fairness, health, environmental sustainability and animal welfare were present, but also an emphasis on

excellence, hard work and an entrepreneurial attitude (and the challenging of conventional food system actors in this regard), and notions of autonomy, fun, enjoyable and inspiring food shopping, and dislike for corporate style. These findings suggest a plurality of shared ideals in the domain of AFNs. The retailers' personal ideals and considerations also appeared open to change: for instance, some retailers described a growing personal awareness of food sustainability issues through their engagement in the sector.

What is justified suggests areas where the retailers perceive criticism, real or potential, and helps identify tensions in the AFN field. The objects of justification fall into two categories: justifying doing things differently from the conventional food system (higher prices, various forms of inconvenience to the consumer, and products not adhering to certain ideas of food quality); and justifying doing things similarly to the conventional system (selling imported foods, for instance).

The consideration of issues emphasised and justified indicates a complex path for retailers to navigate. The aspects emphasised and the weight placed particularly on civic, green and domestic world justifications suggest that consumers in AFNs have a sustainability orientation, and that there is agreement around ideals of sustainability, healthiness and high quality. Yet, justification of cost and inconvenience also suggests that some of the ramifications of sustainable practices may be difficult for consumers to accept, and the very practices that are generally expected in AFNs can meet with resistance from consumers. Thus, the expectations set by the conventional food system leave their mark on AFN practice. At the same time, attempting to meet perceived consumer expectations through engaging in conventional practices, such as importing certain foods in order to provide a more complete selection, also seemed to raise criticism.

The retailers engaged with the three ways of responding to criticism outlined by Boltanski and Thévenot (1991/2006): denunciation, clarification and compromise. The retailers used denunciation in situations of fundamental disagreement, where they questioned the entire motivation of the criticism. This was the case in, for example, the justification of higher prices, where the retailers denounced the industrial world norms of cheapness and overabundance. Another example was the justification of the perceived inconvenience of shopping at these alternative outlets instead of supermarkets, by denouncing the industrial world ideal of a uniform, comprehensive, seasonless selection of foods. In these cases, retailers appealed to other ideals, aligned with for example the domestic, civic, green and inspirations worlds, but also the market world. They used clarification in those situations where the ideal or worth underlying the criticism was accepted, for example, where concern about prices was considered to genuinely reflect a concern about being able to afford healthy and sustainable food (civic world). The retailers' response in these situations of clarification was, for example, correcting beliefs that their prices are particularly high. Compromises appeared to reflect particularly complex situations with many

considerations involved. For example, in cases where the retailers justified importing food, they typically acknowledged that local food would be preferable (domestic, civic and green worlds), but invoked the market world in arguing that they are responding to customer demands, as few people will actually be satisfied with only local food.

On the level of practices, some hybrid practices such as importing foods thus appeared to be brought about by pragmatic necessity to respond to consumer expectations. However, there were also limits to how much the retailers were willing to indulge consumers and justify their practices. At times, the retailers' own stated ideals took precedence over what consumer expectations might be. Notably, besides appearing as driven by principles, this was also in some cases linked to business considerations. For example, while most of the retailers offered some imported foods, stating the need to meet customers' expectations of a sufficiently complete product selection as a reason, one retailer with a domestic foods offering had decided to refrain from selling imported foods as he felt that doing this would ultimately weaken the unique profile of the business. Thus a market consideration - an apparently conventional logic - led to greater, rather than less, alterity in terms of product selection.

Through its use of convention theory, article II contributed a novel view of AFN practices as the outcome of the continuous negotiation of what is acceptable, and of understanding hybridity in AFNs as related to this. It helped to identify agreements about what an AFN should be like, as well as where clashes with consumer expectations may occur; highlighted the natural plurality of ideals in the domain of AFNs; and showed AFN practice as situational rather than fixed.

5.3 SHAPING NORMS

Article III (Forssell & Lankoski 2017) turned outward in its focus, toward how participation in AFNs might shape consumers' understandings and expectations, and what might happen in the rest of the food system as a result. It applied convention theory to sustainability transitions thinking, with the idea that that as different notions of what is worthy are deployed in negotiating economic and social exchange, shared rules and norms are also shaped. Changing the shared rules and norms in practices such as food consumption is seen as one driver of sustainability transitions, and AFNs can be seen as a niche where new norms and practices are created, also impacting the dominant regime. The article examined the norm-shaping work of alternative food retailers in their external, public, consumer-facing communications, looking at what understandings of worth in the food system

alternative food retailers are promoting and how, with what implications for transitioning to a more sustainable food system.

The analysis showed an overall active engagement in articulating a new vision of what food consumption and the wider food system should look like. The majority of the retailers were active in communicating on issues of food and sustainability, using various communication channels, particularly online channels such as websites and social media, and engaged in many different ways of influencing: educating, offering practical advice, criticising the conventional food system in various ways, making direct appeals or calls to action to consumers, and providing inspirational imagery. Thus, they both painted a vision of a better food system and rejected some of the current, dominant ways of thinking and doing in the food system.

All in all, in the retailers' negotiation of what food consumption and the wider food system should look like, four overarching ideals or notions of worth could be discerned: transparency and human scale, valuing food, enjoying real food as part of the good life and intelligent, aware consumption. These ideals were present in the communications of retailers having an active and normative approach in their communications. At the same time, through their criticisms of the conventional food sector and established food consumption routines, the retailers challenged the prevailing acceptance of food as a commodity without provenance, provisioned on a large scale; the ideal of abundance and cheapness; the focus on standardised, processed, convenient foods; and unreflexive consumption, led by marketing messages from conventional food system actors.

Analysis of the communications from a convention theory perspective demonstrated the retailers promoted specific ideals and their practical manifestations through positive claims about how they do things or how things should be done. They also suggested new interpretations of accepted ideals (reality tests) and rejected certain notions of worth and accompanying practices entirely (denunciations), engaging with many different worlds of justification.

The retailers' positive claims reflected ideals of transparency, fairness, paying the right price for food, food being valuable, the healthiness of 'real' food, wellbeing of the environment and animals, enjoyment and a sense of meaning, and awareness and knowledge about food and sustainability. In making these positive claims, the retailers engaged with the domestic, civic, green and inspiration worlds of justification.

In what Boltanski and Thévenot (1991/2006; 1999) call reality tests, criticisms take place within a world of justification. In reality tests, the retailers expressed agreement with given underlying ideals but suggested that the conditions for the fulfilment of the proposed ideal are not met. For example, the civic and market world notions of affordability, price and budget awareness, healthiness and quality were offered new interpretations. The retailers challenged prevailing beliefs about prices and the non-affordability of procuring sustainable food from an alternative, specialist

retail outlet, instead encouraging a more reflexive consideration of the issue of food prices and more mindful, less wasteful food buying and consumption.

In Boltanski and Thévenot's (1991/2006) framework of negotiation, criticisms external to a world of justification, which they call denunciations, are instances in which actors criticise the ideal to which a given way of doing things is anchored, suggesting a different notion of worth as well as a different practice. The retailers particularly rejected industrial world ideals and practices in the food system, invoking domestic, civic, green and inspiration world ideals instead. Large-scale, globalised production of cheap food, the idea that food should be cheap and the practice of consumers unquestioningly picking their food from the seasonless, overabundant selection in supermarkets with long supply chains were particularly targets of denunciation. The perceived profit maximisation mentality in the food industry, driven by market world ideals, was also questioned through criticisms of unfairness toward food producers, and that of maximising agricultural production to the detriment of the environment, health and animal welfare.

Article III contributed a picture of the norm-shaping work in AFNs, supporting the notion that AFNs might have an impact beyond their direct size and reach. It demonstrated how norm-shaping work may happen on the ground in niches, and thus added understanding of the role of niches in sustainability transitions. The convention theory perspective allowed to see the ways in which the retailers promoted certain alternative ideals, offered new interpretations of existing ideals, and distanced themselves from and rejected certain ideals linked to the conventional food system. Importantly, it allowed discovering the deeper ideals promoted by the retailers, and seeing where they are different from or similar to those promoted by conventional food system actors (regime actors).

5.4 SUMMARY OF ARTICLES AND FINDINGS

Examination of the research questions in this study drew a picture of AFNs as complex constellations of characteristics that may or may not link to sustainability. It also established AFNs as relational to and shaped by the conventional system, but also resisting and challenging the conventions established by the conventional system and potentially able to shape them, and potentially driving change in the food system through shaping norms and ideals.

Article I suggested many potential positive sustainability impacts that should be assessed on a case-by-case basis. It also raised two issues that article II and III address: the hybridity of AFNs and AFNs' potentially powerful indirect sustainability impacts. The often-hybrid nature of AFNs

has raised concerns over both their authenticity and their ability to contribute to sustainability. Article II examined the hybridity of AFNs from the perspective of AFN actors, navigating among their own plural ideals and considerations and diverse, sometimes contradictory consumer expectations. These affect, in complex ways, what practices are adopted, and, consequently, what sustainability outcomes may result. Through the continuous negotiation of acceptable practice through public justification, actors also engage in shaping the shared understandings and ideals in their sector. In a continuation of article II, article III demonstrated an active shaping of food system norms through AFN actors' consumer-facing communication of positive claims and criticisms, thus offering a view of the indirect impacts that were noted as potentially important drivers of sustainability in article I. Table 4 summarises the articles.

Table 4 Summary of articles and findings

	Article I	Article II	Article III
Title	The sustainability promise of alternative food networks: an examination through "alternative" characteristics	Navigating the tensions and agreements in alternative food and sustainability: a convention theoretical perspective on alternative food retail	Shaping norms. A convention theoretical examination of alternative food retailers as a niche actor in food sustainability transitions
Aims	Clarifying the unclear picture of AFNs' sustainability	Understanding the hybridity of AFNs and the possibilities and challenges for sustainable practices	Understanding how participation in AFNs might shape consumers' understandings and expectations, and how this might drive change in the rest of the food system
Research questions	What is it in these types of food provision that is seen to distinguish them from the conventional food system, and how do these features possibly translate into sustainability in food networks?	How do alternative food retailers navigate their way through various considerations and perceived expectations at the interface between food production and consumption and what does this reveal of AFNs' potential to contribute to sustainability?	What notions of worth in the food system are alternative food retailers promoting and how, and what are the implications for transitions to a more sustainable food system?
Theory	n/a	Convention theory	Convention theory Sustainability transitions
Data & method	Conceptual analysis, literature review	Content analysis of nine alternative food retailers' public communications and semi-structured interviews	Content analysis of nine alternative food retailers' public communications and semi-structured interviews
Main findings	AFN characteristics include background, core and outcome characteristics	Retailers positioned themselves through expression of a plurality of ideals, both alternative and	The majority of retailers actively shaped norms and ideals: promoted

	<p>Many potential direct impacts, indirect impacts</p> <p>Limitations: some areas of sustainability not linked to AFN characteristics; impacts not always materialising (sufficiently), the presence of counter-effects, irrelevance of specific impacts relative to the whole; characteristics of real-life AFNs delimit their actual impacts</p>	<p>conventional.</p> <p>Retailers justified their practices through clarification, denunciation, and compromise</p> <p>Main areas of tensions, requiring justification: higher prices, inconvenience, quality not as expected, importing foods.</p>	<p>alternative norms through positive claims, offered new interpretations of existing ideals through reality tests; and rejected certain conventional ideals through denunciation</p>
Contribution	<p>Framework for critically assessing individual AFNs' sustainability</p>	<p>A view of AFN practices and hybridity as the outcome of the continuous negotiation of what is acceptable</p> <p>Identified agreements about what an AFN should be like and clashes with consumer expectations, highlighted the natural plurality of ideals in the domain of AFNs; and showed AFN practice as relational and situational rather than fixed and determined by actors individually</p>	<p>Demonstrating how norm-shaping work may happen within niches, furthering understanding of the role of niches in sustainability transitions</p> <p>Allowed discerning the deeper ideals that AFN actors promote, and to see where they are different from or similar to those promoted by conventional food system actors</p>

6 CONCLUSIONS

In the three articles comprising this thesis I have examined the sustainability promise of alternative food networks from different perspectives, both theoretical and empirical. I have examined how the alternative characteristics of AFNs might in principle contribute to sustainability, how AFN actors navigate between expectations and their own expressed ideals and what this reveals of the tensions and agreements in the domain of AFNs; and how AFNs may promote new sustainable ideals of food production and consumption, thus driving transitions toward a more sustainable food system.

The headline claims in the literature have tended to frame AFNs in a very positive light, but a stream of more critical views, both empirical and theoretical, has also built up over the past decade or so (Tregear 2011). In undertaking this study, my initially 'rose tinted' view of AFNs (Murtagh 2015, 22) quickly turned to perplexity. I was left wondering, what can we actually say about AFNs' sustainability on the whole?

I have aimed for an open, 'agnostic' view of AFNs and their sustainability promise (Tregear 2011, 426) in this thesis. This has led me to discover issues that can be considered disappointing from the point of view of enthusiasm for the subject, but also new perspectives regarding AFNs' possible contribution and how we might view their apparent shortcomings. The findings from the three articles in this thesis open up a complex picture of AFNs as diverse, imperfect, and hybrid, with action stemming from many different possible agendas, and of AFN actors as competent agents of change. The findings have both clarified the phenomenon of AFNs and introduced unexpected perspectives and directions. In this section, I discuss the key findings and the directions opened up by the choice of theoretical perspective in this study. I reflect on how this has increased understanding of alternative food networks themselves and of how AFNs may drive food system sustainability transitions. I then discuss the theoretical and practical implications of the study and end with reflections on the limitations of the study and suggestions for future research.

6.1 THE SUSTAINABILITY PROMISE OF ALTERNATIVE FOOD NETWORKS

The analysis in article I showed that alternative food networks hold much potential for sustainability, but need to be critically evaluated on a case-by-

case basis, as do conventional food networks. The analysis pointed toward some practical and research implications. For example, there is a need to introduce measures to promote the fulfilment of those aspects not directly addressed by AFN characteristics, such as labour rights or meat consumption. Careful consideration of actual evidence is necessary regarding AFNs' believed sustainability impacts, and in many cases there is a need for more empirical work. Potential counter-effects also need to be recognized and if they cannot be alleviated, there are consequent value judgments about what issues to prioritise. Finally, there is a need to consider the relevance of different characteristics in promoting sustainability. For example, rather than focusing on scale of networks as such (localness, small scale) we would do best to focus on those characteristics that do have some material impacts. The focus on characteristics can also highlight instances where conventional food networks also have these characteristics and the related potential positive sustainability impacts.

The findings in article II suggest that doing things differently in the food system is not only a matter of actors having the right values and motives; the picture is more complicated than that. AFN actors, in this case alternative food retailers, do not act in isolation, with fixed dispositions toward being alternative or conventional. Rather, in order to be able to survive, they must navigate between their own aims and considerations and the expectations of their stakeholders, importantly, those of consumers. The most interesting finding was that retailers had to justify things that are part and parcel of their alternativeness, such as offering a more limited, seasonal selection than supermarkets. On the other hand, if they made concessions to the expectations created by conventional food system actors, for example, by importing foods, they in some cases had to justify this as well. This highlighted the complexity of AFN practice and perceived expectations, and threw into question the belief that hybridity in AFNs is necessarily indicative of lacking personal commitment to alternative values and principles. The findings also shed light on consumer expectations, although indirectly. They paint a picture of somewhat inconsistent consumers who, to exaggerate slightly, want a complete selection of foods at low prices, but consisting solely of local and sustainably produced foods. The findings complement earlier studies suggesting consumers have mixed considerations when participating in AFNs, illustrating the strong foothold of the norms promoted by the conventional food system (Hinrichs 2000; Harvey et al. 2004; Maxey 2006; Mount 2012; McEachern et al. 2010; Dixon 2007). It appears that there are indeed deep-seated expectations, norms and habits among consumers, created through interacting with the conventional food system, that may limit what AFN actors will be able to do and still remain in business.

Another interesting finding was commercial considerations possibly leading to radically alternative practices. This was demonstrated by one retailer deciding to only offer local, seasonal foods (quite a bold proposition in a Northern European country), because otherwise his business would lose

its unique positioning in the market. Thus, practices that may support sustainability do not need to stem from altruistic motives. From the perspective of sustainability, action is what is significant. If we only look at motives, there may be a temptation to dismiss from consideration those actors who do not appear to have the right motives, even if they are contributing positively to sustainability. Together, the findings in articles I and II suggest a need for and open examination of all kinds of food networks, rather than determining a priori what food networks are genuinely alternative and thus sustainable.

The analysis in article III showed an active engagement from the retailers in shaping notions of worth in food production-consumption, with some interesting implications regarding AFNs as niche actors in food sustainability transitions. Sustainability transitions involve changes to shared norms around how things are done, and social norms may be powerful in driving more sustainable behaviours (Farges 2014). Notably, through their normative work, the retailers were not only painting a picture of what ideal food consumption and the ideal food system look like (through positive claims), they were also painting a picture of what the conventional food system is like and the values it stands for (through criticisms). This is an unappealing picture of untrustworthiness, greed, unsustainable practices, mindless and mislead consumers and boring, soulless, joyless food consumption practices. It can also be argued that, through this, the retailers made visible the taken-for-granted assumptions and norms guiding food consumption. This act of making visible and shaking things up through criticisms may act in favour of greater reflexivity among consumers, which is considered a condition for change in some sustainability transitions studies (e.g., Fonte 2013).

At the same time the new ideals can be seen as safely anchored in existing universal notions of worth as represented by the worlds of justification deployed, rather than being entirely and radically new. This is likely to facilitate their acceptance. An interesting example here is the engagement with the inspiration world of justification. The retailers framed different ways of doing things more sustainably as something that brings meaning and enjoyment. This links to new directions in sustainable consumption studies that place emphasis on pleasure and ‘the positive experiences and elements of sustainable consumption [...] dreams, fantasies, excitement and enjoyments are all to be considered as relevant constitutive elements subject to study’ (Spaargaren 2011, 818; see also Soper 2008; Sassatelli 2015). The retailers also suggested new interpretations of some ideals that are already embraced in the wider food system (e.g., healthiness), suggesting possible parallel developments in niches and regimes that may accelerate transitions.

One point to consider is the sustainability outcomes of the retailers' norm-shaping work, which raises some questions. First of all, it is good to separate between rebellion against conventional norms and actual sustainability outcomes, and also keep in mind that the worlds of

justification do not directly impact sustainability, rather, the practices that follow from the ideals do. If the retailers are successful in promoting these new ideals, more sustainable food consumption patterns may follow. However, the retailers also promoted some potentially questionable beliefs from a sustainability perspective. Thus, automatically assuming that AFNs will always promote more sustainable practices appears ill-founded also from the perspective of this article.

In the network perspective to AFNs, the commitment to understanding different parts of networks and wider systems as relational and mutually influencing leads necessarily to consider the question of how AFNs might influence the wider food system in a more sustainable direction. Alternative food networks should thus be examined also in relation to conventional food networks. Change to the conventional system, driven by the existence and success of AFNs, is arguably the most materially significant aspect from the point of view of food system sustainability.

There are different perspectives to this change. Studies in certain theoretical streams, such as actor-network theory and post-structural perspectives to economic analysis have emphasised the unstable, contested nature of the conventional food system and its continuous need to defend itself, and the much more distributed power and agency of all kinds of actors (see Rosin & Campbell 2009). In the words of Whatmore and Thorne (1997, 236), 'size, as the dinosaurs discovered, isn't everything'. The CT perspective also supports this view in its stance that conventions and actor dispositions are not fixed but continuously negotiated. Taking a slightly different perspective, the sustainability transitions literature has described changes in the dominant regime, both material and immaterial. It has outlined for example the adoption of niche elements into the regime and painted a picture of a food system that is changing in many ways. Generally, AFNs have often been dismissed as too marginal to have any impact on the food system and we might indeed ask whether the negotiation of ideals performed by minority actors in the food system is of any consequence. In transitions thinking, however, small actors are seen differently, as potential 'seeds of transition' (van der Ploeg et al. 2004), as the interaction of different levels in the MLP is seen to produce transitions.

If consumers' norms are changed through the retailers' negotiation of food system ideals, the impact might be felt beyond the domain on AFNs. New ideals and increased reflexivity and consumer awareness could spill over to the conventional food system as consumers start to ask questions and show interest in food sustainability issues. We may find that the hybridity of the AFN consumer, that is, their food provisioning not happening solely through alternative channels (Morris & Buller 2003; Smithers et al. 2008; McEahern et al. 2010), may work in favour of change. Scholars have noted the possibility of the 'graduation effect', whereby consumers start thinking and acting differently in other situations as well, for example when shopping at supermarkets or eating in restaurants, and also the transferring of

consumer sustainability awareness onto other areas than food consumption (Cox et al. 2009; Dowler et al. 2010; Van Gameren et al. 2015). More broadly, Geels (2004, 914) describes the potentially rapid change that may take place through 'strategic games' as companies observe and react to other companies' moves. The spread of new ideals and awareness among consumers sends signals to supermarkets and other conventional food system actors, who have been keen to pick up these trends (Hendrickson & Heffernan 2002; see also Kirwan 2004). For example, supermarkets have started offering organic and locally sourced foods (La Trobe & Acott 2000; Oosterveer 2012) and there is increasing attention to managing the sustainability aspects of business among corporations in the agri-food sector and their supply chains through adherence to various corporate social responsibility standards and codes, reporting to stakeholders about sustainability performance and so on (e.g., Hartmann 2011). The changes in niches, then, may have reverberations to the regime level, challenging regime actors to respond. Thus, the transition pathway may be through changes in the regime, or the shared rules guiding the conventional food system, through pressure from and visions provided by AFNs, rather than just AFNs gaining a greater share of the system (Oosterveer and Spaargaren 2012).

Based on the findings in article III, the retailers can be considered reaching across the levels of the MLP in introducing niche norms; challenging, or offering a revised interpretation of, the norms of the regime, and engaging with landscape issues such as climate change and the consumer fears brought about by food scares.

Indeed, one highly interesting aspect in considering AFNs' sustainability promise is the role that landscape factors may play in supporting them. The MLP proposes that landscape factors interact with the niche and regime levels and might accelerate change. A potential landscape factor playing in favour of AFNs might be food scares and a more general distrust of 'big food' as well as the realisation of the sustainability crisis of the dominant system (Kjaernes 2013; Hendrickson & Heffernan 2002; Campbell 2009), which the retailers also made use of in their communications. Another factor might be a cultural shift toward looking 'beyond consumer capitalism's drab seriality and moral vacuity, to seek deeper meanings to wider life problems in a range of niche-marketed products bearing the stamp of rebellion, authenticity, simplicity, economic justice and ecological responsibility' (Binkley 2008, 599). In this study, I have demonstrated how AFN actors might be part of the apparatus that can contribute to promoting these shifts in perception through their engagement with domestic, civic, green and inspiration world ideals.

However, the material aspect of change should not be overlooked. The most successful normative changes will not contribute to sustainability without a change in how things are done, and the possibility for doing things in a different way. For example, consumers need to have access to more sustainable food networks. Thus, while I have proposed an alternative way of

looking at the impact of AFNs, beyond the approach of growing AFNs and increasing their share of the market, the scaling up of AFNs (e.g. Mount 2012; Beckie et al. 2012; Nost 2014; Aggestam et al. 2017) remains an important topic of investigation. In the words of Feenstra (2002, 104), ‘turning the food system in a more sustainable direction is likely to be a game of many players and strategies [...] with an “invisible web” of gaining and communicating new understandings, “background politicking” as well as more concretely building new infrastructures and doing things in new ways’.

Finally, there have been critical voices countering the promise of alternative practices spreading to the conventional food system, or of niche practices being adopted by regime actors. The entrance of conventional food system actors to the alternative arena (for example through the growth in supermarket organics) has been much debated. The literature on AFNs tends to frame this in terms of corporate co-optation or appropriation (Marsden 2004; Watts et al. 2005; Kirwan 2004; Jaffee & Howard 2010), whereby the actual practices are weakened versions of those proposed by AFNs, and the regime has seemingly adapted but has not changed radically.

Indeed, the question remains how powerful a shift of norms will be if the conventional sector offers an interpretation of the new norms that is not actually sustainable. The same interpretive flexibility of the worlds of justification (Patriotta et al. 2011) that enabled the retailers studied in the present study to offer new interpretations of accepted ideals through reality tests, may offer tools for the conventional sector to counter these with its own interpretations. Thus, within wider areas of apparent agreement, the alternative sector may well have to continue the battle over what the right interpretations and manifestations of the ideals are. The conventions in the food system will ultimately be the ‘product of negotiation among diverse participants seeking to mould [the system] to favour their own position in it’ (Rosin & Campbell 2009, 45).

In outlining the benefits from the spreading of norms and practices, then, we should remain aware of the possibility of these benefits not materialising. Also, it can be argued that the conventional food system has been criticised for a long time, yet no substantive change is happening - that supermarkets organics and the like are a drop in the ocean among unsustainable food production practices and unhealthy foods.

This is an issue on which it is perhaps difficult to say anything definitive. In a way, any changes could be seen as better than no change. For example, as Rosin and Campbell (2009) argue, criticisms of the conventionalisation of organic agriculture risks overlooking the occurrence of positive shifts toward more environmentally benign production methods in the conventional food system. Rather than rejecting these developments entirely, we can remain aware of weakening tendencies and try to discern which developments are harmful for the goal of sustainability. The need to critically engage with changes in the food system is certain. This brings us back to the importance of reflexivity and paying attention to what actual sustainability outcomes

may be. We should not fall for mere assumptions, or enchanting images of sustainability or watered-down responses to sustainability concerns from the conventional system.

In summary, AFNs can be seen as both less and more than their promise. They may not always be as sustainable as presumed, nor are they purely alternative, but they do seem to challenge the conventional food system and their indirect impacts on the wider food system may be greater than suggested by their small size and reach. AFNs operate in a constant dialogue between different parties, and the general direction of this dialogue will shape what AFNs might be or become, and the realisation of sustainability in AFNs.

6.2 THEORETICAL AND PRACTICAL CONTRIBUTIONS

The key contributions of this study are firstly to provide a clarified, unified overview of the potential sustainability impacts of AFNs, and their limitations in this regard, through identifying the central alternative characteristics of AFNs and how these characteristics possibly contribute to sustainability, with what limitations. This helps to advance the discussion about AFNs' sustainability through highlighting areas of greatest relevance for further scrutiny (such as looking at actual practices rather than values or motives, and looking at those characteristics that are the most crucial in working toward sustainability), encouraging a critical view of AFNs' sustainability, and helping to sift through the complexities involved.

The analysis also created a practical framework that can be used in assessing the sustainability potential of specific AFNs with their particular characteristics. It also helps to see beyond a narrow focus on AFNs to assess which sustainability impacts can also be realised in those food networks that may be considered conventional, thus moving in the direction of examining food networks on their own terms as advocated by Holloway et al. (2007). More broadly, the idea behind the framework could be fruitful for assessments of sustainability also in other areas than agri-food. Examples include looking at overall issues addressed or not addressed, judging the relevance of issues, looking at whether assumed impacts do materialise and why they might not, or whether we are conflating certain characteristics with unrelated outcomes.

Another area where this study has advanced our understanding is around the issue of expectations for purity in AFNs, both in practices and intentions. Part of the promise of AFNs is the notion of participants having alternative values, motives and goals. Where this has been found to not be the case, it has caused some perplexity. Likewise, AFNs adopting conventional practices has met with suspicion in some of the literature. The second part of the study, article II, turned this notion around from an individualist to a

relational, contextual frame: what is possible for AFNs? Does it matter what actors' values and goals are? The convention theory perspective enabled to challenge some underlying perceptions in the AFN literature, such as static notions of the alternative and conventional, based on fixed predispositions, perhaps stemming from actor motives. Instead, AFNs could be framed as complex, situational, and having idealistically or pragmatically chosen courses of action, informed by multiple considerations. This perspective could also usefully be applied to studies of other sectors in the sustainable or alternative economy. For example studies of 'sustainability entrepreneurship' or 'ecopreneurship' have tended to conceptualise and explain sustainability entrepreneurship through entrepreneurs' sustainability-related motives (e.g. Parrish 2010, Tilley & Young 2009) and, as for example Beveridge and Guy (2005) argue, take an overly individualistic approach, seeing ecopreneurs as driven by their sustainability commitment and simply making things happen, as though no external factors played any part.

The agnostic view of AFNs has been helpful in a drawing up a less finalistic view of AFNs' imperfections and perhaps encouraging problematic aspects to be considered and addressed, rather than dismissing these imperfect AFNs. As Murtagh (2015, 4) asks: 'does it mean [AFNs] have achieved nothing because they don't achieve or represent what a constructed ideal sets out for them?'. The CT perspective linked my thinking to the calls in the AFN literature outlined in Chapter 2, calling for a more open view of all food networks as sites where different things happen, rather than being predetermined as alternative or conventional (Tregear 2011). This study joined the stream of literature that sees food networks as fundamentally diverse and 'already hybrid' (Mount 2012).

The focus on 'critical moments' has helped to identify pressure points, or potential 'sites of political action' (Rosin & Campbell 2009) within AFNs, where there are disagreements, buzz and possibly change underway. This will have implications for the trajectories of AFNs and, also, where the conventional food system might be challenged. On a more practical level, the understanding the tensions and agreements in the field brought by the CT perspective opens up understanding of where possibilities or obstacles for more sustainable practices may lie, helping both practitioners and policy-makers make sense of and address these. This could improve for example public policy initiatives toward more sustainable consumption, moving away from the so-called knowledge fix model where the focus is on providing information about sustainable choices to consumers, and which has been criticised for being ineffective as it ignores, for example, the plurality of considerations that consumers balance (Eden et al. 2008; Andersen 2011).

The examination of norm-shaping within the niche of AFNs contributed to the discussion about AFNs' ability to drive change toward a more sustainable food system on a larger scale. On a practical level, it can help practitioners who are seeking to contribute to a more sustainable food system to understand their potential for doing this in a broader way. It also

helps to assess where and how they may most effectively shape norms, where new norms and practices may be in conflict with prevailing ones, and where they are in fact aligned. The worlds of justification provide an understanding of universal deeper ideals that may be used to support normative messages.

Articles II and III also contributed to the use of convention theory in the study of AFNs by using CT in a more dynamic, rather than static and classificatory way. The focus on what convention theorists call critical moments, which has been overlooked in applications of CT to the study of agri-food networks (Ponte 2016), has been instrumental in opening up new perspectives. The application of convention theory to sustainability transitions thinking in examining the normative work undertaken by niche actors also contributes a novel theoretical perspective to transitions theoretical studies. The CT perspective complements the transitions perspective by uncovering the negotiations of conventions at a deeper level and helping to analyse possible parallel developments in niches and regimes that may accelerate transitions.

6.3 LIMITATIONS AND SUGGESTIONS FOR FURTHER STUDIES

In considering the implications of this study, there are necessarily some limitations to be kept in mind, stemming from the perspectives taken and the kind of empirical data used. At the same time, these offer interesting avenues for future research.

The empirical material for the study has been collected from two Northern European countries with a somewhat similar food culture and notions of food quality (See Sonnino & Marsden 2006). A study conducted in, say, France or Italy which are countries with different quality conventions, might have yielded a very different picture of consumer expectations for food shopping and consumption, and different tensions and agreements in the field.

Article II provided an indirect view of consumer expectations. Thus, a convention theoretical study of alternative retail customers' deployment of the worlds of justification as they navigate the purchasing of food through alternative outlets (see Andersen 2011 for a related study on organic food), perhaps studying a retailer and its customers together, would provide further insight. Also, an examination of conventional food retailers' positioning and justification would shed light on what tensions they are encountering.

Article III has focused on the norm-shaping work performed by one type of AFN actor. It does not, however, provide direct knowledge about how effective these attempts to influence are in actually driving change. Indeed, there are many possible forces and interests at play. Transitions studies in

general look backward over long time periods to propose what forces have driven transitions. Studies with a shorter, current temporal focus, for example ones investigating the development of new practices in food system niches, have identified for example new understandings about appropriate price and convenience formed through participation in AFNs (Fonte 2013; Crivits & Paredis 2013), but have been wary of stating wider outcomes of the changed practices with any certainty. The same caution applies here. A different kind of study, perhaps a retrospective case study of a given country's food sector, could look at the changes in the conventional system and analyse the role of AFNs and landscape factors in a more conclusive way.

In relation to article III, it would also be interesting to study the competing claims from the conventional system. A cursory review of major retailers' websites revealed a strong emphasis on low prices and discounts, but also some acknowledgment of issues such as health and local sourcing. An understanding of the ideals promoted by the conventional system would complement the picture, as conventional food system actors are likely no less savvy about shaping ideals related to food consumption

In article III, I have focused on written content, particularly online and social media content. Another interesting approach would be to engage in more extensive observation of interactions between customers and personnel in shops, and the ways in which new norms are being shaped on that arena.

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