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Guest Editorial
Revisiting the Slow Food Movement: Three Cases of Heritage, Innovation, and Sustainability in Alternative Food Networks

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Abstract

The special issue, 'Revisiting the Slow Food Movement: Three Cases of Heritage Innovation and Sustainability in Alternative Food Networks', explores the integration of Slow Food principles within Alternative Food Networks (AFNs) to enhance sustainability and cultural heritage preservation. By analysing case studies from Afghanistan, Ireland, and Switzerland, the editorial illustrates how AFNs can address food security, local communities' social adherence, economic viability, and environmental sustainability. The Afghan case emphasises collaborative agribusiness for resilience and market access, the Irish study focuses on sustainable lobster fishing practices, and the Swiss example highlights the revival of traditional red berry cultivation. Utilising the Triple Bottom Line framework, this editorial explores the multifaceted benefits of AFNs in fostering sustainable food systems that align with local cultural practices and innovative agricultural techniques. This special issue provides valuable insights for policymakers, practitioners, and scholars aiming to develop more resilient and equitable food systems globally.

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Introduction to the Special Issue

The special issue titled 'Revisiting the Slow Food Movement: Heritage, Innovation, and Sustainability in Alternative Food Networks' is rooted in the growing significance of sustainable food systems in addressing global food security challenges. The Slow Food Movement, which began in Italy in 1986 as a response to the globalisation of fast food, emphasises principles of good, clean, and fair food. These principles align closely with the goals of preserving biodiversity, promoting sustainable agriculture, and maintaining cultural heritage (Cacciolatti & Lee, 2022). This special issue thus explores how the Slow Food Movement's philosophy can be applied through Alternative Food Networks (AFNs) to foster sustainability and innovation in food systems worldwide (Cañada, & Vázquez, 2005).

There are current gaps in the literature concerning AFNs in diverse contexts (Michel-Villarreal *et al.*, 2019), especially in regions experiencing socioeconomic and political instability or that are affected by climate change (Moragues-Faus & Marsden, 2017). AFNs offer an innovative approach to food production and distribution that prioritises local, organic food systems and direct relationships between producers and consumers (Renting, Marsden, & Banks, 2003). These networks are vital in creating transparent and traceable food supply chains that can adapt to the unique challenges faced by different regions. By highlighting case studies from Afghanistan, Ireland, and Switzerland, this issue will provide insights into how AFNs can be leveraged to address food security, promote local food cultures and institutions (Pothukuchi & Kaufman, 1999), and integrate modern technologies and traditional practices for sustainable outcomes.

Furthermore, the intersection of cultural heritage and sustainability is a critical area of focus for this special issue. Food is a powerful expression of cultural identity and values, playing a significant role in social cohesion and community building (Brulotte & Di Giovine, 2016). The Slow Food Movement has been instrumental in preserving culinary traditions and promoting biodiversity by supporting small-scale producers and traditional food systems (Peano *et al.*, 2014). By revisiting the Slow Food Movement through the lens of heritage, innovation, and sustainability, this special issue seeks to shed light on the transformative potential of AFNs in creating resilient and equitable – and therefore more sustainable – food systems (Van Bommel & Spicer, 2011). This special issue contributes to the ongoing discourse on sustainable development and offers practical implications for policymakers, practitioners, and scholars dedicated to fostering sustainable food practices globally.

1. Slow Food, Alternative Food Networks, and the Innovation of Sustainable Food Systems

Innovation in sustainable food systems encompasses technological advancements such as precision agriculture, alternative proteins, and blockchain technology. These innovations reduce the environmental impact of food production, improve supply chain transparency, and increase access to nutritious foods (Trivelli *et al*., 2019). Social and organisational innovations also contribute to sustainable food systems by fostering collaboration among various actors and establishing new business models that support fair wages and working conditions for food workers. The Slow Food Movement and Terra Madre, as examples of AFNs, exemplify social innovation by creating platforms for small-scale farmers, food producers, and consumers to exchange knowledge and ideas on sustainable food practices (Canavari *et al*., 2016).

The Slow Food Movement's core philosophical principles include promoting good food (i.e., high quality and flavourful), clean (i.e., produced in an environmentally sustainable way), and fair (i.e., with accessible prices for consumers and fair conditions for producers) (Hsu, 2015). Terra Madre, a global network created by Slow Food in 2004, brings together small-scale farmers, fishers, food artisans, and activists from around the world to share knowledge and promote sustainable food production practices. This biennial event in Turin, Italy, serves as a platform for discussing and advancing the goals of the Slow Food Movement, reinforcing its commitment to biodiversity and cultural heritage (Hayes-Conroy & Martin, 2010; Rosa *et al*., 2022).

Alternative Food Networks (AFNs) share many similarities with the Slow Food Movement and Terra Madre, as they both prioritise local, sustainable food systems and emphasise the social and environmental dimensions of food production and consumption. Both frameworks aim to create transparent and equitable food supply chains that support local economies and preserve traditional food cultures (Renting *et al*., 2003; Cacciolatti & Lee, 2022).

AFNs have emerged as a significant force in the transformation of food systems towards greater sustainability and innovation. These networks encompass a range of initiatives that prioritise local, organic, and sustainable food production, distribution, and consumption. They include community-supported agriculture (CSA), farmers' markets, urban farming, and cooperative food enterprises (Medici *et al*., 2021) although the level of engagement depends also upon smallholder farmers' characteristics (Cacciolatti & Wan, 2012). Their contribution to the innovation and sustainability of food systems can be analysed through several key dimensions: environmental impact, economic viability, social equity, and technological advancement. We adopt the theoretical lens of the Triple

Bottom Line (TBL) to frame the papers presented in the special issue, and we approach their analysis through the cultural heritage, sustainability, and innovation dimensions.

2. Alternative Food Networks and the Slow Food Principles: the Cases of Ireland, Switzerland, and Afghanistan

The Slow Food Movement and its associated Terra Madre network emphasise principles of good, clean, and fair food. 'Good' refers to food that is nutritious and enjoyable, 'clean' commands production methods that are environmentally sustainable, and 'fair' pertains to accessible and equitable food systems for all. Terra Madre, by supporting small-scale farmers, fishers, and artisans in preserving traditional and sustainable practices, fosters direct connections between producers and consumers and promotes biodiversity. Thus, the Slow Food Movement aims to counteract the homogenising effects of industrial agriculture and by integrating these principles, practitioners can create food systems that respect cultural traditions, protect the environment, and ensure fair access to quality food.

By integrating the lessons from these three diverse case studies, practitioners can develop more holistic and context-sensitive approaches to building sustainable food systems globally and AFNs' similarities with the Slow Food Movement and Terra Madre are remarkable. We can observe, through various case studies around the world, that the collaborative agribusiness initiatives in Afghanistan demonstrate how AFNs can address food security challenges through increased agricultural productivity and resource enhancement (Amirzai & Chau, 2024). AFNs in Afghanistan integrate marginalised groups and foster collaboration among farmers, these initiatives improve access to markets and resources, ultimately enhancing food security in the region (see Study 3: Amirzaj & Chau, 2024). This aligns with the principle of good and fair food promoted within a Slow Food philosophy.

Likewise, in Ireland, the integration of the Slow Food Movement with the lobster industry highlights how AFNs can preserve local culinary heritage. The study shows how traditional practices maintain ecological and economic sustainability, demonstrating the intricate link between cultural heritage and sustainable practices, often fuelled by a combination of traditional practices and new technology and supported by the social ties within closely knit communities (see Study 2: Pauley, 2024).

Finally, in Switzerland, the case study of red berry cultivation in the Entremont region illustrates the significance of reviving traditional agricultural practices while enhancing local economies. In that case study

(see Study 1: Bertolino, 2024), practitioners learn the importance of re-evaluating neglected agricultural practices and recognising their cultural, social, and economic value. The following sections introduce more in detail the case studies.

2.1. *Cases Introduction*

2.1.1. Study 1: How Does Living Heritage Relate to Alpine Food?

This study focuses on the Entremont region in Switzerland, exploring the cultivation of red berries, which were once vital to the local economy. This study discusses the cultural, social, and economic importance of reviving this heritage after decades of neglect and examines the cultural, social, and economic significance of the cultivation of red berries, particularly strawberries and raspberries, in the Entremont region of Switzerland.

The study is set against the backdrop of the broader movement to recognise and safeguard intangible cultural heritage, particularly in the context of Alpine food heritage and discusses the historical importance of red berry cultivation from the 1930s to the 1990s and its decline due to various economic and social factors. The case also brings to the reader the contemporary efforts to revitalise this agricultural practice through community engagement and sustainable practices, drawing on criteria of sustainable development.

The historical and cultural significance of red berry cultivation is considerable, as these berries were not only a source of income but also a part of the local heritage, deeply embedded in the community's collective memory and practices, harnessing a sense of identity in the local community. The decline in cultivation over time took place because of factors such as international competition, changes in agricultural practices, and the socio-economic shift towards tourism and industrial employment. Nevertheless, an effort to engage the local community brought a revitalisation of traditional and more sustainable practices (Bertolino, 2024). The contemporary efforts to revive red berry cultivation involve community-based initiatives, participatory governance, and the integration of traditional knowledge with innovative agricultural techniques. Thus, the role of women as custodians of agricultural know-how is particularly strong, showing how intergenerational transmission of knowledge can support the sustainability of these practices.

Furthermore, we can see an alignment of the local sustainable and traditional practices of the Entremont region with the principles of Slow Food, as the local AFNs advocate for good, clean, and fair food systems. By focusing on the environmental, social, and economic dimensions of

sustainability, the revival of red berry cultivation is positioned as a model for sustainable development in mountain regions, contributing to the resilience of agricultural practices to adapt to contemporary challenges such as climate change and market competition (Ericksen, 2008).

2.1.2. Study 2: A Social Practice Perspective of Ireland's Lobster Cultural Food Heritage

Using Social Practice Theory, this study examines the integration of the Slow Food Movement with Ireland's lobster industry. The study emphasises the preservation of local culinary heritage and sustainable food systems, proposing a model that balances cultural integrity with sustainable practices through qualitative interviews and secondary data analysis. The research article titled 'A Social Practice Perspective of Ireland's Lobster Cultural Food Heritage' analyses the cultural and symbolic significance of lobster consumption in Ireland, the role of lobster in Irish culinary heritage and its potential for fostering sustainable seafood consumption.

The role of fishing communities in preserving local culture is paramount as they maintain cultural food heritage through traditional practices. These practices contribute to ecological and economic sustainability, emphasising the importance of community-based initiatives and the transmission of traditional knowledge across generations (Pauley, 2024). Yet, the maintenance of such a social tissue supporting sustainable lobster consumption comes with challenges and opportunities: despite the cultural significance of lobsters, their consumption in Ireland is low, mainly due to economic factors (the product is often highly priced and export is often a preferred destination), lack of culinary knowledge, and historical associations. The study stresses the importance of educational initiatives and community engagement to promote lobster as a sustainable food source, making it good and fair for the local community. This approach can enhance the appeal of lobster products and support the economic viability of coastal communities through sustainable practices.

2.1.3. Study 3: Alternative Food Networks in Afghanistan

This third study investigates collaborative agribusiness initiatives in Afghanistan, emphasising their role in addressing food security challenges. Through interviews with key stakeholders, the research identifies resilience, resource enhancement, and revelation (3Rs) as crucial components for improving access to markets and resources for smallholder farmers in remote

regions. This study, titled 'Alternative Food Networks in Afghanistan: The Role of Collaborative Agribusiness in Food Security' discusses the potential of collaborative agribusiness initiatives in addressing food security challenges in Afghanistan and emphasises community well-being, sustainability, and food justice. The article presents findings from interviews with key Afghan stakeholders, including farmers, agricultural entrepreneurs, and experts and identifies the critical role of collaborative agribusiness in enhancing agricultural productivity and food security. It also shows how AFNs integrate marginalised groups and improve access to markets and resources. Resource limitations are a main challenge to the resilience and sustainability of the Afghan food systems. Challenges such as water scarcity, lack of electricity, and insufficient infrastructure hinder agricultural productivity and the sustainability of the local economy. The absence of modern agricultural techniques and the reliance on traditional methods further exacerbate these issues. Addressing these resource limitations is crucial for the success of agribusinesses and overall food security in the region.

Thus, collaboration plays a crucial role in the enhancement of food productivity, and security. Collaborative agribusiness practices, deeply rooted in Afghanistan's religious and cultural traditions, play a vital role in supporting agricultural enterprises. Practices like Hashar, where farmers collaborate to harvest each other's crops, demonstrate the importance of community support and collective effort in overcoming resource constraints. These informal networks and practices help sustain agribusinesses despite the challenging environment, highlighting the resilience of Afghan farmers. Such principles as Hashar (as a form of agricultural gratuity) are well aligned with the Slow Food principles, where food is also more equitable, and fair.

Yet, from the organisational point of view, the absences of formal AFNs leave way for more informal networks: formally coordinated community-supported agriculture or fair-trade initiatives are rare in Afghanistan. Instead, informal networks and local cultural practices fill this gap, providing a unique form of alternative economic frame. These informal networks, characterised by strong community bonds and mutual support, enable farmers to navigate the complexities of the agricultural market and enhance food security.

2.2. *The Triple Bottom Line as a Theoretical Lens for the Analysis of the Alternative Food Networks Phenomenon*

For this editorial, we chose the Triple Bottom Line (TBL) as a sustainability theory for the case analysis. The TBL framework (Elkington, 1994) evaluates sustainability based on three interconnected dimensions:

environmental, economic, and social sustainability. This comprehensive approach aligns well with the themes explored in the editorial: cultural heritage, innovation, and sustainability in AFNs. The TBL framework extends the traditional financial accounting framework, which focuses on profitability, to include social and environmental dimensions, thus assessing an organisation's impact on 'people, planet, and profit'. This holistic approach encourages businesses to consider their long-term sustainability and societal contributions alongside economic performance. Recent studies highlighted the importance of the TBL in driving corporate social responsibility and sustainability practices. For instance, integrating TBL principles can enhance organisational reputation, stakeholder engagement, and long-term financial success (Murray *et al.*, 2017), and can foster innovation and resilience in supply chains, promoting sustainable business practices across various industries (Rashidi *et al.*, 2020). The following presents the three dimensions of the TBL theoretical framework.

Environment. The environmental dimension of the TBL focuses on the impact of activities on the natural environment. In the context of AFNs, environmental sustainability comprises practices that reduce carbon footprints, promote biodiversity, and minimise the use of harmful chemicals in agriculture. The case study from Afghanistan illustrates how collaborative agribusiness initiatives enhance agricultural productivity while promoting sustainable resource use. The case study from Switzerland shows that the revitalisation of traditional red berry cultivation practices supports the preservation of biodiversity and agroecological practices. Likewise, the case from Ireland demonstrates how local communities can rediscover the local culinary tradition, preserving local fish stock varieties. These examples demonstrate how AFNs contribute to environmental sustainability by prioritising local and organic food systems and reducing the environmental impact associated with conventional agricultural practices (Renting, Marsden, & Banks, 2003; Kremen, Iles, & Bacon, 2012).

Economy. Economic sustainability within the TBL framework emphasises the viability and profitability of activities over the long term. The AFN initiatives described in the editorial showcase how economic sustainability can be achieved through direct relationships between producers and consumers, fair pricing, and local economic stimulation. The case study from Ireland highlights the economic benefits of integrating traditional lobster fishing practices with modern sustainability initiatives, ensuring fair wages and stable incomes for local fishing communities. Similarly, the Afghan collaborative agribusiness initiatives show how enhancing agricultural productivity and market access can improve food security and economic stability for smallholder farmers. On the other hand, in Switzerland, the economic impact of the revival of traditional berry cultivation practices can

create employment in an industry that ceased to thrive due to the loss of local know-how. These examples highlight the potential of AFNs to create economically viable food systems that support local economies and provide sustainable livelihoods (Jarosz, 2008; Mount, 2012).

Society. Social sustainability in the TBL framework addresses the well-being of individuals and communities, ensuring social equity and justice. This editorial emphasises the importance of preserving cultural heritage, which is integral to social sustainability. The Irish case study demonstrates how traditional culinary practices can foster community cohesion and cultural preservation while promoting sustainable food consumption. In Switzerland, the renewal of red berry cultivation highlights the cultural and social significance of reviving traditional agricultural practices. Finally, the Afghan case study highlights the role of inclusive and participatory approaches in enhancing food security and community resilience. These examples illustrate how AFNs contribute to social sustainability by promoting food justice, preserving cultural heritage, and fostering inclusive and equitable food systems (Guthman, 2008; Alkon & Agyeman, 2011).

The TBL provides a robust framework for analysing the sustainability contributions of AFNs. By evaluating AFNs through the lenses of environmental, economic, and social sustainability, this theoretical frame offers a comprehensive understanding of how these networks can address contemporary food system challenges. The integration of case studies from Afghanistan, Ireland, and Switzerland within this framework highlights the variety of benefits of AFNs and their potential to create more sustainable, equitable, and resilient food systems globally (Elkington, 1994).

2.3. *Alternative Food Networks' Impact on the Sustainability of Food Systems*

AFNs significantly reduce the environmental footprint of food systems. By focusing on local production and consumption, these networks minimise the carbon emissions associated with long-distance transportation and the use of chemical inputs in conventional agriculture (Renting, Marsden, & Banks, 2003). Studies have shown that local food systems tend to use fewer synthetic fertilisers and pesticides, promoting agroecological practices that enhance soil health and biodiversity (Kremen, Iles, & Bacon, 2012). Urban farming and vertical farming, key components of AFNs, further contribute to sustainability by optimising land use and reducing the need for land conversion, which is often associated with deforestation and habitat loss (Despommier, 2010).

From an economic sustainability point of view, AFNs often operate on models that support fair prices for producers and affordable prices for consumers, creating a more balanced economic system. By fostering direct relationships between producers and consumers, AFNs eliminate intermediaries, ensuring that a larger share of the profit goes to the farmers or other local stakeholders. This model has been particularly beneficial for small-scale and marginalised farmers who struggle to compete in conventional markets (Michel-Villarreal *et al.*, 2020) dominated by large agribusinesses (Jarosz, 2008). Furthermore, AFNs stimulate local economies by keeping financial resources within the community, which can lead to the creation of jobs (Cacciolatti & Mar Molinero, 2013) and support for local businesses (Mount, 2012).

Finally, social equity is a cornerstone of AFNs, which aims to create an inclusive and participatory food system. AFNs often prioritise the needs of vulnerable and marginalised communities, providing them with access to healthy and nutritious food (De Schutter *et al.*, 2020). Initiatives such as food cooperatives and CSAs engage community members in the decision-making process, fostering a sense of ownership and empowerment (Guthman, 2008). AFNs also promote food justice by addressing issues such as food deserts and nutritional disparities in urban and rural areas (Alkon & Agyeman, 2011). By supporting fair labour practices and equitable distribution of resources, AFNs contribute to the creation of more just and resilient food systems (Knickel *et al.*, 2018), thus contributing to the local and national economy, health and wealth.

2.4. *Alternative Food Networks and Technological Advancement*

Sustainable food systems are defined by their ability to provide healthy, nutritious, and affordable food while preserving the environment and supporting local communities (Revoredo-Giha *et al.*, 2011). Innovation in AFNs is not limited to social and economic practices but extends to technological advancements as well. Technological advancement is at the core of sustainable food systems, where traditional and contemporary scientific and engineering knowledge are combined in solutions to support food production, processing, and distribution.

For instance, precision agriculture, blockchain technology, and alternative protein sources are some of the technological innovations that AFNs have embraced to enhance sustainability. Precision agriculture uses sensors, data analytics, and automation to optimise resource use, reduce waste, and improve crop yields (Pierpaoli *et al.*, 2013). Blockchain technology, on the other hand, increases transparency and traceability in food supply

chains, allowing consumers to make more informed decisions about the sustainability and ethicality of their food choices (Kamilaris *et al.*, 2019). Also, the development of alternative protein sources such as plant-based meats and cellular agriculture offers sustainable alternatives to traditional animal farming, reducing the environmental impact associated with livestock production (Parodi *et al.*, 2018).

Innovation thus plays a crucial role in fostering sustainable food systems by introducing new technologies, processes, and practices that enhance efficiency, productivity, and resilience. For instance, the study 'A Social Practice Perspective of Ireland's Lobster Cultural Food Heritage' examines how integrating the Slow Food Movement with Ireland's lobster industry can preserve local culinary heritage and promote sustainable food systems. By adopting a Social Practice Theory perspective, the research highlights the symbolic importance of lobster in Irish culture and its role in ecological and economic sustainability. Yet, it highlights the importance of navigation tools and lobster cage design, which are informed by the local knowledge embedded in the local fishing communities. The study proposes a model that balances cultural integrity with sustainable practices, demonstrating the intricate link between tradition, technology, and sustainability.

3. Alternative Food Networks and Collaborative Agribusiness

Another important aspect contributing to the sustainability of resilient and small-scale food systems, other than the focus on the TBL and its acceptance of technological development, is the strong collaborative element that permeates AFNs. AFNs redefine food production, distribution, and consumption by prioritising local and organic food systems, reducing the carbon footprint associated with long-distance transportation, and fostering direct relationships between producers and consumers.

These networks do embrace innovative approaches such as urban farming, community-supported agriculture, and vertical farming, but none of this would be possible without the ability to coordinate and collaborate for the mutual benefit of the AFNs' members and extended stakeholders. For instance, the study 'Alternative Food Networks in Afghanistan: The Role of Collaborative Agribusiness in Food Security' explores how collaborative agribusiness initiatives can address food security challenges in Afghanistan. By integrating marginalised groups and improving agricultural productivity through collaboration, these initiatives enhance resilience, resource utilisation, and revelation (i.e., 3Rs), ultimately improving access to markets and resources for smallholder farmers in remote regions.

3.1. *Local Heritage and Cultural Preservation in Sustainable Food Systems: Education and Advocacy*

Promoting traditional, local, and sustainable food systems as alternatives to the globalised fast-food industry is essential for preserving cultural heritage and biodiversity. Food marketing plays a significant role in promoting local culinary culture and safeguarding culinary traditions that might otherwise disappear. By expressing cultural identities and values through food, communities can maintain their heritage and pass it on to future generations (Cacciolatti *et al.*, 2015). The Slow Food Movement and Terra Madre provide platforms for small-scale farmers, food producers, and consumers to exchange knowledge and ideas, emphasizing the importance of cultural heritage in sustainable food systems.

Cultural heritage plays a vital role in shaping food systems worldwide, as food often embodies the identities, values, and traditions of communities. The preservation of culinary traditions and biodiversity is essential for maintaining cultural heritage too (Polito *et al.*, 2020). For instance, in the context of the Swiss Alps, the study 'How Living Heritage Relates to Alpine Food?' highlights the case of red berry cultivation in the Entremont region of Switzerland. This cultivation, once a significant part of the local economy, had been neglected for decades. However, recent action research at the Centre Régional d'Etudes des Populations Alpines (CREPA) and the Interreg project's efforts have brought a renewed focus on the cultural, social, and economic values of these berries. This reconsideration stresses the importance of local food heritage and its potential revitalisation.

Education and advocacy are thus an important element of the rediscovery and preservation of the cultural heritage of a community (Made Prastyadewi *et al.*, 2020), and this is particularly true when promoting sustainable food systems and reducing food waste. Through awareness campaigns and educational programmes, consumers can learn about sustainable food consumption practices and the impact of their choices on the environment and society. Food co-creation and innovative business models can drive sustainability by involving consumers in the production process and fostering a sense of ownership and responsibility. Advocacy efforts can influence policy changes (Maye & Duncan, 2017) and support the development of more sustainable food systems. By educating the public and advocating for sustainable practices, more informed and responsible food cultures can be fostered.

3.2. *Case Analysis*

The three papers under consideration each explore different aspects of the Slow Food Movement and AFNs in distinct contexts: Afghanistan, Ireland, and Switzerland. The TBL framework, which encompasses social, economic, and environmental dimensions, provides a comprehensive lens to compare the main issues discussed in these papers.

Social Dimension. In Afghanistan, the social dimension is heavily influenced by collaborative agribusiness practices, which are deeply rooted in cultural and religious traditions such as Hashar, where farmers help each other during harvest times. This fosters strong community ties and mutual support, which are crucial in a conflict-affected region with limited formal structures. On the other hand, in Ireland, the focus is on the cultural significance of lobster fishing communities, emphasising the preservation of traditional practices and community engagement to promote sustainable seafood consumption. Last, the Swiss study highlights the role of community-based initiatives to revive red berry cultivation through an active engagement of the local population and programmes to recover local traditions and the sustainable agricultural practices associated with their cultural heritage.

Economic Dimension. Economically, Afghanistan faces significant resource limitations, including water scarcity and inadequate infrastructure, which hinder the development of agribusinesses. Despite these challenges, collaborative efforts among farmers have led to increased agricultural productivity and better food security. In Ireland, the lobster industry struggles with low domestic consumption, but initiatives to educate and engage the public hold promise for economic recovery in that declining industry. In Switzerland, red berry cultivation is seen to boost local economies by promoting agrotourism and supporting small-scale farmers in generating more income locally, while preserving local jobs and contributing to a resilient ecosystem (Rosli & Cacciolatti, 2022).

Environmental Dimension. Environmentally, the Afghan paper highlights the need for sustainable agricultural practices to conserve limited resources and reduce environmental degradation. Collaborative agribusiness initiatives promote resilience and resource enhancement, crucial for long-term sustainability. Likewise, the Irish study highlights the importance of sustainable fishing practices and the role of the Slow Food Movement in advocating for environmentally friendly seafood consumption, as traditional practices are inherently respectful of fish stock preservation. The Swiss paper promotes environmentally sustainable agricultural practices that preserve biodiversity and reduce the environmental impact of farming. The Table 1 juxtaposes the three cases.

Table 1 - Comparison of the case studies in the special issue

Dimension	Afghanistan (Amiraj & Chau, 2024)	Ireland (Pauley, 2024)	Switzerland (Bertolino, 2024)
Cultural Heritage, Innovation, and Sustainability			
Heritage	Preservation of traditional farming methods and cultural practices such as Hashar	Preservation of traditional lobster fishing practices and cultural heritage	Revitalisation of traditional red berry cultivation methods, promotion of local food heritage
Innovation	Introduction of collaborative agribusiness initiatives to enhance productivity and sustainability	Innovative public engagement strategies to boost domestic lobster consumption	Innovative agricultural techniques and community engagement to restart red berry cultivation
Sustainability	Focus on building long-term resilience for harsh climate conditions through sustainable agricultural practices	Promotion of sustainable fishing practices to ensure the long-term viability of lobster populations	Sustainable agricultural practices to preserve berries biodiversity and support local economies
TBL layer			
Social (*fair*)	Strong community ties through collaborative practices rooted in cultural and religious traditions	Cultural significance of lobster fishing, community engagement in sustainable practices	Community-based initiatives in red berry cultivation, reconnecting locals with cultural heritage
Economic (*good*)	Resource limitations, but increased productivity through collaborative efforts and gratuity system	Low domestic consumption of lobster, economic potential through public engagement and education	Economic boost through agro-tourism, support for small-scale farmers and local traditional practices advocacy
Environmental (*clean*)	Emphasis on sustainable practices to conserve resources and reduce soil and natural resources degradation	Sustainable fishing practices, advocacy for environmentally friendly seafood consumption	Promotion of sustainable agriculture, preservation of biodiversity

4. Considerations for Policymakers and Practitioners

Practitioners in the field of sustainable food systems can derive valuable insights from the case studies of AFNs in Afghanistan, Ireland, and Switzerland. First, the Afghan case study demonstrates the importance of collaborative agribusiness initiatives in addressing food security challenges. Practitioners learn that by fostering cooperation among farmers and integrating marginalised groups, agricultural productivity can be significantly enhanced. This collaborative approach not only improves access to markets and resources but also builds resilience within the farming community, through economic interventions of gratuity, i.e. Hashar. Such strategies can be adapted by policymakers and practitioners in other regions to support smallholder farmers, tailoring collaborative models to local contexts to achieve similar outcomes in improving food security and community well-being.

Second, the Irish lobster industry case study provides a compelling example of how integrating traditional practices with modern sustainability initiatives can preserve cultural heritage while promoting ecological and economic sustainability within local communities. Practitioners learn the value of leveraging local cultural assets and traditional knowledge to support sustainable food systems. By using Social Practice Theory, the study illustrated the role of cultural practices in maintaining sustainable consumption patterns. This shows practitioners the importance of understanding and incorporating local traditions and values in the design of sustainability programmes geared towards market stimulation within a local region. It suggests that successful sustainable food systems can be built not only on technological and economic innovations, which are nevertheless important but also on the cultural practices that resonate with local communities.

Last, in Switzerland, the case study of red berry cultivation in the Entremont region reminds us of the significance of traditional agricultural practices to enhance local economies and cultural heritage. From this study, policymakers and practitioners learn the importance of re-evaluating neglected agricultural practices and recognising their cultural, social, and economic value. The case study offers a model for practitioners to follow in other regions where traditional practices have been abandoned. This study demonstrates that reviving and supporting local food heritage can contribute to economic development, cultural preservation, and sustainability, corroborating the idea that resilient AFNs also focus on food that is good, fair, and clean. Practitioners and policymakers can integrate the lessons from these three diverse case studies and develop more holistic and context-sensitive approaches to building sustainable food systems globally.

Conclusions

The interconnected themes of heritage, innovation, and sustainability are central to creating resilient and equitable food systems (Garrido-Pérez & Sidali, 2014). The Slow Food Movement's principles continue to be relevant in addressing contemporary challenges in the food system. By integrating these principles with innovative practices and AFNs, we can promote sustainable agriculture, preserve cultural heritage, and support local communities. Further research and collaboration in this field are essential for developing more sustainable food systems that meet the needs of present and future generations.

AFNs play a crucial role in the innovation and sustainability of food systems by reducing environmental impact, enhancing economic viability, promoting social equity, and embracing technological advancements. These networks offer a viable alternative to conventional food systems, addressing some of the most pressing challenges of our time. As AFNs continue to evolve and expand, they hold the potential to transform global food systems into more sustainable, equitable, and resilient structures. Future research and policy support are essential to maximise the benefits of AFNs and ensure their integration into broader food system frameworks. Future studies could dissect the constructs adopted in the studies of this special issue and build models that could help with the generalisation of the findings to larger and more diverse samples.

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