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Relational work in an alternative food network: The fundamental role of shared meaning for organising markets differently

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Abstract

This article studies the role of shared meaning for organising Alternative Food Networks (AFNs). Extant research shows that organisational elements, such as rules, and hybridisation of conventional and alternative modes of food provisioning are important for AFN organisation. Yet, they might both enable and hinder the aims of AFNs. Complementing this body of research, the article investigates how AFN participants work out the appropriate kind of organisation for realising ‘a promise of difference’. Introducing Zelizer’s ‘relational work’, the article investigates how AFN participants foster a shared meaning of participating and thereby identify what practices are appropriate for its organisation. The analysis draws on extensive ethnographic materials from Swedish REKO-rings (a direct marketing arrangement for local foods). The findings show how the REKO-ring participants’ relational work negotiates and establishes shared meaning; what practices are appropriate and inappropriate for organising decent food provisioning. The study contributes to extant research by showing the fundamental role of shared (and discordant) meaning

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for the organisation of market-based alternatives to the current food system.

KEYWORDS
alternative food networks, markets, meaning, organisation, relational work

INTRODUCTION

Recent decades have seen calls for a sustainable and fair mode of food provisioning to overcome the social and environmental problems associated with current food systems (McGreevy et al., 2022; Willett et al., 2019). Alternative Food Networks (AFNs) have emerged as a response to the call, supplying alternative foods (e.g. heirloom varieties) through certain production techniques (usually small-scale and/or organic) and distribution systems (local and/or without intermediaries).[1] Although AFNs make up a marginal share of food systems, they offer more sustainable solutions to 'the problem of cooperation' in market-based food supply (see Beckert, 2009). That is, they foster cooperation among market actors in food supply chains to ensure that neither people nor the environment will be exploited by the (price) competition and profiteering of mainstream food systems (cf. Goodman et al. 2012). Yet, many AFNs involve markets (Bååth, 2022; Fuentes & Fuentes, 2022). Henceforth, I limit my argument to such market-based AFNs. In this article, I investigate how AFN participants use and negotiate shared meaning – understandings of appropriate organisational elements, such as practices – for organising decent food provisioning.

AFN scholarship has engaged extensively with the issues of defining what 'alternativity' is and how it might be organisationally achieved. Rather than forming distinct alternatives to conventional food provisioning, extant research shows that AFNs tend to foster hybrids. Thus, they integrate, or hybridise, conventional and alternative aspects of socio-economic arrangements. Thereby, AFNs may deliver on their promise of difference, or 'alternativity', to mainstream food production (see Le Velly, 2019; Zollet, 2022). AFN scholarship has engaged with hybridity in a variety of ways, ranging from the hybridisation of individual organisational elements, such as rules or spaces, to complex hybrids of entire systems, such as supply chains (Bloom & Clare Hinrichs, 2011: 143; Le Velly & Dufeu, 2016: 174; Zollet, 2022: 3). Examples include how AFN participants hybridise economic and environmental or moral values (Ilbery & Maye, 2005; Laursen & Noe, 2017) and competitive and cooperative forms of organisation. Examples of the latter include market pricing and communally set regulation (Chiffoleau et al., 2019; Le Velly & Dufeu, 2016) and overlap between conventional and alternative supply chains (Bloom & Clare Hinrichs, 2011; Zollet, 2022). A hybrid is thus any integration of conventional and alternative organisational elements or structures in AFN organisation.

Hybridity is, however, not unique to AFNs. In economic sociology, it is well established that all markets require both cooperation and competition to function. Moreover, the coordination of economic transactions involves both economic and, at least to some extent, non-economic values (Bandelj, 2020; Beckert, 2009). Thus, although hybridisation is often part of achieving 'alternativeness' within markets, hybridity alone is not sufficient for achieving it. Zollet's (2022) study of Japanese AFNs further supports this observation, showing that hybridisation is as much part of organising commercial co-option as of engendering alternatives in AFN.

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Le Velly offered an alternative, or complement, to hybridisation for what would distinguish AFNs' organisation from conventional food supply. He conceptualised AFNs as 'projects' where people organise to realise 'a promise of difference':

> [AFNs] … are motivated by the promise of difference that their projects harbour. Working on the alternative/conventional hybridisations that make up alternative food networks then amounts to identifying the rules that are specifically established to set this promise of difference in motion, i.e., 'alternative rules' … (Le Velly, 2019: 16).

One example of such a project is the local fishermen, who organise by hybridising 'market prices' and communally set rules to realise a promise of solidary profit sharing (Le Velly & Dufeu, 2016).

Studies of embeddedness in AFNs have produced similar arguments to Le Velly's. They showed how the relations and interactions of AFN participants 'embed' markets in social arrangements that are different from those embedding conventional markets. In line with Le Velly, these studies emphasised that embedding shapes AFN-markets through communally set regulations, including defining members' shares, including prices, payment models and supply quantities (Hinrichs, 2000), setting minimum order quantities and banning political discussions from functioning meetings (Chiffoleau, 2009; Chiffoleau et al., 2019). However, these studies showed how relations may embed, and thus shape, markets in less formal ways as well, such as through practices and technologies (see Chiffoleau, 2009; Chiffoleau et al., 2019; Hinrichs, 2000).

To organise markets alternatively, AFN participants must embed them in an appropriate manner. However, Bloom and Clare Hinrichs (2011) showed that informal ways of organising (and thus embedding) AFNs tend to lose out to formal ones as alternatives and conventions hybridise, fostering conventionalisation. Research on authority formation in AFNs similarly finds that increased regulation makes them more similar to, rather than different from, the conventional food system (Duncan & Pascucci, 2017). Furthermore, bureaucracy in AFNs often stems from market competition over food qualities rather than cooperation over shared politics or values (Pascucci et al., 2021). Thus, in addition to hybridisation and relational embedding through rules, practices and technologies, AFN participants must be able to collectively negotiate and, eventually, agree on what practices (and other organisational elements) are appropriate for their organisation and for organising projects that realise a promise of difference.

I start from Le Velly's (2019) notion that AFNs should be understood as projects organised for realising a promise of difference in order to have the potential to be an alternative. However, to organise such a project, AFN participants must not only foster hybrids and embed markets – they must also share meaning. By sharing meaning, I refer to them holding corresponding understandings of the project's aim and organisation. If the participants do not share meaning, they cannot distinguish appropriate hybrids or ways to embed the market, including the practical realisation of formal organisation, such as following and auditing rules. This observation begs the question: How do AFN participants work out the appropriate practices of market participation and organising to realise a promise of difference?

In this article, I address this question by investigating how AFN participants use relational work to foster and use shared meaning to realise a promise of difference. 'Relational work' is both a concept and a theory that focuses on how actors relationally negotiate what elements, such as practices, are appropriate for organising and participating in socio-economic arrangements, such as markets (Zelizer, 2011, 2012; see also Bandelj, 2012, 2020). Relational work is thus a process of meaning-making wherein actors, through interaction and eventual agreement, construct understandings of appropriate (and inappropriate) elements. To my knowledge, relational work has not

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been employed in AFN research (see also Schneider & Cassol, 2020). However, a study of not-for-profit 'sharing economy platforms' found that participants shared meaning in terms of '… a moral vision of economic life rooted in a new domestic mode of production' and '[taking] part in the construction of better alternatives' (Fitzmaurice et al., 2020: 99). Such shared meaning thus allows for the joint identification of appropriate and inappropriate practices for realising this vision of better alternatives – a kind of promise of difference. Thus, relational work allows for analysing the role of shared meaning and the negotiation of such meaning for the organisation of AFN.

Despite the absence of AFN studies of relational work, extant research shows how AFN participants form new kinds of relations which intertwine with shared meanings of participation. Such meanings concern what makes food and food provisioning 'better' (or different) (Baumann et al., 2022; Beacham, 2018; Carolan, 2022) and are often motivational for AFN participation (Barbera et al., 2020). However, these studies do not discuss the role of meaning for organising AFN. A few additional studies, however, engage with this topic. Sage (2003) argued that AFN participation fosters 'relationships of regard' due to a shared set of values concerning 'good food', in addition to embeddedness in AFNs. Kirwan (2006) furthered Sage's argument by showing how such regard enables AFNs to refrain from regulation or standardisation. Milestad et al. (2023) also showed the importance of maintaining, and sometimes negotiating, a shared meaning of 'territoriality' for upscaling AFNs. However, although informative on the role of meaning in AFN, these studies do not relate meaning to the organisation of AFN for realising a promise of difference (i.e. what Le Velly (2019) called 'projects').

After introducing relational work, the article studies its manifestation among participants (suppliers, administrators and customers) in Swedish REKO-rings (a direct marketing arrangement for local, small-scale foods). The analysis draws on extensive ethnographic materials, including interviews and participatory observations. The discussion concludes that relational work complements extant research on AFN organisation by explaining how AFN participants relationally work out what practices are appropriate (and inappropriate) for realising a promise of difference. Additionally, it argues for the importance of studying meaning sharing to further the organisation and upscaling of AFNs.

RELATIONAL WORK AND MARKET ORGANISATION

Relational work is a theory of socio-economic organisation that highlights 'the establishment of differentiated [i.e., complex] social ties, their maintenance, their reshaping, their distinction from other relations, and sometimes their termination' (Zelizer, 2007: 35; see also Bandelj, 2012, 2020).[2] Relational work gained traction as part of the relational turn in sociology, complementing the more structure-oriented theories of networks and embeddedness in economic sociology by focusing on the contents of relationality and of human relations (Bandelj, 2020: 252). Contrasting, for example, Granovetter's (1973) network analysis, relational work makes no à priori distinction between different types or forms of relations (e.g. strong and weak ties) (Bandelj, 2012; Zelizer, 2012). Instead, what is of interest is the content of the social relations that make up economic life (including, but not limited to, markets). Such content includes 'the viable matches of relations, transactions, meanings, and media of exchange' (Bandelj, 2020: 255), and their role for maintaining – or challenging – socio-economic organisation (Bååth, 2023). Relational work may be contrasted with theories of embeddedness in economic sociology; although the latter focuses on how non-economic social orders embed economic ones, such as regulation embedding markets (see Beckert, 2009), the former focuses on 'continuously negotiated and meaningful

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interpersonal relations that constitute economic activity' (Zelizer, 2012: 149). Zelizer's position thus largely aligns with White's (2002) argument that different kinds of interaction, including meaning sharing, among market participants are fundamental for their organisation; markets are not (only) socially embedded but also socially constructed. To this end, relational work seeks to engage with the real experiences and practices that constitute the socio-economic phenomena that may analytically be described in terms of embeddedness; for example, and of particular relevance for this article, how AFN participants foster relations through appropriate practices of competition and cooperation, through which participants negotiate and thus foster a shared meaning of the AFN and their participation therein.

Relational work starts from the assumption that all human relations harbour some kind of shared meaning (however, not necessarily a positive meaning); otherwise, they cease to exist. According to Bandelj (2012), 'For Zelizer, … meaning includes the understandings of what kind of symbols, practices, and media of exchange [are …] appropriate for different kinds of relationships' (176, emphasis added).[3] This definition of meaning emphasises that as people work out and maintain relations, they do so by negotiating and, to some extent, agreeing on what elements, such as practices, are in some other way appropriate for the relation. Relational work is thus a process of meaning-making, fostering shared meaning among people as they foster relations. To foster a relation is, fundamentally, to create, negotiate and interact according to shared understandings of appropriate relational elements. Consequently, discordant or in other ways non-shared meanings hinder the formation of relations, because at least one actor uses elements the other(s) find inappropriate; elements that simply do not allow actors to work out relations, including but not limited to being morally inappropriate. Some uncontroversial elements might thus be found inappropriate simply because they do not foster any relations.

The starting point for analysing meaning on markets is thus to study how actors foster relations and thereby create and negotiate shared meaning around how to participate in a market in an appropriate manner. While usually focusing on all kinds of socio-economic, interpersonal relations, Zelizer (2011) defined markets as 'a set of social relations in which actors transfer goods and services by establishing price-quantity schedules that govern those transactions' (129). This definition emphasises that markets are made up of relations among people, realised as they valuate and exchange priced offers (for money). However, for the (somewhat cryptic) schedules governing them to be characteristic of markets, the actors' relational work involves both competition and cooperation (cf. Beckert, 2009).

Drawing on the previous definition of meaning, I focus on the participants' understandings of appropriate practices of competition and cooperation for AFN as the empirical instances that indicate shared or discordant meaning(s). The relational content of such instances is of relevance, as it shows how AFN participants jointly work out shared meanings in relation to each other. Markets include a variety of practices. However, my focus is on competition and cooperation because, as outlined in the Introduction section, the former is usually seen as the cause of commercial co-option and conventionalisation, whereas the latter is associated with the hybrids and embeddedness involved when organising an alternative. Thus, how AFN participants work out relations through appropriate competition and cooperation reveals their meaning sharing (and lack thereof).

Competition is realised as different kinds of struggle. On a market, such struggles may take place both among and between suppliers and customers (Arora-Jonsson et al., 2020; Geertz, 1968: 32–33), through which the actors establish what relational 'matches' are 'viable' for appropriate economic transactions. The role of shared meaning in AFN organisation may thus be analysed by studying how market actors comprehend and share understandings about practices of struggle

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as appropriate or inappropriate, and, moreover, how the latter relate to problems of market organisation due to discordant understandings.

In contrast to competition, cooperation is distinguished by reciprocity, 'an exchange in which the participants benefit from the encounter' (Sennett, 2012: 5), which might be voluntary or enforced. Regulations that mandate cooperation or sharing among competitors are common examples of the latter (Beckert, 2009), whereas practices of solidarity often include the former. Thus, by studying how market actors comprehend and share understandings about practices of reciprocity as appropriate or inappropriate, one may analyse the role of shared meaning in AFN organisation and, moreover, how inappropriate practices relate to problems of market organisation due to discordant understandings.

To study AFN from the vantage point of relational work, this article henceforth focuses on how AFN participants understand and, in effect, practice competition and cooperation in appropriate ways as they organise markets. This focus limits the analysis to two fundamental, relational practices of market interaction and their possible hybrids. It is worth noting that, from the perspective of relational work, it is the meaning and associated practices that are of primary analytical relevance. Thus, if competition or cooperation takes place within a single market or between adjacent or partly overlapping markets, it is only relevant to the extent that it colours the content of these actors' relations and their respective market participation. Given that actors both struggle and act reciprocally, relational work moreover allows for understanding how actors hybridise (appropriate) practices of competition and cooperation in ways that realise rather than stifle the AFNs' promise of difference (cf. Le Velly, 2019; Zollet, 2022). This approach thus allows for investigating the role of relationally sharing meaning, or failure thereto, in the (market) organisation of AFNs.

FIELDWORK AND ANALYSIS

To study relational work in AFNs, I draw on extensive ethnographic materials from Swedish REKO-rings. A REKO-ring is a market for local, small-scale and often organic foods where (private) customers acquire foods directly from the farmer or food processor. These markets are co-organised by suppliers and customers, in particular those shouldering administrator roles (see also Bååth, 2022; Fuentes & Fuentes, 2022):

> Reko stands for Reliable Consumption [Rejäl konsumtion; 'Reko' might also mean 'decent' and 'trustworthy' in Swedish] and is a way of buying locally supplied foods without any intermediaries. Local consumers and suppliers join together to create a Reko-ring, selling produce and foodstuffs directly from producer to consumer … Usually, buyers and sellers establish contact through Facebook groups. The group informs buyers about the wares offered in the local Reko-ring and how to place an order. The group also informs about when and where the order can be picked up and how to pay. All business is arranged in advance. (Hushållningssällskapet, 2018, author's translation)

Although originally from Finland, the first Swedish REKO-rings emerged in 2016. By 2021, there were 220 active REKO-rings throughout the country. The Swedish agricultural development organisation, Hushållningssällskapet, supported the development of REKO-rings by spreading information about the concept until early 2021(Hushållningssällskapet, 2018).

REKO-rings offer a suitable case for examining relational work in AFNs. First, the quoted description of REKO-rings' guidelines and organisation offers a promise of difference – locally

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sourced and traded foods without intermediaries – or decent food provisioning (cf., e.g., 'good food' in Carolan (2022); or 'regard' in Sage (2003)). The quoted description also implies the rules for participating in a REKO-ring: to supply local foods without intermediaries, to organise the REKO-ring collaboratively, to create a way for suppliers to advertise and customers to review offers and place orders (i.e. Facebook groups) and to (only) deliver pre-ordered and pre-paid for foods at the meetings. These are what I henceforth refer to as the rules of REKO-rings. By following these rules, the suppliers also circumvent the legal demand for a sales permit, as this does not apply to the delivery of pre-paid orders in Sweden.

A core task for the administrators is to exclude any supplier that the members (or at least administrators) identify as 'large scale'. There is thus a bureaucracy to organising REKO-rings. However, it combines formal organisational means with informal and ambiguous ones, such as judging what 'local' or 'small-scale' means in practice. In addition, relational work among participants may be carried out both at delivery meetings and in the Facebook groups. How they understand practices as (in)appropriate may thus be reflected both in their experiences and how they practically participate in AFN, including the foods they buy or sell. Moreover, it is not a given that all participants share meaning. Participants may hold discordant or otherwise non-shared views of whether a practice is appropriate or not, and act accordingly. REKO-ring organisation and participation thus include working out relations and agreeing on what practices are appropriate.

The empirical objects of analysis are the REKO-ring participants' understandings of appropriate and inappropriate practices of competition and cooperation, including their experiences of performing them. To generate materials thereon, the study used a multi-sited ethnographic approach to examine REKO-rings in southern Sweden. We (the author and three other researchers) combined interviews with suppliers, administrators and customers ($N = 41$; see Supporting Information Appendix, Table 1 for an overview), online observations of Facebook groups ($N = 26$) and participatory observations on delivery meetings ($N = 15$) for six different REKO-rings during 2019 and early 2020.[4] Beyond using a combination of qualitative methods to study multiple, interrelated sites (Marcus, 1998), our focus during fieldwork was ethnographic – to 'learn' about how REKO-ring participants experienced the 'the meaning of actions and events' of participation (Spradley, 2016: 3–5). To investigate such meaning, the interviews generated materials on the REKO-ring participants' practices of participation and how they understood them in relation to the organisation of REKO-rings. By asking the interviewees to describe their participation, rather than justify it, we avoided requesting the interviewees' opinions or politics. Thereby, we ensured that we did not provoke or enforce normative statements during the interview, such as why a practice is (in)appropriate, or disseminate expectations of holding the 'right' opinions. Additionally, we reviewed relevant texts (information brochures, news media, individual suppliers' marketing etc.) to contextualise the materials generated during fieldwork.

We interviewed and recorded REKO-ring participants (henceforth interviewees) individually or in pairs (when relevant, e.g. customers sharing a household or suppliers being business partners or colleagues), in their homes or business sites. Although using an interview guide, we sought to follow the interviewees' reflections and queries, enabling them to emphasise the relevant dimensions of their REKO-ring participation according to their own experiences.

We informed the interviewees beforehand about the conditions of participation and how the interviews would be treated, including the pseudonymisation of participants and locations, and the option to end the interview or withdraw from the study at any time (no interviewee chose to do so). Our ethical considerations focused on minimising the risk for negative fallout for interviewees and REKO-ring participants during observations while maximising their ability to voice unfavourable or deviant experiences or opinions.

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While including suppliers, administrators and customers, 12 of the 41 interviewees occupied more than one such role (see Supporting Information Appendix, Table 1). Suppliers include those who sell foods at REKO-rings, usually small-scale farmers but also other food producers, such as artisanal bakers or cheese makers. Customers include those who order and purchase foods from suppliers. Administrators, however, include suppliers and customers who engage in running the REKO-ring: administrating the Facebook group, organising delivery meetings, marketing the REKO-ring and reviewing applications from prospective suppliers. Thirty-one of the interviewees were female, mirroring the bulk of interviewees' experience that customers and administrators were almost exclusively female.

After transcription, I used NVivo to code the interviews in three rounds. First, focusing on relational work, I identified passages where interviewees shared experiences of relations with other REKO-ring participants and whether they were with suppliers, customers or tying suppliers and customers together. For example, testimonies where suppliers described positive interactions with customers were coded 'relational work supplier → customer'. The relational work carried out regarding suppliers was generally described as relating to a supplier or customer. Thus, relational work with or among administrators was foremost described as relational work with suppliers. Moreover, I coded testimonies where the interviewees shared experiences of failed or terminated relations and of the absence of relations they had hoped for as they engaged in REKO-rings. For example, testimonies where suppliers described a lack of response or interest from customers in interaction were coded 'failed relational work supplier → customer'. In the second round, I coded the first-round excerpts for indications of shared meaning and the equivalent of disinterest or discord in failed or absent relations. I used the codes 'struggle', 'reciprocity' and 'hybrid' (a combination of the former two) to indicate what kind of relation the REKO-ring participant found the practice (in)appropriate for. Combining the codes of rounds one and two, it was thus possible to analyse how the REKO-ring participants deemed certain practices of AFN participation (in)appropriate, thus indicating a sharing or discord of meaning. Later, to generate a phenomenological description of the REKO-rings' promise of difference, a third round of coding was carried out to identify what promises the participants found REKO-rings to offer and deliver on (beyond relational work).

Henceforth, the focus of the analysis is the interviews, as they most directly include observations of REKO-ring participants' understandings of (in)appropriate practices and how they relate to other participants – that is the shared or discordant meanings. In addition, I do not elaborate to any greater extent on differences between online and in-person relational work, as the interviewees largely treated them as complementary dimensions of one and the same relational work. This may be the case because interaction in the Facebook groups is quite instrumental and rarely of any conversational character. The material from the observations, however, offered important contextualisation and examples of direct interaction. The excerpts quoted have been selected to demonstrate the different aspects of relational work among REKO-ring participants and have been edited for readability.

RELATIONAL WORK AND THE REALISATION OF A PROMISE OF DIFFERENCE

The following analyses how REKO-ring participants work out what practices of competition and cooperation, and their possible hybridisations, are appropriate for organising a project that realises a promise of difference. First, the analysis shows how REKO-ring participants perceive it as a

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meaningful organisation for realising a promise of difference – decent food provisioning. Second, it examines how participants foster relations, including both reciprocity and struggle, that they find appropriate for realising that promise. Third, it examines when relational work fails or becomes jeopardised and the role of discordant meanings involved when actors find certain practices inappropriate. The fourth section discusses how the REKO-ring participants' relational work allows them to foster shared meaning and how they negotiate and identify appropriate and inappropriate practices of competition and cooperation, and hybrids thereof, for market organisation.

The promise of difference: decent food provisioning

To analyse REKO-rings as projects organised to realise a promise of difference, I start from the AFN participants' understandings of REKO-rings as appropriate means of food provisioning: what promise of difference they find them to offer and realise.

The REKO-ring promise of difference in REKO-rings is foremost described in terms of their merits compared to conventional supermarkets' provisioning. The customers foremost refer to six different, yet intertwined, understandings of their promises, or offers: (1) better tasting, (2) more ethical, (3) more sustainable foods supplied by (4) a person you want to support and (5) hold in a positive regard due to (6) a more personal relation. Taken together, these understandings suggest that REKO-rings are seen as appropriate for food provisioning because they provide decent foods.

The understandings moreover overlap. For example, customers often talk at length about the gastronomic qualities of REKO-ring foods. Yet, these qualities are (at least partly) understood as the consequence of supplying foods in a more ethical and sustainable manner; by producing heirloom or organic varieties and by the fact that knowledge about their origin is available. One customer outlined this understanding as follows:

> The better animal welfare is my primary argument for shopping at the Reko-ring. I find that the meat is of higher quality. Especially the pork – other people have told me that they have eaten it and that they find it to be tastier, better meat. (Customer 13)

The meaning of REKO-ring participation is, however, not limited to accessing these different, and thus presumably better, foods. Moreover, it is understood as a means of supporting the supply of such foods: 'I think many people shop at the REKO-ring because it is environmentally friendly, locally produced and better goods – you want to support that' (Customer 8). The customers thus engage financially and, in other ways, support such decent food provisioning. REKO-rings thereby become a warrant, or promise, of such decency. A customer who first contended that organic production was the most important quality of foods later nuanced:

> I know that some [Reko-ring suppliers] are very clear about the fact that they are not organic. But they are close. There are certain rules you must follow to sell food as organic, but what is important is that you – as a customer – have knowledge about what kind of commodity you buy. (Customer 11)

The quote displays an understanding that in REKO-rings, it is of less relevance whether the food is certified organic because REKO-rings offer a means of securing decent foods that make

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formal organisational means, such as brands and standards, less relevant. The foods of REKO-rings are thus supplied in an appropriate manner, according to the customers, because they find that they share the meaning of decent foods with the suppliers. The shared meaning is thus of greater importance than certification schemes or other formal means of ensuring decency. As one customer concludes, 'it does not really make things easier for a consumer, it is more of an active choice – we do this for local suppliers and the environment and so on' (Customer 1). This quote mirrors how suppliers perceive customers' participation, indicating that they share the meaning of AFN participation, exemplified as follows:

> They [customers] do not want what the supermarket offers – they want quality. And I believe they want to feel that it is sustainable, since there is so much talk about the environment, that they want to buy locally. (Administrator 11)

The suppliers' appreciation of REKO-rings comes from a different vantage point. Nevertheless, they mirror the customers' six understandings. It is probably expected that suppliers claim that they offer particularly well-tasting foods. During several interviews, I was given the opportunity to taste their foods and encouraged to affirm that they were indeed better tasting and that the taste was due to more ethical and sustainable production methods. However, they also perceive REKO-rings as offering a different mode of supplying small-scale and otherwise decently supplied foods, as outlined by a hog farmer and administrator:

> We [the Reko-ring] do not require [suppliers] to be organic or certified organic. But food should be produced with regard for animal welfare and the environment. You know, our situation is that our farm is so small that audits and certification [organic] are too expensive, so we need a [different] way to get paid what it [such an operation] costs. (Administrator 9)

This quote displays an understanding of REKO-rings as a means of supplying decent foods in a manner that does not require large-scale operations. It also mirrors the conception that REKO-rings promise decent foods, and thus expensive certification schemes are not required in order to ask the premium prices needed to fund a comparably small-scale, ethical and sustainable operation (see Bååth, 2022). Thus, suppliers and customers display corresponding understandings that indicate an experience of shared meaning of REKO-rings as projects promising decent food provisioning and that participating in them contributes to the realisation of that promise.

Working out relations

Knowing that REKO-ring participants share in its promise of difference raises the question of how they foster relations that allow them to (jointly) identify the appropriate practices for realising a project – here, organising a market. REKO-rings exist because suppliers and customers work out relations that facilitate transactions of food for money in accordance with a shared meaning of what practices are appropriate for decent food provisioning. The Facebook group is the starting point for the relational work. Suppliers post ads and information about their operations, and customers place orders as public replies on the suppliers' posts. The supplier then replies to the customer, acknowledging the order, price, (usually) an order number and occasional modifications to the order.

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Although this starting point may seem unassuming, it resonates with the promise of difference that REKO-rings offer. As mandated, payments take place after ordering but before delivery. The order and its payment are thus not simply an affirmation of a future sale and delivery but also information about what and how much to produce or harvest for the upcoming delivery meeting. A baker explains that 'Tuesday is the last day for orders if I deliver on Thursday, so that I have the time to proof the dough and so on. That would be hard without Facebook' (Administrator 7). The quote implies an understanding of the ordering procedure as appropriate in terms of harmonising her baking with the customers' demand for bread, beyond following the rules to participate. Several interviewed suppliers describe such harmonisation as important for minimising waste and affirming that customers will indeed pay for and pick up the foods. Such descriptions indicate that it is an appropriate practice, not least because it corresponds with a promise of environmental and economic sustainability.

At the delivery meeting, the customers pick up their order from the individual suppliers. In terms of a market relation, this could be its end as the customer and supplier part ways. However, relational work fostering reciprocity also occurs at this event. One customer described it as follows:

> It is great to meet the people directly. Those who have worked with the food for real. You get a different respect for the food, plus they get paid better when no money goes to intermediaries. (Customer 12)

In this quote, the customer exemplifies how they understand their interaction with suppliers as appropriate by referring not only to positive emotions but also to the direct, appreciative relation to the supply of food it fosters. However, they also show that it is appropriate in economic terms because they acknowledge that decent food provisioning must promote financial viability through market exchange. The understanding thus exemplifies how economic and non-economic values of the practice 'intermingle', and thereby realises an appropriate (hybrid) practice. The decency involves paying a fair price because it is an appropriate and reciprocal act of supporting the supplier by letting the supplier win the economic struggle over prices and thus make the profits necessary to supply these decent foods.

Suppliers display an understanding that mirrors that of the customers, exemplified as follows:

> We have many loyal, returning customers and we wanted to give something back to them. In the summer we offer farm safaris, and give all returning customers free tickets to it. (Supplier 4b)

This quote shows a dual understanding. Offering free tickets is appropriate as a form of marketing because the supplier might foster further loyal customers who accept steeper prices (or lower quality) and thus increase profits. However, the practice becomes appropriate by not only functioning as marketing; the free safari is simultaneously a gift, offered seemingly honestly as appreciation for customers' loyalty. Additionally, it makes the production practices transparent to the customers. The practice and the symbolic meaning of marketing/gift become appropriate as they are combined. As a mirror image of Customer 12's understanding, the relational work is simultaneously commercially appropriate and appropriate as a means of fostering mutual regard between supplier and customer. In line with Zelizer's argument that economic and intimate values intermingle, commerce intermingles with mutual appreciation and the supply of local and sustainable foods. This intermingling organises the REKO-ring in a manner that realises the promise

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of decent food provisioning and fosters relations that make the realisation a joint project (cf. Le Velly, 2019).

Turning to relations among suppliers, their relational work plays out in a different manner. Inclusion among the REKO-ring suppliers, and thus the performance of relational work among them, is formally controlled. New suppliers are allowed into the Facebook group after being reviewed and approved by at least one administrator. An administrator outlines the procedure as follows:

> I review what kind of business they are. Thereafter, to be let in, they must answer three questions regarding whether they have read the guidelines [Reko-ring rules and eventual local guidelines]; if they agree to them and what they supply. (Administrator 3)

The review procedure means a distinction among decent suppliers who share, or are willing to share, the meaning of REKO-ring participation and other, effectively indecent, suppliers. Thereby, the suppliers have promised that they know what it means to participate in an appropriate manner and that they intend to do so. The interviewed administrators and several suppliers comment that competitors are generally welcomed and that the review and other control mechanisms are not used to enforce monopolies. They experience the formal organisation, or bureaucracy, of supplier engagement as appropriate because it is a means of ensuring that new suppliers genuinely share the ambition to realise decent food provisioning. Thus, the organisational effects of the bureaucracy rely on its different elements resonating with the shared meaning. A rule that is discordant with that meaning would be inappropriate to follow, or at least not inappropriate to violate, just as in the case of practices. In some REKO-rings, however, current suppliers with whom a new one would compete have to agree on letting an additional competitor in to avoid inappropriate practices or degrees of struggle, which I come back to in the next section.

The suppliers thus hold a shared meaning of REKO-ring participation, as they rely on appropriate practices of both struggle and reciprocity. However, these practices do not foster parallel relations but rather hybrid ones that integrate struggle and reciprocity – collegial struggle:

> Thanks to the Reko-ring, we [suppliers] know each other very well. That has made pricing easier. And when you meet at the delivery meeting, you may ask 'what abattoir do you use?' or 'how much do you pay for meat packing?' It is very collegial in that manner – we cooperate. (Supplier 4a)

This quote shows the understanding that interaction and knowledge sharing are additional acts of reciprocity among competing suppliers – practical cooperation that fosters a sense of collegiality. Taken together, the collegial relations and practices of suppliers constitute the organisation of REKO-rings by informally and organically harmonising meanings into a shared meaning that allows for identifying appropriate conduct. These are not so much the consequence of formal organisation-shaping practices as of mutually adjusting practices through (informal) interaction. Through such interaction, it is also possible to distinguish certain formal organisational means, such as rules, as appropriate. However, this is not necessarily to solve coordination problems, as it may also be a formalisation of how coordination is and should be constituted, codifying an uncontested shared meaning of REKO-ring participation. The next section focuses on failed relations and how those reveal the role of discord or uncertainty about shared meaning in REKO-ring organisation.

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When relations do not work out

REKO-rings hinge upon suppliers and customers using appropriate practices to organise a market that realises decent food provisioning. By turning to cases of jeopardised and failed relations, the following discusses how discordant meanings relate to identifying certain practices as inappropriate and their role for organising REKO-rings.

A seemingly simple case of failed or jeopardised relational work is the frequently reported issue of egg shortages. There is often more demand for eggs in REKO-rings than suppliers can fulfil, which results in the following situation:

> A customer arrives to pick up hen's and duck's eggs. She is informed that the hen's eggs have sold out. She complains that she was the first to post in the Facebook group. However, the supplier informs her that he delivers to nine different Reko-rings that day, and customers in other rings ordered eggs earlier. The customer begrudgingly accepts and picks up the duck's eggs, but laments that she cannot review competing orders in other groups, so it is impossible for her to know whether she should order from someone else. (Field note)

The customer is clearly disappointed, as she was outcompeted by other customers and left eggless due to excess demand. Her lament that she cannot keep track of the competition implies that she finds this kind of struggle inappropriate and thus either void of meaning or discordant with the meaning she finds in REKO-ring participation. The supplier, however, presents a discordant understanding that competition between REKO-rings is appropriate, and that suppliers therefore cannot be expected to guarantee supply for all customers. Despite who is thought to be correct in this matter, the example shows how the discordant understandings of appropriate competition influence and obstruct their relational work and their ability to partake in market exchange.

Moreover, obstacles to relational work show, indirectly, in the customers' use of the Facebook group. It is foremost used for viewing and reviewing suppliers and their offers, and placing orders, 'what they offer and how they produce it. They usually offer very good descriptions: this is how our animals live, they get this feed in the winter and this in the summer' (Customer 16). The interaction during delivery similarly focuses on the food items and their qualities, 'maybe you talk a bit about the honey or other [foods], if you have any questions and so on' (Customer 10). Appropriate interaction is not about decency in general, or food provisioning in general, but is limited specifically to their intersection as decent food provisioning, similar to the shared notions of 'regard' and 'good food' in extant research (Carolan, 2022; Kirwan, 2006; Sage, 2003; see also Baumann et al., 2022).

The limitation of meaning to decent food provisioning is especially pronounced in some cases of failed relations. An administrator and egg supplier explained that the price point of REKO-ring foods is, to less privileged customers, an obstacle for fostering relations:

> We usually use 'solidarity pricing'. We say that, if you add a fiver [€0.5] you can help someone else who must [and thus can] pay less, because we believe that money should not hinder people from buying good food. Yet, no one has paid less, but a few have paid more. (Administrator 1)

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This interviewee employed the uncommon practice of solidarity pricing to provide less privileged customers with decent foods. Solidarity includes, but also goes beyond, cooperation, as the latter only requires reciprocity but not the mutual sympathies usually associated with solidarity. Yet, the solidarity pricing had so far only meant that some customers displayed their ability to afford premium prices or solidarity with the supplier. Thus, it seems questionable whether it is appropriate for realising a promise of decent food provisioning. This is not because it violates a shared meaning of decent food provisioning, but because it does not foster the relations and cooperation that realise REKO-rings as markets for decent foods. As extant studies show, less privileged customers often find AFNs irrelevant and unattainable (cf. Kennedy & Givens, 2019; Paddock, 2015). Thus, the reduced price on this specific offer, or the amount it was lowered, might lack the ability to make (this version of) decent food provisioning appropriate for them, making it functionally inappropriate. This might be the case because the practice is not widely adopted, and solidarity pricing – however benevolent – might even be understood as an inappropriate kind of cooperation because it jeopardises the promise of financial support for suppliers.

Suppliers, as indicated in the previous section, use and seek to identify others using decent practices of competition and cooperation to foster relations of collegial struggle. Thus, uncollegial, or hostile, struggles must be prohibited, or the relational work that formal controls and rules for suppliers seek to ensure will fail. An example of such prohibition is when an administrator relates that 'We actively decline price-dumping and ask that people [suppliers] respect each other [financially]' (Administrator 7). Furthermore, both suppliers and administrators talk about how they have asked hobby suppliers to raise their prices so as not to undercut the commercial suppliers, who must cover their salaries. These attempts have generally led to good results. Yet, they go beyond the REKO-ring guidelines, as these do not say anything about price competition. Instead, attempts to counteract price competition are often informal and based on harmonising different conceptions of appropriate competition. Despite whether it is formalised as a rule or not, deeming price competition inappropriate relies on the participants agreeing that such competition is antithetical to decent food provisioning. Such an agreement indicates a shared meaning and, moreover, suggests that it is fundamental for any formal organisational means to be practically realised in a REKO-ring.

Rule violations may weaken or dissolve relations – even when the rules are not enforced:

> But then there is one who does not produce her offers herself. Which is interesting and wrong – actually. She drives around to [big] farms and buys what the wholesalers have rejected. But then she is an intermediary between major growers and direct marketing. It is not in any way obvious that she has not grown the produce herself. And that's not the point of direct marketing. But maybe her customers appreciate the low prices. (Administrator 10)

The quote outlines a case of inappropriate competition. The interviewee finds the (other) supplier's competition practices fraudulent and in violation of the rules. In addition, the offers are inappropriate as they have not been produced by the supplier herself. By missing 'the point', the fraudulent supplier acts in discord with the REKO-rings' promise of decent food provisioning. However, this supplier is not cast out for violating the REKO-ring rules. Instead, the administrator makes it clear that relational work – reciprocity and struggle alike – is pointless with this supplier. Yet, the REKO-ring's organisation is not unaffected. It leaves (for now) the fraudulent supplier and their customers socially isolated yet begrudgingly tolerated as they form relations around a discordant kind of shared meaning, supposedly low prices.

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In this section, I have shown how failing or jeopardised relational work involves inappropriate forms of REKO-ring participation associated with discordant meaning in two ways: (1) one of the involved participants uses inappropriate practices that convey discordant meanings, such as the covert intermediary supplier. They are inappropriate because they violate the promised 'difference'. Alternatively, (2) actors use practices that are inappropriate because they fail to foster relations, as in the case of solidarity pricing. They are inappropriate because they fail to realise the promised 'difference', despite not necessarily violating it.

Sharing meaning: the relational pursuit of market organisation

As shown in the previous two sections, REKO-ring organisation relies on participants sharing meaning in terms of appropriate competition and cooperation. When they do not, the market organisation fails, or at least struggles, to be realised in terms of material exchange. Returning to the research question, the following discusses how the REKO-ring participants share meaning to identify and use appropriate (and inappropriate) practices and how they form the relations that allow REKO-rings to become projects that realise a promise of decent food provisioning. It is in the intersection of shared meaning and the use of appropriate practices that REKO-ring organisation takes place and enables the participants to create a joint project.

At the centre of REKO-ring participants' meaning sharing is interaction, as relational work-theory would predict. First, because the REKO-ring participants treat interaction as intrinsically appropriate, exemplified by the positive experiences of meeting others in the REKO-rings and knowledge sharing among suppliers. Thus contrasting the conventional lack of interaction between supplier and customer in mainstream markets. Second, interaction enables the participants to share their understandings and thus negotiate and agree (or disagree) on what appropriate participation in a REKO-ring is. The interaction thus enables mutual adjustment of (appropriate) cooperative and competitive practices, fostering and realising shared meaning. Likely, the participants already hold some understanding of what practices are appropriate or inappropriate for decent food provisioning as they enter REKO-rings. However, as they enter, they may interact with others and thus change, nuance or develop these understandings in relation to other participants. Thus, it is the social sharing and negotiation of (in)appropriate practices and the promise of difference that constitute the fundamental role of shared meaning for organising markets in REKO-rings.

One way of sharing meaning is by relating to the (shared) rules or principles of REKO-rings, such as when administrators review prospective suppliers or customers engage to support local, relatively small-scale suppliers. This is in many ways similar to how embeddedness theory would outline that AFN participants jointly decide on means of organisation, such as rules or practices, and use them to shape markets to solve coordination problems (cf., e.g., Chiffoleau, 2009; Chiffoleau et al., 2019). Relational work, however, adds insights into the fundamental role of interaction for sharing meaning that the embeddedness relies upon and constitutes both material and social dimensions of market participation in practice (Zelizer, 2012). This is especially clear in cases where shared understandings, materialised as appropriate practices, foster decent food provisioning in the absence of rules. One telling example is the customer finding a reduced relevance of organic certification because the REKO-ring allowed her to be knowledgeable about how the food was produced. The relational work thus shows that interaction may solve coordination problems through the interaction that establishes experiences of shared meaning. It is also worth noting that shared meaning in this manner may render certain bureaucracy

redundant (cf. Bloom & Clare Hinrichs, 2011). The shared meaning allows the participants to agree on what practices are appropriate for realising a promise of difference, and which ones are not, not only on a general level but also for including local variations.

Interaction is thus key to foster ‘relations of regard’ (Sage, 2003; see also Kirwan, 2006), in accordance with a shared meaning of decent food provisioning. However, these relations do not only concern mutual regard or respect. They are also part of organising a market that seeks, and at least to some extent succeeds, to realise that promise. Thus, beyond interacting with words and gestures, the participants must interact with money and food offers. By fostering relations that involve appropriate competition and cooperation, the REKO-rings may organise markets that realise the economic as well as the ethical dimensions of decent food provisioning. This is core to the creation of appropriate hybrids in REKO-rings.

As argued initially, hybridity per se is no guarantee for making an AFN realise a promise of difference, because hybridity is a necessary part of all markets; relations among market actors always ‘intermingle’ plural kinds of values, relations and social orders (Bandelj, 2020; Zelizer, 2011). REKO-rings involve both cooperation and competition, yet only hybridise them in some relations. That is, I argue, because REKO-ring participants attempt to form relations that include only appropriate forms of reciprocity and struggle. As the materials do not offer any clear example of inappropriate cooperation, this is clear foremost in terms of competition.

The suppliers and administrators overall describe appropriate competition as a kind of friendly competition that is less motivated by antagonistic motives and more by mutual adjustment, especially in terms of prices and quality differentiation. Such competition is also compliant with the rules of REKO-rings. The empirical materials show that the shared meaning of such appropriate competition relies on a sense of collegiality – a relational work that acknowledges competitors as, simultaneously, colleagues. The REKO-ring participants become colleagues who, while competing, also take part in the organisation of a joint project for realising a promise of difference. It is appropriate to compete by adjusting to competitors’ prices and doing so is intimately tied to appropriate cooperation among competitors – information sharing – that may be used to, for example, lower production costs. This practice of appropriate competition cannot be derived from the REKO-ring rules; they do not say anything about what competition or cooperation is appropriate (or legal) (cf. Hushållningssällskapet, 2018). Thus, REKO-ring participants’ shared meaning is fundamental for collegial competition to take place. That said, the REKO-rings’ promise of difference also includes, for example, a promise of difference in terms of food qualities. Yet, the empirical materials do not suggest that quality competition is made different, or alternative, in the same significant manner as price competition. Thus, meaning sharing and other elements of the REKO-ring’s organisation might not be as successful regarding differences other than economic ones. The lack of different forms of quality competition might suggest a limitation of the participants’ relational work and meaning sharing, or a limitation to the REKO-ring’s organisational potential for offering alternatives. Yet, to delve further into this issue lays beyond the scope of this study.

Concluding the findings of this study, shared meaning may be fostered and negotiated through interactions that create mutual regard (see also Sage, 2003). Thereby, the shared meaning becomes a fundamental part of organising the REKO-rings for providing food in a decent manner. The relations formed by sharing understandings thus constitute the REKO-rings as a market. As pointed out by Zelizer (2012), the market actors’ relational work not only embeds but also constitutes markets (148; see also White, 2002). Embeddedness studies show how interaction among AFN participants fosters rules and practices to solve coordination problems as they organise markets (see Chiffoleau, 2009; Chiffoleau et al., 2019; Hinrichs, 2000). Relational work complements such

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studies by showing how the organisation becomes real (or fails to do so) in human relations by the power of the involved parties' shared meaning and the relational work that shapes and gets shaped by such meaning (see also Fitzmaurice et al., 2020). The REKO-ring participants' ability to realise a promise of difference, in line with their shared meaning, was most pronounced in relation to price competition and economic exchange. For example, the resistance to price competition is present in REKO-rings – both with and without regulating against it – because such resistance is part of the participants' shared meaning and thereby transpires into practice and the formation of relations. The supplier, who seemingly did not share meaning on such economic matters with other REKO-ring participants (implied by their rule violation and possible price competition), was also seen as a pointless actor to work out any kind of relations with. That said, it is worth noting that in the REKO-ring case, meanings pertaining to other kinds of competition and cooperation, such as over quality, were treated in more conventional ways. Furthermore, there does not have to be a coordination problem to self-regulate a market; there only needs to be a shared understanding that a certain rule is appropriate, if not to solve a problem, then to, for example, acknowledge appropriate practices or communicate participants' shared meaning to prospective newcomers (cf. Beckert, 2009). Therefore, it is by no means surprising that all REKO-rings do not have the exact same rules or routines, as their organisation is likely affected by local variations of relational work, yet they organise in highly similar manners.

DISCUSSION: THE FUNDAMENTAL ROLE OF SHARED MEANING

This article sets out to pursue the question: How do AFN participants work out the appropriate practices of market participation and organising for realising a promise of difference? Drawing on Swedish REKO-rings, the answer to the question is that AFN participants negotiate and eventually share a meaning thereof – a promise of decent food provisioning. At its core is the identification and use of practices that are appropriate for the realisation of that promise and the avoidance and relational resistance to inappropriate ones. By employing relational work-theory, this study shows that practical relational work and the power of the participants' shared meaning are what realise rules and other elements of AFN organisation. It is by sharing meaning that participants may jointly form a project that realises a promise of difference (cf. Le Velly, 2019), while not guaranteeing that the promise is fully realised. Relational work and the sharing of meaning is one aspect of AFN organisation, and it should therefore be regarded as a complement to other such aspects. Thus, interaction is not only causally important for the creation of rules, practices and other organisational elements in AFN (Chiffoleau, 2009; Chiffoleau et al., 2019). Moreover, as relational work reveals, interaction harbouring and negotiation of shared meaning are key to how AFN participants realise these elements in practice and jointly identify appropriate and inappropriate versions thereof.

In a functional AFN, formal means of organisation, such as rules, are thus adopted to the extent that the participants find them to resonate with their shared meaning. Moreover, if and how they are followed, audited and/or violated depends on how they transpire into the relations and practices of the participants, and how they are worked out in relation to a shared meaning. Relational work thus never stops being important in AFNs' organisation; the meaning sharing is ongoing and thus part of maintaining and furthering a project's realisation of a promise of difference. Yet, the case of REKO-rings also suggests that shared meaning can be limited to only parts of the promise of difference or can emphasise select parts of it. The REKO-rings seem much less disposed to realise promises of non-economic difference, such as quality competition.

This might raise questions regarding the ability of REKO-rings to offer substantial alternatives. More generally, it suggests that further studies should engage with the questions of how AFN organisations affect meaning sharing and relational work and whether certain promises of difference demand certain forms of organisation to be realised.

The results thus affirm extant studies' insights about the fundamental role of meaning sharing in AFNs (see also Kirwan, 2006; Sage, 2003). Relational formation, including such meaning, enables AFN farmers and customers to share understandings that allow for organising food provisioning differently (cf. Bååth, 2022; Baumann et al., 2022; Beacham, 2018; Carolan, 2022). As all markets involve some kind of hybridisation of cooperation and competition, what distinguishes AFNs is the use of shared understandings and how they identify – and fuel the realisation of – appropriate versions and hybrids thereof (cf. Beckert, 2009).

Relational work also adds insight regarding how market participants distinguish appropriate and inappropriate practices when rules or other formal organisational elements are absent. By sharing meaning, AFN participants may co-organise joint projects, whereas the absence of shared meaning may result in conflicts of different kinds. The solutions to conflicts in AFN are described in the extant literature as new, and often further bureaucratised, forms of formal organisation (cf. Chiffoleau, 2009; Chiffoleau et al., 2019; Duncan & Pascucci, 2017; Pascucci et al., 2021). Relational work, however, shows how shared meaning may, if not solve, at least avoid or mitigate conflicts by creating mutual understandings of appropriate conduct. Such insights are likely instrumental for understanding not only why certain AFNs succeed, as in the case of REKO-rings, but also why others fail or succumb to conventionalisation.

However, the findings have their limitations. In this article, I analyse REKO-rings as well-working functional AFNs. Further studies should engage with the relational work among AFN participants in processes of conventionalisation or in seemingly dysfunctional AFNs. In such cases, it would be worth examining whether the formal organisational means are appropriate according to the participants' shared meaning(s). As several extant studies show how formal organisation and bureaucracy fuel conventionalisation in AFN (e.g. Bloom & Clare Hinrichs, 2011; Duncan & Pascucci, 2017; Pascucci et al., 2021), it is important to investigate whether this may be a response to discordant meanings and failed relational work among participants. However, it is also possible that the participants find the reality of an AFN to be more radical than promised, and thus conventionalisation might be the deliberate result of actors' relational work, organising to realise the original, less radical, promise. One possible explanation for the failure of solidarity pricing in the REKO-rings was that it was too radical a practice to be appropriate for realising the promise of decent food provisioning, despite being in line with a general understanding of alternative politics or morals of food provisioning. In addition, I have focused on two important yet not all-encompassing practices of market participation – cooperation and competition. Thus, the conclusion does not engage with, for example, the communal decision processes of AFN organising or the culture and policy landscape in which they are organised. The latter might particularly have important consequences for, for example, the differences of organic and non-organic foods and what cooperation and competition mean for the market participants.

Lastly, this study suggests that shared meaning has a fundamental role for ambitions to scale up AFNs. Support for small and mid-sized suppliers is likely necessary for upscaling (Brislen, 2018). However, this study suggests the importance of maintaining relational work during AFN upscaling, supporting and complementing Milestad et al.'s (2023) finding that AFNs maintain meaning to successfully manage growth processes. Thus, a core question for such processes is, how might the interaction that allows for the relational work and the fostering of shared meaning be maintained or even improved to ensure appropriate organisation when upscaling? Although AFNs

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often praise direct interaction, further studies should examine relational work without physical proximity (see Zollet, 2022: 13–14) and the ability to foster shared meaning that includes groups that are often absent from AFN, such as working-class customers (see Bowen et al., 2020; Kennedy & Givens, 2019; Paddock, 2015). To successfully upscale, AFNs must enable interaction among a larger and more varied group of people that can share and negotiate understandings, engage practically and strive for the same difference – together.

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CONFLICT OF INTEREST STATEMENT

The author declares no conflict of interest.

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DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

The author has provided the required Data Availability Statement, and if applicable, included functional and accurate links to said data therein.

ENDNOTES

[1] AFN is one of many concepts that refer to this phenomenon; others are, for example, Hybrid Food Networks (Zollet 2022) and Value-based Territorial Food Networks (Milestad et al. 2023).

[2] Although Zelizer is the primary source and author of relational work, I rely substantially on Bandelj (2012, 2020). The reason is that Bandelj, in contrast to Zelizer, has summarised and defined the theoretical tenets of relational work, drawing mostly but not exclusively on Zelizer's work.

[3] Although not ideal, I must take Bandelj's statement at face value because she does not cite any source for 'Zelizer's starting point' and I have not been able to identify it, or any other definition of meaning, in Zelizer's works. Yet, Bandelj's expertise on relational work is probably only second to Zelizer's, and as her statement also resonates with Zelizer's use of the meaning concept, I have no reason to question the correctness of Bandelj's statement.

[4] Covid-19 or its associated restrictions did not interfere with the fieldwork.

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