

Community entrepreneurship in sustainable food places

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During the last few years, the agro-food sector has undergone a phase of great transformation deriving on arising territorial emphasis on the topic and a greater sensitivity regarding the issues of sustainability on supply chains. In this contribution, we focus on how these transformations increasingly boost new community-based territorial functions in food distribution and consumption. In answering this question, we attempt to delineate a reflection on tools and conditions for sustainable food place-making through the analysis of two examples: the e-commerce platform 'L'Alveare che dice sì' and the covered market of 'Mercato di Lorenteggio', recognized as good practices in a perspective of convergence between community entrepreneurship and sustainable food place making.

Keywords: community entrepreneurship; food policy; sustainability

Tra piattaforme reali e virtuali: impresa di comunità nei luoghi del cibo del futuro

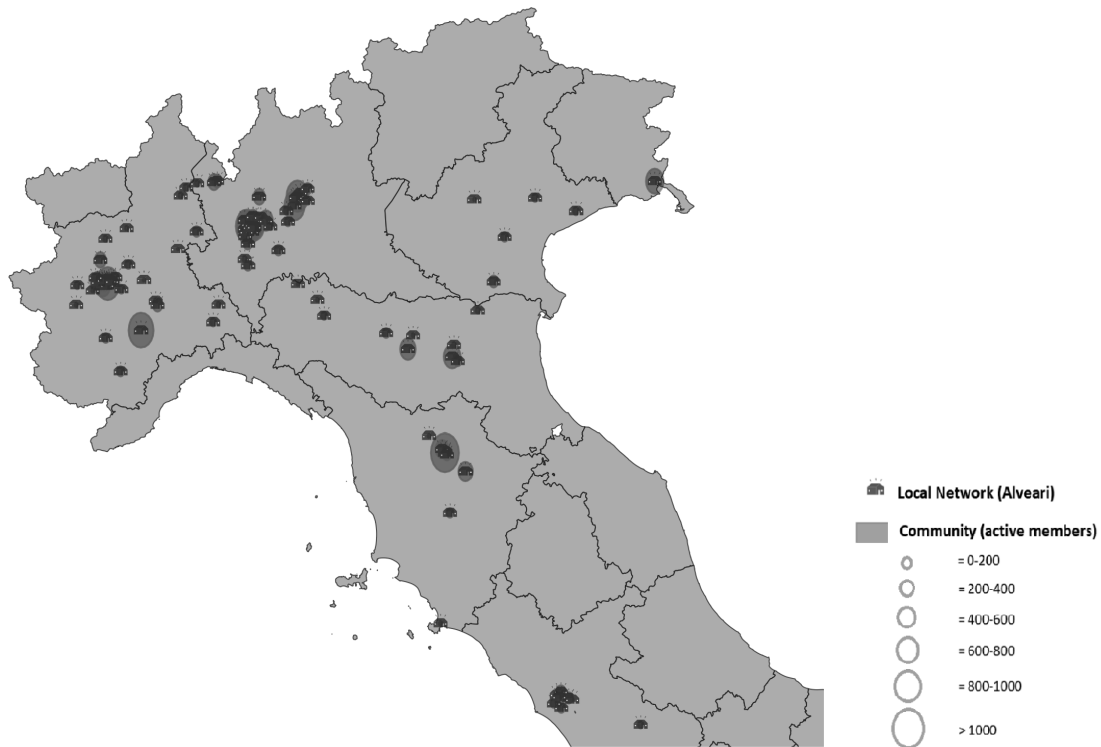
Il settore agroalimentare sta attraversando una fase di grande trasformazione, per l'imporsi del tema in chiave territoriale a livello nazionale e internazionale e per una crescente sensibilità verso la sostenibilità e le filiere corte. Questo articolo si interroga su quali contesti e fattori giochino un ruolo chiave nello sviluppo di 'luoghi del cibo' sostenibili basati su reti territoriali e funzioni community-based. Il contributo si articola attraverso l'analisi di due esempi: la piattaforma di e-commerce 'L'Alveare che dice sì' e il 'Mercato di Lorenteggio', riconosciuti come buone pratiche in un'ottica di convergenza tra l'imprenditorialità comunitaria e la produzione di politiche in collaborazione con attori locali.

Keywords: impresa di comunità; politiche alimentari; sostenibilità

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In this era characterized by vast changes such as globalization, growing world population, rapid urbanization, volatile markets and climate change, the relationship between cities and food has become an increasingly crucial issue to be addressed for future sustainable development. In this vein, the New Urban Agenda (NUA) and Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) have recently recognized food as a priority urban issue, especially in terms of security and nutrition. Moreover, from a territorial perspective, the Milan Urban Food Policy Pact¹ (MUFPP) has noted the international relevance of adopting an 'urban food policy' perspective aimed at engaging cities worldwide in the development of sustainable, inclusive and resilient urban food systems (Borelli *et al.*, 2017). The sustainability of urban food systems is an important and underestimated issue, in part due to its low visibility compared to other urban services and physical networks, e.g. housing, transportation, electricity. Despite this 'visual' issue, a certain sector of the literature has recognized the importance of adopting urban policy to manage territorial externalities and uneven developments, especially regarding the management of spatial functions for food production, distribution and consumption in urban areas (Morgan, 2015; Marsden Murdoch, Morgan, 1999; Pothukuchi, Kaufman, 1999). Recent contributions to the topic have framed mass-market retailers, urban markets, retail stores, alternative food networks (e.g., community-supported agriculture-csa; Nost, 2014) as the main actors experimenting with urban food distribution and supply innovation (Morgan, 2009).

In this contribution, we have to consider also with the current debate on social and technological innovations deriving from the advent of digital platforms and the sharing economy (Bain, Company, 2016). These have been generally acknowledged as radical factors innovating the way we trade and exchange goods and consequently on the way in which we organize services (Benkler, 2006). These dynamics, along with the reduction of resources' distribution costs influence the production trends of advanced economies, transforming the places in which we live, consume and work, are opening opportunities for new actors to experiment with innovative and sustainable approaches to food production, distribution and consumption (Connelly, Markey, Roseland, 2011; Atkins, Bowler, 2016; Campanaro *et al.*, 2019). On the other hand, we can observe that these disintermediation formulas, together with the development of platform economy tools, can lead to the fragmentation and atomization of the actors involved in

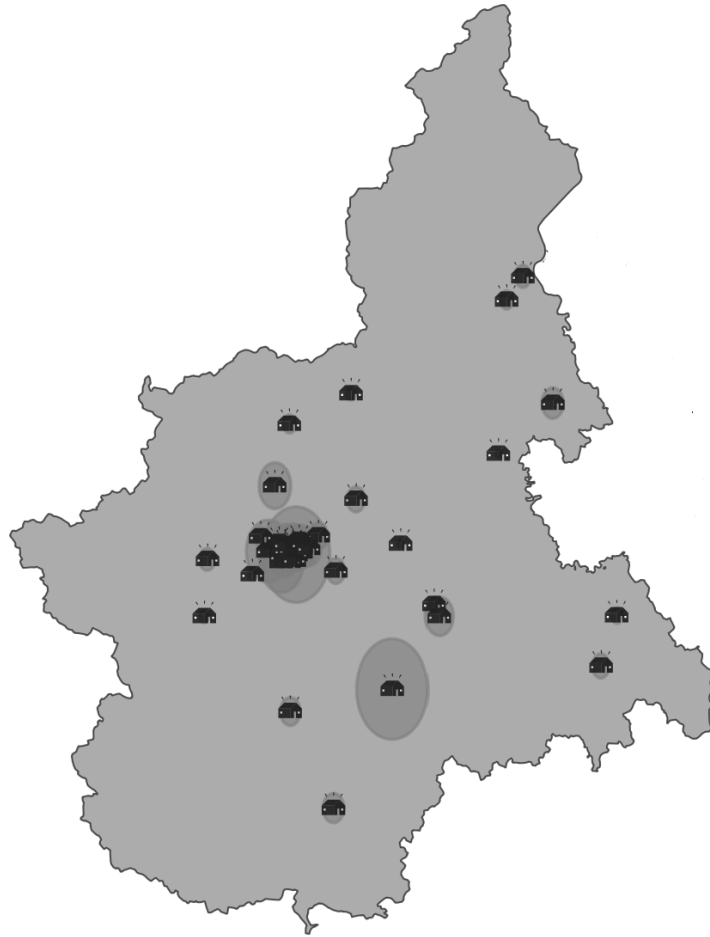


1 - 2. The Local Networks and Community members' diffusion of 'L'Alveare che dice sì' in Italy and the Piedmont Region, highlighting the community of active members involved.
Source: Elaboration by the authors based on 'L'Alveare che dice sì' dataset.

these innovative forms of exchange (Keney, Zysman, 2016). In order to identify potential conflicts and potentialities caused by the above mentioned dynamics, it is worth analysing the relationships and opportunities characterizing these practices, here termed 'sustainable food places', where new formulas of food distribution and consumption occur (Micheletti, 2010). In this contribution² we want to match this emerging discussion, with the observation of certain territorial practices that deals with this issue proposing the recombination of actors and resources able to reconnect food to local communities, their socio-cultural and territorial dimension as well as improve social cohesion at multiple scales (Vito, 2018; Allen *et al.*, 2003). The hypothesis is that this emerging community-based entrepreneurship practices (Tricarico, Le Xuan, 2014, 2013; Sommerville, McElwee, 2011; Peredo, Chrisman, 2006), can represent a potential actor to

target urban and regional development strategy able to promote sustainable food place-making policy. Based on this reasoning, the paper aims to address the following question: which contexts and factors play a key-role in developing community engagement in sustainable food places?

To answer this question, the article analyses specific organizational conditions that ensure the development of sustainable food places, within a perspective of relational food economy (Bathelt, Glückler, 2011). Specifically, the paper presents two relevant examples: the e-commerce company of *L'Alveare che dice sì*, a 'virtual space' based on a short supply chain platform that enables local producers and consumers to interact, promoting knowledge exchange between the members of a virtual community; and the *Mercato di Lorenteggio* based in Milan, a 'physical space' where the actors involved have implemented



ALVEARE	members
Alba	1313
Arona	290
Asti	512
Borgarello	236
Borgomanero	235
Chieri	339
Chivasso	336
Ciriè	593
Cocconato	114
Cuornè	241
Giaveno	298
Grugliasco	814
Ivrea	173
Lemi	236
Mondovì	391
Novara	405
Novi Ligure	311
Orbassano	153
Pianezza	250
Pinerolo	170
San Mauro Torinese	351
Savigliano	376
Torino - Barriera	347
Torino - Borgo Po	418
Torino - Cattaneo	812
Torino - Gioberti	172
Torino - Guido Reni	233
Torino - Mille	439
Torino - San Donato	507
Torino - San Paolo	407
Torino - San Salvario	1255
Torino - Vanchiglia e Aurora	579
Torino - Asinari di Berzezzo	549
Torino - Grassi	812
Torino - Juvarrà	267
Torino - Madonna del Pilone	463
Torino - Montevideo	325
Torino - Pier Carlo Boggio	31
Torino - Sebastopoli	535
Torino - Servais	228
Torino - Tepice	306
Tortona	210
Varese	487
Vercelli	601
Viatosto	104
Viatosto	198

a participatory process aimed at renovating traditional food market functions and improving social cohesion at the local community scale.

Theoretical background and methodology

Reasoning on the topic of sustainable food places means understanding several dynamics that in recent years have contributed to increasing consumer awareness of the socio-environmental impacts of food systems across a wide strata of population in both Italy and Europe as a whole (Pirani, Zandonai, 2017; Ismea, 2016; Grunert Hieke S, Wills, 2014). This shift has significantly influenced consumption patterns and, consequently, led to the growth of sales of organic, fair trade and certified food products (Nielsen, 2016). As argued by Maye

and Kirwan (2010), this increase in consumers' food awareness results mainly from the increase in concern of knowing where and how food has been produced, due to both growing media coverage of these issues and the consumer concerns about the safety and quality of the industrial food system. Considering these changing trends, economic actors in the agro-food sector have started to adapt their own production to this new demand, offering products reporting detailed information, particularly in terms of nutritional value, use of natural resources and traceability of raw materials (IPSOS, 2016). Evidence of these changes comes not only from the introduction of new product categories, but also from the growing relevance of territorial variables that are becoming feature of specific food places, space of reinterpretation traditional forms of production, distribution and consumption (Tricarico, Geissler, 2017; Mundler,

Laughrea, 2016). In these places we can observe the interaction between private firms, citizens and local authorities, demonstrating a particular sensitivity to social and environmental problems related to food systems (Lappo *et al.*, 2015). This school of thought has started with those communities or social movements traditionally sensitive to issues related to ethical consumerism, food justice and food sovereignty. In particular, we cite the Alternative Food Networks (AFN)³, defined as «those networks of production, distribution and consumption of food which propose and practice models that can be considered as alternative to the ones of the conventional food system, based on agro-food industry and large-scale retail trade» (Dansero, Pettenati, 2015: 7).

However, this paper intends to affirm two new specific categories and related examples of: an e-commerce platform and covered market hall, as 'virtual' and 'physical' examples of 'sustainable food places'. They can be considered as relevant examples because they include both aspects related to social and environmental sustainability but also and critically the current trends in food distribution and consumption, relying on 'virtual places' such as e-commerce platforms to purchase locally grown food and that provide access to information on the quality of products. This last aspect is crucial because it defines the driver of community engagement, increasing consumers' awareness and influencing their choices and at the same time orienting producers' offer through directly intercepting the preferences expressed by demand. Purchasing food products on digital platforms has also become increasingly important and widespread in a society where time has come to be considered as a scarce resource and internet connection is now widely available (Lucatelli, Peta, 2008). In studying 'physical places' such as municipal market hall, we deal with the urban policy trends on the valorisation of under-utilized public assets as tools of urban regeneration and community entrepreneurship towards the improvement of socio-cultural interactions with local contexts (Billi, Tricarico, 2018; Tricarico, 2016; Bailey, 2012). Infact, producers and retailers working in 'physical places' can benefit *vis-à-vis* a relationship with consumers, creating in this way mutual trust, vital for enhancing consumers' satisfaction (Vannoppen *et al.*, 2001). In this view, the participation of local communities in the organization of municipal markets activities may be considered as a positive experience not only in economic terms, but also as an opportunity for socio-cultural interaction and knowledge exchange (Tamini, 2015; Polyak, 2013).

In the methodological perspective, this contribution refers to a qualitative investigation of the development process of two examples of sustainable food places. The analysis considers the description of stakeholders' and community interactions that have mobilized tangible and intangible factors necessary for the definition of specific territorial practices (Crosta, 2010). This analytical framework comes from the fields of social research in territorial practices (*ibid.*) and community-based entrepreneurship analysis, where these initiatives are considered as a complex interplay between different forms and dimensions of networks, interests, duties and powers (Tricarico, 2016; 2014; Bailey, 2012). Borrowing the framework of stakeholder theory (Donaldson, Preston, 1995) and applying it to the concept of sustainable food places, these practices can be considered as the resulting interaction of different stakeholders, namely

any «group of individuals who can affect or is affected by the achievement of the organization's objectives» (Freeman, 1984: 46). In our case, the process analysis is essential to finding how and which different stakeholders have been engaged and which interactions created the feasible conditions necessary for these initiatives.

Referring to the methodology of this work, the territorial dimension and the policy framework of future food places is characterized by: (i) *factors*: the resources utilized, both tangible and intangible, to create the conditions of economic feasibility of the services and for defining the space of social relations necessary for their functioning; (ii) *stakeholder framework*: the companies, public and intermediate bodies, traditional social economy actors related to the third sector and the for-profit sector, which operate in the context of food production and distribution.

A third aspect we analyse is the spatial and relational dimension of those we frame as food places of the future, in particular referring to: (i) *a virtual spatial relationship* represented by the e-procurement platforms, based on an organizational scheme that changes some aspects of the Gruppi di Acquisto Solidale (GAS) and introducing elements of social innovation in the creation of an enabling platform for the bottom-up exchange of food products between a community of local producers and consumers; (ii) *a space of physical interactions* represented by the municipal covered market, which has reacquired and strengthened its dimension as *a place of access and consumption* and, at the same time, a key device of relations between local community actors and individuals. All this took place within a process of urban regeneration realized in synergy between a public entity and a cultural association as a *de facto* urban policy (Fareri, 2009).

Two Examples of Sustainable Food Places

The following examples are based on experiences and practices that have taken place in innovative food places, virtual or physical, observed with particular interest towards their community-based production and distribution functions.⁴

A virtual place: the e-procurement platform

'L'Alveare che dice sì!'

L'Alveare che dice sì! is a fruit and vegetables e-procurement platform developed in Toulouse, France in 2011 as *La Ruche qui dit Oui!* with the aim of creating local networks that allow direct trading between small farmers and consumers. This system encouraged sourcing and selling local food from farmers and food producers to consumers, while strengthening these relationships and connecting the community through food. The system has recently been expanded to Italy, England, Spain, Germany and Belgium under the name of *The Food Assembly*. In Italy, this digital platform was initially set up in Turin in 2014, replicating the original French entrepreneurial idea and model. The main feature of the platform is the promotion of cutting the middle men associated costs, using proximity as a tool for ensuring the quality of food as well as environmental sustainability of the production process, proposing itself as an alternative to the industrial supply chain. The scheme uses an online platform to assemble small food-buying networks called

Alveari. This network facilitates users ordering from a selection of locally-sourced products online and then can collect their orders from one of the pre-order pop-up markets where the producers gather to assemble your goods and deliver them in person. The two-hour weekly event is coordinated by *Alveare* leaders. These meetings encourage an exchange of knowledge, with the consumers discovering the detailed history of their purchases and the latter better understanding new preferences and trends of their customers. The innovative element of the *Alveare*, compared to a traditional e-commerce platform, is the direct interaction between producers and consumers through the organization of these meetings and events where consumers can gain direct contact with small-scale producers and related cultural information of the production processes and territorial features. It is a crucial resource that enables the development of this virtual food place and led to the company's recognition as an innovative start-up (in December 2015), which provided further incentives⁵ by the Italian Government put in place to support entrepreneurial initiatives with highly innovative social impact (Italian Ministry of Economic Development, 2017). With regard to the organizational model of the company, the aspect of greatest interest lies in the decentralization of activities through the regional exchange spaces developed by bottom-up initiatives. In particular, the *virtual place* creates an 'interaction space' where consumers and local small farmers can meet, within a radius of 250 km, and exchange not only products, but also knowledge through the contents of the platform. The platform also enables local managers to create new networks where the system does not yet exist, but where there are local producers that can work in a short food supply chain framework. At the same time, the headquarters manages the online sales platform⁶ (fig. 1-2), through which consumers can purchase products, according to the availability of the farmers. This model of management resembles that of GAS, but in this case, the involvement of consumers is more flexible and does not include affiliation to any association. Only the online registration to the platform represents a peculiar 'syncretism' of the virtual and physical market that responds to the changing needs of sustainable consumption. Examining the data on local networks (*Alveari*) and active community members, the distribution primarily concentrates in the northwestern area of Italy, where both concentration and specialization in the agro-food small enterprise sector is already prominent (Platania, Rapisarda, Rizzo, 2015).

A physical food place: the Lorenteggio municipal market

The Lorenteggio municipal market is located in Giambellino, an historical and populous residential neighbourhood in the southwest outskirts of the municipality of Milan, characterized by the presence of public housing estates and low-income population, but also by a great sense of community and social activism, thanks to the presence of numerous socio-cultural associations (Piva, 2006). The market, in line with the functional transformation of many other municipal markets across Europe, has been the object of a regeneration process triggered by the *Dynamoscopio*,⁷ a cultural association based in Giambellino currently involved in animating the social and cultural life of the public spaces of the neighbourhood. The association began its activism campaign in 2011, responding to the deprivation

trends of both the neighbourhood and the municipal market, especially regarding the decline of its commercial activities. The market trading scheme has been based on a historically close relationship between retailers and the members of the local communities rather than a formal trading system. As explained by the project manager, the crisis emerged following the general physical decline of the market building, but also due to the difficulties in respecting municipality rules regarding on-site food consumption, restrictions on activities allowed in the market spaces and the policies of pricing control on goods sold. In 2011, with the retailers' licenses expiring and the local elections approaching, *Dynamoscopio* issued a petition to support local inhabitants' calls to preserve and enhance the market's functions. Shortly thereafter, with the election of new mayor Giuliano Pisapia, a new ad-hoc regulation was issued for the management of covered markets, aiming to enable a more inclusive and democratic decision-making process that would allocate at least 10% of available space to socio-cultural organizations. Beyond these measures, in 2013, in collaboration with retailers, *Dynamoscopio* took over management responsibilities of the Lorenteggio Market. This permitted them to begin the physical requalification process – organized in different phases in order to keep the market continuously operational – and was partly financed through fundraising carried out by the collaboration between the consortium and cultural associations based in the neighbourhood. Currently, the market spaces work as an open platform to host cultural and recreational activities, mainly oriented to the youth of the neighbourhood, such as: storytelling workshops, language courses, music concerts, fashion and design workshops and multi-cultural playrooms.

Moreover, the market's retailers have adopted an internal policy to sell goods produced by local social enterprises, labelled and marketed as *Giambellino DOP (Di Origine Popolare)*. DOP denotes a commercial brand identifying socially responsible products, coming not only from the local supply chain of the Rural South Park of Milan, but also from other Italian social enterprises involved in agro-food production across the country. *Giambellino DOP* has also planned to create a 'charter of values' that will guide consumers in their food purchasing choices, providing them with information not only about the supply chain, but also of the impacts on local communities. From the information gathered through interviews with the cultural associations and retailers of the community, it is clear that *Dynamoscopio* has played a key role in coordinating and fostering a bottom-up approach aimed at using the market spaces to intercept local needs in order to improve the community's quality of life. What emerges from the history of the Lorenteggio market is a strong example of a functional transformation of a traditional market hall, from a mere commercial exchange place to a platform for civic participation and experimentation with new subsidiary services focused on food. Despite contextual and regulatory obstacles, the process has seen a drastic evolution in its dialogue with local authorities to provide economic and political resources that address local needs, while at the same time anticipating new consumption trends and providing new uses of the spaces as places for socio-cultural interactions integrated with the enhancement of 'access to food experiences' (Kahneman *et al.*, 2006).

Conditions required for the development of Sustainable food place-making

The main reflection following the analysis focuses on the role of factors and the contexts useful for creating the necessary conditions for project development. In both the examples analyzed, we observe how particular conditions allowed these food places to become public spaces for social interaction, facilitate an exchange of knowledge and strengthen the community (Poli, 2017; Tricarico, 2017; Bailey, 2012). Compared to the facilitation and promotion policies of virtual initiatives, these objectives have been achieved, in part, by innovative processes that indirectly aim at improving the sustainability of the supply chain, within a framework of incentive policies and business regulatory innovation. In the case of *L'Alveare che dice sì!*, for example, the government measures promoted by the Ministero dello Sviluppo Economico generated a flexible corporate management scheme and fostered investments. Thanks to these provisions, the e-procurement platform has been able to engage a community of producers and consumers in its activity, characterized by a strong focus on the relational and social innovation aspects. In light of the innovation schemes developed by the platform, small farmers have benefited from this new face to face relationship with their customers that allows them to better know and anticipate their preferences. Likewise, consumers gained the opportunity to discover more about where and how the food they buy has been produced, improving their awareness of their own consumption. These kinds of practices represent a stimulating input for the public actors who foster the transition towards sustainable food systems and models of production aimed at creating cohesive local communities and proximity between rural and urban areas (Quaglia, Geissler, 2018).

With regard to the resources and support factors of 'physical place' initiatives, a significant policy issue concerns the exploitation of neglected or underutilized public assets in the experimentation of innovative community projects (Tricarico, Zandonai, 2018; Mangialardo, Micelli, 2017; Campagnoli, 2016; Tricarico, 2016). In the case of the municipal market, this crucial condition questioned the legitimacy of sustainable food places as an effective tool of civil society mobilization and representation of needs (Polizzi, Vitale, 2010). It also broadened the discussion by assuming these participatory practices as tools of aggregation of local interests for the production, distribution and consumption of food within a framework of social cohesion. In this context of the Municipality of Milan, the administration has shown a prominent position by actively supporting this approach, through providing regulatory innovation to support the creation of a sustainable food place, integrating the needs of citizens and encouraging civil society actors and retailers to join together in a regeneration strategy for the market and the neighborhood as a whole. Starting from the functional transformation of the Lorenteggio market, the Municipality has been proactive in implementing projects and policies for regenerating areas, particularly thanks to special funds specifically allocated for re-launching the outskirts of the city⁸ (Liso, 2016).

In a period characterized, both in Italy and in Europe, by strong inequalities and weak household purchasing power the development of innovative places of food distribution and consumption, opens up the creation of interesting dynamics of civic participation and strengthening of local communities. Important and

positive signals are provided by these 'new places' and along with the exploitation of the digital marketplace for purchasing food we can imagine these places improving access to healthy and quality food as well as an exchange of food knowledge. However, these trends also introduce some important questions about the role of private and public actors, in particular if the former is capable of responding to a lack of intervention in terms of social policies aimed at guaranteeing access to quality food and whether the latter has the capacity of promoting innovative practices and networks able of generating new offers in every area of cities and regions (Maino, 2016).

Considering the analysis of the two examples, the most critical factors of these initiatives that emerge are the strengthening of relationships and the composition of interests between different actors involved «in the ability to use goods and resources in different ways that can improve the ability of society to act» (*ibid.*: 44). The main obstacle lies first in the economic sustainability of these initiatives and second in their inclusiveness in terms of capabilities of such agendas within different territories. As underlined by Pasqui (2015: 55), the spread of these highly innovative community developments can be strongly dependent on a «high standard of economic performances and urban infrastructures needed to support these new form of production» rather than eventually «promoting new asymmetries and spatial inequalities».

This contribution has presented different urban contexts and experiences that represent significant examples belonging to certain territories (Turin and Milan) and favorable socio-economic conditions. These development factors, together with uneven institutional and cultural contexts, may represent the main challenges to diffusing food place making practices in places «that don't matter» (Rodríguez-Pose, 2018). In order to enhance the possibility to reach new opportunities to develop sustainable food places, we must recognize the need to introduce these practices into wide co-production tools, enhancing the role of regional and local authorities in supporting a strong civic infrastructure, boosting the network and interactions between local communities, institutions and business ecosystems.

The work is a joint result of the three authors contribution; the paragraphs are assigned as follows: the introduction, the conclusions and the original idea of the paper to L.T, the theoretical background and the methodology to L.T. and S.Q., the analysis of the cases study to L.T. and L.S., the maps has been elaborated by L.S. We also thank Fondazione Giangiacomo Feltrinelli for funding research activities.

Notes

1. Launched in 2014 as immaterial legacy of the Milan Expo 2015, signed by more than 160 cities from all over the world (<http://www.milanurbanfoodpolicycompact.org/>).
2. A previous and partial version of the present contribution is available in Sganzzetta, Tricarico, 2018.
3. Jarosz (2008) identifies four major features characterizing the AFN approach: (i) shorter distances between producers and consumers; (ii) small farm size and scale or environmentally sustainable farming methods; (iii) existence of food purchasing venues and models; (iv) commitment to sustainable food production, distribution and consumption.
4. The investigation has been conducted through interviews with Project

Managers and secondary data derived from newspapers, policy documents and datasets related to the development processes of the two food places. The Project Managers interviewed: E.S. (L'Alveare che dice sì), J.L. (Lorenteggio Market/Dynamoscopio) and Lorenteggio Market retailers were made in July 2017.

5. The general objective of the policy measures is to promote sustainable growth, technological advancement and, in particular, to create favourable conditions for the development of a new business culture inclined towards innovation. Other explicit goals of this policy are enhancing social mobility, generating new employment, especially for the youth, reinforcing the links between universities and businesses, and increasing the capacity of Italy to attract foreign capitals and talents. More on the specific measures can be found at Executive Summary of the Program (Italian Ministry of Economic Development, 2017).

6. The economic sustainability of *L'Alveare che dice sì!* is ensured by a 10% fee on each monetary transaction.

7. Association created with the mission of processing research and dissemination of the cultural history of the neighborhoods' population.

8. Other policies, more related to food issues, have recently been implemented for promoting municipal market halls as food access and socio-cultural interaction places, as part of the Food Policy Milano 2015-2020 adopted in 2014 (<http://www.milanurbanfoodpolicypact.org/>).

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