

Localised experimentalist governance: A framework for understanding the political dimensions of Alternative Food Networks

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Abstract

There is widespread agreement on the need to radically transform food systems. Some scholars have argued that such transformations demand an engagement with ‘the political’: that is, with the competing understandings, values, and ambitions that mark society. However, it remains unclear how networks of actors govern processes in ways that make space for ‘the political’ without undermining collective action. In this paper, we explore the role of ‘the political’ in the internal governance of Alternative Food Networks (AFNs) by advancing a locally-adapted framework for experimentalist governance. Taking the case of Campi Aperti, an AFN in Bologna, Italy, we show how the internal governance structures of AFNs, when shaped by elements of a localised approach to experimentalist governance, can facilitate engagement with ‘the political’ by navigating power dynamics and strategic uncertainties that influence their capacity for transformative change. In turn, our framework and analysis make visible the political potential of Campi Aperti as facilitated through its internal governance. Our findings illustrate how governance innovations emerge predominantly inside the network but struggle to receive support from other actors, notably public policy actors like the Municipality and regional authority. In this way, we contribute to understanding the internal governance of AFNs and respond to calls for deeper inquiry into their political dimensions.

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Introduction

There is widespread agreement on the need to radically transform food systems (Webb et al. 2020). Transformation in this context is not only technological or economic—it implies shifts in social practices, values, and institutional arrangements, including infrastructures, policy models, and business frameworks (McAlpine et al. 2015; Duncan et al. 2022). These transformations are advanced by networks of actors, including producers, citizens, policymakers, and researchers who organise (i.e., govern) in ways that shape both their actions and their transformative potential (Duncan and Pascucci, 2017). Consequently, governance innovation becomes a central requirement for systemic transformation (Kimbrell et al. 2020).

One space where such innovation occurs is at the municipal level, where alternative food networks (AFNs) actively experiment with practices aiming to transform food systems (Home & Nelson, 2015; Sage, 2014; Sonnino & Marsden, 2006). Empirical evidence (European Commission. Joint Research Centre. Institute for Prospective Technological Studies, 2013; Brandy, 2023) confirms that AFNs can bring needed innovations forward to support such transformations. However, their transformative potential is often constrained by a lack of alignment with local policymakers around ambitions and values or because their collective action becomes depoliticised (Moragues-Faus, 2017). This paper focuses on the political and depoliticising dimensions of transformation and argues that these can be understood by analysing the governance of AFNs.

One challenge is that the concepts of governance, transformation, and AFNs are contested. Some of the literature has critiqued their depoliticising tendencies, for example, by critiquing AFNs as consumer-driven or apolitical spaces (Bradley & Herrera, 2016; Guthman, 2008), governance as a managerial process that erases conflict (Swyngedouw, 2005; Wood & Flinders, 2014; Ansell et al., 2025), and transformation as a technocratic fix (Blythe et al., 2018). To address some of these critiques, we present a locally-adapted framework for experimentalist governance. Experimentalist governance has typically been applied to the study of international or national processes, such as the Water Framework Directive or the Montréal Protocol (Sabel & Zeitlin, 2012; De Búrca et al., 2014; Sabel et al., 2019). To date, however, experimentalist governance has been limited in its application at the local level or in grassroots contexts. In this paper, we argue that experimentalist governance—through its emphasis on local adaptation, inclusive participation, iterative goal-setting, and revision—can uncover the tensions, negotiations, and forms of contestation that animate the political within AFNs.

In what follows, we develop a locally-adapted experimentalist governance framework and apply it to the case of Campi Aperti, an AFN based in Bologna, Italy. Through this case, we show how experimentalist elements—such as recursive deliberation, the setting of provisional goals, and a commitment to diversity of views—can both enable and challenge political engagement. We analyse how these governance practices create spaces of contestation, negotiation, and horizontal power distribution while also encountering limits. We conclude by arguing that experimentalist governance, when locally adapted, can serve as an analytical tool for revealing the political in food system transformation—and for highlighting how grassroots actors articulate, navigate, and potentially transform uneven power relations.

Politics and the (de)political: a conceptual framework

According to Mouffe (2005, p. 9), politics refers to the “manifold practices of conventional politics”: the ontic level. The political is then ontological and refers to the dimension of antagonism which is ‘constitutive of human societies’ (2005, p. 10). In this way, politics are the practices and institutions that govern societies in the context of conflict that emerges from the political. The differentiation between politics and the political allows for a distinction between a democratic condition in which the project of emancipation, through agonistic encounters of adversaries, is enabled (Mouffe, 2005; Rancière, 1992). Relatedly, depoliticisation refers to the processes that suppress or displace collective agency, contestation, and deliberation (Fawcett & Marsh, 2014).



This understanding of the political and depoliticisation grounds our analysis of how governance can either engage with or suppress contestation.

From our theoretical starting point, we understand that the political dimensions of AFNs, particularly concerning representation, contestation, and power, can be constrained by governance arrangements that fail to engage with the political (Mouffe, 2005). In turn, a failure to acknowledge the political dimensions of governance can restrict its transformative potential (Duncan and Claeys, 2018). This is because politicisation aims to open up pathways for counter-hegemonic possibilities (Moragues-Faus, 2017; Mouffe, 2005). Ignoring the political antagonisms inherent to human relations does not make them disappear. Instead, by making antagonisms visible and giving them an outlet, a radicalisation into violent, oppressive, and discriminatory forms of politics and increased confrontations over “non-negotiable moral values” may be prevented (Mouffe, 2002, p. 11).

Inspired by recent work that identifies the “political within collaborative governance” (Ansell et al., 2022; 2025), we argue that experimentalist governance, as a flexible and iterative mode of governance, offers a promising framework for making visible and analysing the political dynamics at play within AFNs.

From our theoretical perspective, the ‘political’ is not something to be avoided. Rather, it is a necessary dimension of transformation. Attempts to suppress disagreement and disruptive transformations in the name of consensus may weaken political practice by leaving dominant path-dependencies and hierarchies unchallenged (Mouffe, 2005; Marchart, 2018). Disagreement can be generative, especially when it leads actors to shift their role perceptions (Sørensen, 2014) or reconfigure their power relations (Rossi et al., 2019; Turner et al., 2020). Yet, how to govern such processes without undermining collective action remains unclear. We approach this dilemma by exploring the potential of experimentalist governance as a set of governance practices that can hold space for disagreement and deliberation.

Methods and Empirical Case

To address the research question, we adopt a case study methodology, which enables an in-depth analysis of complex social phenomena in their real-life contexts (Yin, 2009). Following Layder’s (1993) theory-testing and theory-building model, the case was selected based on its theoretical relevance, using purposive-theoretical sampling (Silverman, 2018; Mason, 1996) to identify a case containing key features predictive of specific theoretical outcomes. The selected AFN, Campi Aperti, is a formal farmers’ market association based in Bologna that has been active for over twenty years. It was chosen based on the following criteria: (1) self-identification as a farmers’ market—relevant to Italy’s cultural and political context (Aguglia, 2009; Galisai et al., 2009); (2) internal structures aligned with experimentalist governance; (3) political engagement with the Municipality of Bologna; and (4) involvement in activities extending beyond food sales.

Three methods were used to comprehensively analyse the experimental nature of AFNs and reflect on their transformative potential and political implications: questionnaire, interviews, and document analysis. A structured questionnaire, incorporating both closed and open-ended questions (Denscombe, 2010; Yin, 2009), was distributed to all 132 members of the Association in 2023. It explored members’ views on decision-making, motivations, values, and the perceived impact of the Association on local food policy. Thirty-four members completed the questionnaire. Between June 2021 and November 2023, twenty semi-structured interviews (20–45 minutes each) were conducted with key stakeholders, including: Campi Aperti’s key actors (president, coordinator, working group representatives); municipal actors (Bologna city councillors, neighbourhood presidents); and regional officials (Emilia Romagna’s Directorate of Agriculture, Hunting, and Fishing). These interviews explored governance practices, political dynamics, and institutional perceptions of the Association, allowing for the emergence of context-specific insights. Questionnaire data is attributed to “respondent,” and interview data is cited as “interviewee no. X.” To enhance robustness, we triangulated interview and

questionnaire data with document analysis (Denscombe, 2010; Yin, 2009). A wide array of documents deemed relevant to the research question were reviewed, including: public records from Bologna and the Emilia Romagna region, research papers, content from Association websites, municipal meeting recordings, and internal communications—specifically, emails from the Campi Aperti mailing list spanning September 8, 2022, to September 8, 2023.

Case study description

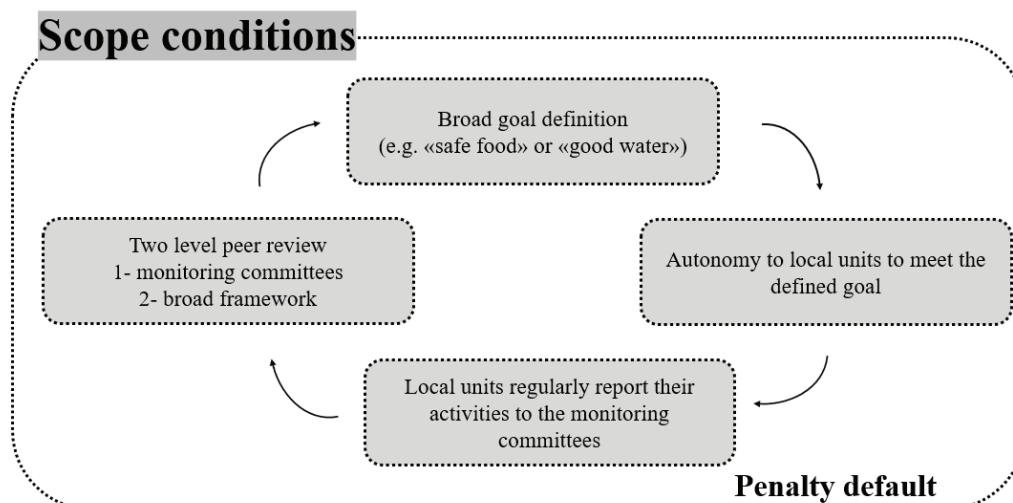
Campi Aperti is a farmers' and co-producers' association formally established in Bologna (Italy) in 2009, though its roots trace back to the late 1990s. At that time, a group of agronomists sought to support small-scale organic production outside speculative market dynamics, creating a network to connect farmers with consumers, who began to be referred to as 'co-producers'. This arrangement aimed to ensure fair pricing, determined by producers and consumers, and provide access to quality local food. The initial network comprised four farms and two university-based collectives, forming the '*Coordinamento per la Sovranità Alimentare*' (Coordination for Food Sovereignty). A crucial development occurred through collaboration with XM24, a historic social centre in Bologna, where the first version of the farmers' market took shape. In 2009, the group formalised into the Association Campi Aperti, enabling active engagement with the Municipality to secure market venues. The Association adopted a statute inspired by the Declaration of Nyéléni (Sélingué, 2007), reflecting its commitment to food sovereignty.

Campi Aperti operates through horizontal self-governance, with decisions made collectively in the general assembly and delegated to working groups when necessary. It defines itself as a "community fighting for food sovereignty" and currently organises eight weekly farmers' markets in Bologna and Casalecchio di Reno.

Making the political visible: local experimentalist governance in practice

Experimentalist governance is theorised as a form that emerges spontaneously—or pragmatically—in response to a shared and pressing problem when two scope conditions are met. The first condition is a polyarchic distribution of power. The second condition is strategic uncertainty. In its most complete form, experimentalist governance appears as a multi-level governance architecture with four main elements that function iteratively and cyclically, supported by a penalty default mechanism defined as "the threat to engage in traditional rule-making that is disruptive and produces dysfunctional results" (Sabel and Zeitlin, 2012, p.14) or as a "rule that everyone fears more than forms of mutual accommodation that no party might independently choose" (Sabel and Zeitlin, 2007, p.39). The features are: (1) a broad goal definition, (2) autonomy to local units, (3) constant reporting activity, and (4) peer review (see Figure 1).

Figure 1: A visual representation of experimentalist governance. Source: authors' elaboration





Building on literature on experimentalist governance and our empirical data, we put forward a locally-adapted experimentalist governance framework to support the identification and analysis of political practices in relation to the internal governance of AFNs.

Scope Conditions: polyarchic distribution of power and strategic uncertainty

When localising experimentalist governance, polyarchic distribution of power and strategic uncertainty (scope conditions) should be reframed based on the contextual specificities of local governance.

Polyarchic distribution of power

While a polyarchic power distribution is a key condition at the macro level, the local scale introduces more complex and sometimes contradictory configurations. On one hand, local authorities hold jurisdiction over specific domains (such as land use or public procurement). On the other hand, they also work under national or regional limitations, limiting their adequate room for manoeuvre. Nonetheless, local governance is often characterised by a plurality of actors—including food producers, civil servants, farmers' organisations, and citizens—who exercise influence through participation in councils, associations, and civic initiatives, resulting in a **de facto** polyarchy. However, this power distribution is uneven and dependent on the institutional openness of the local political environment, which must be carefully assessed in each case.

Experimentalist governance emerges where no single actor dominates (polyarchic distribution of power) and where strategic uncertainty prompts innovation. In the case of Campi Aperti, both conditions are present, although unevenly distributed across different relational scales.

Internally, Campi Aperti fosters a polyarchic structure through horizontal self-governance. It is structured around recursive deliberation and distributed autonomy. As such, polyarchy is practised through everyday mechanisms of inclusion, trust, and shared responsibility distributed across several “departments.”

The General Assembly comprises producers and co-producers, all of whom participate equally. This flattens hierarchies and enables members to shape rules collaboratively, reinforcing the network's grassroots identity and political autonomy. While Campi Aperti is formally required to appoint a president and administrative office (as mandated by Italian law for registered associations), these roles do not hold decision-making power. Instead, all “departments” or groups, including the president, are ultimately accountable to the General Assembly. No actors prevail upon others. Campi Aperti's structure includes groups and actors, other than the general assembly, with specific responsibilities. The participatory guarantee system (explained below) group manages the monitoring activities and collects any reports. Bioregional assemblies are composed of producers within the same territory (e.g., producers from the mountains, or producers from drought-affected areas, etc.) that can discuss issues and proposals concerning their contexts. There are also assemblies for each market, where day-to-day practicalities and logistical problems are discussed and managed among the participants of that specific market. Permanent groups are created to manage particular issues or carry out projects. While the representation of Campi Aperti's structure may give the impression of compartmentalisation, every “department” operates as autonomous yet interconnected nodes within a horizontally organised network. Authority flows through deliberation and consensus rather than hierarchy. Externally, however, this power balance is disrupted. Campi Aperti's operations remain deeply contingent on the Municipality of Bologna, particularly in securing public space permits for market operations and recognition, and facilitating their activities. This institutional dependency introduces a hierarchical asymmetry, whereby municipal authorities hold discretionary control over the Association's visibility and continuity. Strategic uncertainty is thus entrenched in Campi Aperti's external relations, amplified by political cycles and administrative turnover. As one interviewee remarked, “Campi Aperti is a den of communists and anarchists who don't vote”—a quote that illustrates the cultural and ideological frictions that have historically strained the Association's legitimacy in institutional eyes.

Strategic uncertainty

The second condition is strategic uncertainty. While macro-level uncertainty, such as that driven by climate change, pandemics, or geopolitical instability, is widely acknowledged, AFNs face compounded and often more immediate forms of uncertainty. This includes opportunistic behaviours carried out by members of the networks as well as external uncertainties, shaped by asymmetric power relations with local political institutions. In our case, for instance, while the Municipality of Bologna has nominal responsibility for food policy, its fragmented administrative structure and political turnover often undermine continuity in support for AFNs. Moreover, resource limitations, bureaucratic inertia, or political alliances with corporate food actors can exacerbate grassroots initiatives' uncertainty. These dynamics reflect what De Búrca et al. (2014) describe as asymmetries of power and knowledge that prevent straightforward cooperation. Therefore, we reframe strategic uncertainty locally as emerging from complexity, power struggles, limited institutional trust, and the fragility of multi-actor collaboration. These issues are well-documented in AFN literature, highlighting how trust and informal cooperation often compensate for the absence of formal structures (Martindale, 2021; Thorsøe and Kjeldsen, 2016).

Given the more circumscribed range of action, we expect that the local architecture of experimentalist governance will look less formal, as actors participating in the process are more likely to be ordinary citizens with time and budget constraints. The autonomy of the local units becomes an implied characteristic rather than a formally granted one, as seen in more hierarchical cases like the Montréal Protocol. The focal point in this framework is the cooperation among the parties since values such as trust and community-building are shown to be central to the organisation of Alternative Food Networks (Martindale, 2021; Sage, 2003). For this reason, robust mechanisms to promote, stimulate, and facilitate cooperation must be conceived to promote, in particular, the creation of personal relationships, trust, mechanisms to enforce the common goal, and to stimulate the creation of networks outside the conventional system. Moreover, when mentioning the creation of novel networks, it is crucial to consider the interaction with institutional actors (such as the Municipality). In the traditional framework of experimentalist governance, the commonly shared problem is recognised by national or even international authorities. This means that authorities may provide autonomy to local actors and financial, institutional, political, or technical support. The same is not necessarily true for AFNs, which may arise for many reasons. What distinguishes local experimentalist governance is the extent to which institutional relationships shape the conditions for autonomy and iterative learning. Without formal mandates or top-down support, grassroots actors rely on navigating—and often renegotiating—access to space, legitimacy, and resources through fragile relationships with public institutions. These relationships can either hinder or enhance experimentation, making them a core variable in the success or failure of locally adapted governance models. With the scope conditions adapted, we move to the adaptation of the four key features: 1. broad goal definition; 2. autonomy to local units; 3. communication; and 4. peer review.

Broad goal definition: shared problem perception and political drive

The first feature of experimentalist governance relates to a collective defining a broad, shared problem that mobilises diverse actors toward collective experimentation. In Campi Aperti, this foundational problem is framed as a critique of the dominant food system and as a broader political struggle for autonomy, justice, and food sovereignty.

The Association defines itself as a “community fighting for food sovereignty,” emphasising its collective ownership, ecological stewardship, and systemic resistance. This framing emerged from the unification of multiple grievances: dissatisfaction with agribusiness dominance, distrust toward institutions, and a desire to reassert community control over food production and distribution. Politically, Campi Aperti's roots are traceable to the 2001 Genoa G8 protests—a pivotal moment of anti-globalisation activism in Italy. These events shaped many of its founding members, viewing food system transformation as part of a wider counter-hegemonic project. Qualitative responses from the questionnaire and interviews confirm this political

orientation. When asked about their motivations to join Campi Aperti, respondents provided insights that can be clustered around three interrelated themes:

The need for alternative markets that protect small-scale producers from corporate dominance.

I understood almost immediately, as soon as I started farming, that a small producer cannot compete in the market without a support network and access to direct sales, respondent 1 claimed.

Environmental stewardship, where farmers act as “guardians of the territory”;

[I have decided to join Campi Aperti] mainly because you cannot buy and sell; you can only sell what you produce in your company. This means that farmers stay on the land and take care of it, guaranteed by a price list that protects them from the free market. The ethics of producing healthy food that nourishes and preserves soil, water, air for generations to come, respondent 3 explained.

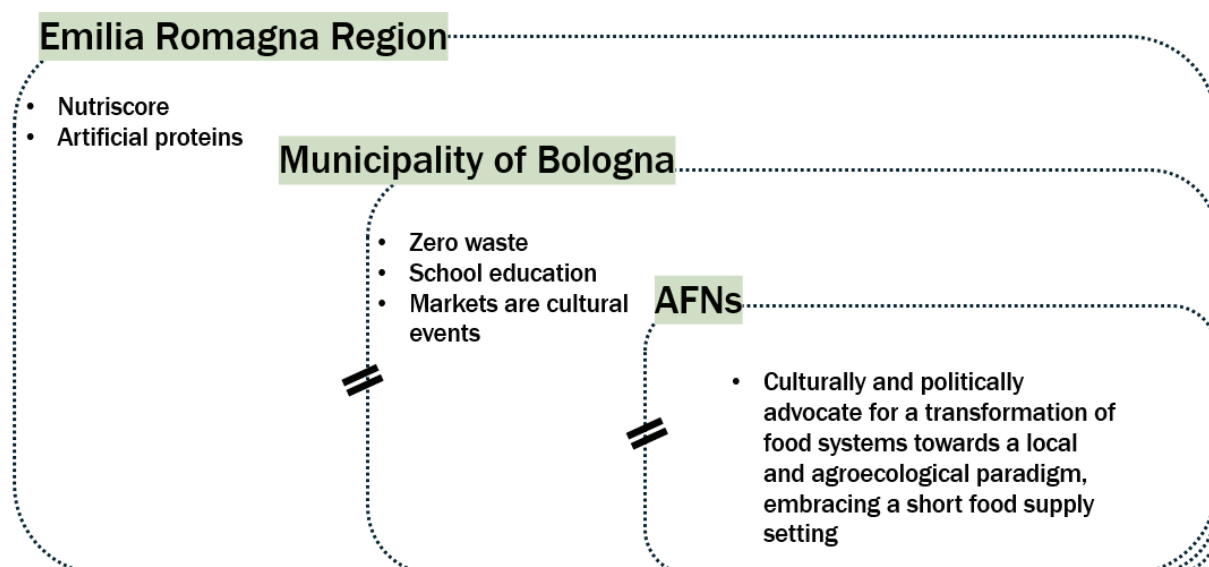
A desire for community-driven, politically aligned collective action. As confirmed by respondent 33, who noted:

[I decided to join Campi Aperti] Because it is a community of confrontation, struggle, debate, mutual support which has in its manifesto the values I believe in and which I think are worth fighting for.

These shared motivations operate not as a fixed consensus but as a platform for pluralistic and contested engagement—precisely the terrain where ‘the political’ unfolds. Campi Aperti’s members are united by a collective dissatisfaction with the status quo and a commitment to experimentation and collaboration.

However, this framing is not universally accepted. Both the Municipality of Bologna and the Emilia-Romagna Region articulate different priorities in their food-related policies. Campi Aperti’s emphasis on autonomy, anti-capitalist critique, and trust-based markets often clashes with institutional concerns around legality, standardisation, and economic development. This lack of alignment limits formal recognition and support opportunities, yet it also sustains a necessary antagonism that energises internal political commitment.

Figure 3: Representation of the absence of alignment in priority areas among AFNs, Municipality, and Region. Source: authors’ elaboration



As summarised in Figure 3, interviews with actors from the Municipality of Bologna and the Emilia Romagna region highlighted a misalignment of goals. While Campi Aperti (AFNs in the figure) advocates for transforming the food system, the Municipality is more focused on projects that receive funding and political approval, like the fight against food waste. The Emilia Romagna region is focused on even broader issues, such as artificial proteins. Moreover, the Municipality of Bologna and Emilia Romagna region still fail to consider these networks as political actors and still perceive them as cultural events, with a hint of romanticisation when asked to describe their perception of alternative food network initiatives.

Autonomy to local units: self-governance, innovation, and institutional navigation

The second key feature of experimentalist governance is granting actors the autonomy to pursue shared goals in context-specific ways. In Campi Aperti, autonomy is an operational reality embedded in their governance structure, interactions with institutions, and creation of parallel collaborations and networks.

Internally, Campi Aperti presents and exercises a robust form of self-governance. Membership requires adherence to a collectively developed **statuto**, which outlines production standards, organisational ethics, and decision-making norms. These rules are revisited and adapted, always after discussion in the general assembly, in response to emerging challenges. Importantly, autonomy is not understood as individual independence, but as a collective process of horizontal coordination. Members are free to innovate, as long as their actions align with the broader values of the Association.

Externally, Campi Aperti uses this autonomy to build networks outside formal institutional frameworks. Three prominent examples demonstrate this:

1. *Genuino Clandestino*, a national grassroots campaign that openly challenges EU and national regulations by promoting the unlicensed sale of processed products from production surplus. The network reframes “clandestine” production as legitimate political resistance, rooted in food sovereignty and anti-corporate critique.
2. *Emporio Camilla*, a self-managed cooperative grocery store that breaks from conventional retail by operating without profits, intermediaries, or formal hierarchies, and whose employees are volunteers.
3. *Mag6*, a solidarity finance cooperative with which Campi Aperti signed a mutual pact. This enables member producers to access capital outside the banking system through community guarantees, thereby avoiding debt that ties them to extractive financial structures.

Campi Aperti builds parallel infrastructures (financial, regulatory, and commercial) that reinforce its autonomy from dominant systems through these partnerships. These arrangements reduce reliance on state or market institutions and demonstrate viable alternatives rooted in solidarity, trust, and prefigurative politics.

Autonomy does not imply isolation. Members actively cooperate, both internally and externally. Data from the questionnaire show high levels of informal collaboration among members, particularly around production advice, input sharing, and event organisation. These collaborations function as distributed learning mechanisms, reinforcing the network’s collective intelligence and adaptability. Nonetheless, autonomy is not limitless. Campi Aperti must still engage with institutions such as the Municipality of Bologna, particularly when accessing public spaces or influencing food policy. Tensions characterise these interactions. The Association’s political stance often clashes with institutional norms, but strategic engagement remains essential. Members recognise that autonomy is negotiated, not given (“*Nothing is taken for granted here!*” interviewee 18 said vigorously) and that building credible alternatives requires confrontation and selective collaboration.

3&4- Reporting, peer review, and soft enforcement: trust as governance infrastructure

In experimentalist governance, continuous learning and mutual accountability are sustained through iterative



reporting and peer review. These mechanisms ensure that autonomy does not drift into fragmentation or opportunism. In Campi Aperti, these dynamics are embedded in everyday practices, structured around trust rather than official certifications, formal audits, or sanctions.

The general assembly functions as the primary site of reporting and decision-making. All major issues, from rule changes to conflict resolution, are discussed and decided collectively. However, Campi Aperti also supplements this structure with a highly active internal mailing list, which serves as a space for daily coordination, reflection, and dissemination of knowledge. Over a year, more than 1,200 messages were exchanged on topics ranging from regulatory updates to urgent logistical challenges and political mobilisations. This constant communication supports horizontal transparency and acts as a filter for discussing what arrives at the assembly level. According to an interviewee:

We are a community; therefore, sometimes there are arguments similar to the one you have with a partner,” and “Deciding everything in an assembly is impossible. Once we had assemblies that lasted 15 hours. Now we are adopting tools to hold useful assemblies, using notions that are part of the consensus method, introducing sociocratic mechanisms, and ensuring everyone can talk. (interview no. 18)

This model broadly empowers members: 82% of respondents say they feel part of the decision-making process, and 85% believe decisions are made collectively. Yet, this horizontalism is not without tension. Several members noted that assemblies can become chaotic or can exclude newer participants. Campi Aperti has gradually adopted sociocratic tools to improve facilitation and inclusivity, an example of reflexive governance in action.

Beyond procedural transparency, trust-based mechanisms monitor and enforce compliance with the Association’s shared rules. The cornerstone is the Participatory Guarantee System (PGS)—an internal, peer-led evaluation and monitoring process that replaces formal organic certification. Producers applying to join Campi Aperti must undergo farm visits by peers (including co-producers) who assess practices based on criteria collectively established in the statute. Once inside, members remain accountable to this community through ongoing observation and mutual dialogue.

Importantly, PGS is not a symbolic element. Members who violate shared norms, such as failing to disclose product sourcing, engaging in exploitative labour, or resisting transparency, face the risk of exclusion. Over the years, Campi Aperti has expelled members when, even after repeated warnings, they failed to comply with the Association’s statute. These decisions are grounded not in centralised authority but shared expectations and the reputational risks of violating community trust.

This soft enforcement model also mitigates external pressures. Campi Aperti’s rejection of third-party organic certification is a practical and political choice. As interviewee 14 explains: “I put my face in it because I declare it [my products to be organic] even without a certification. The farmers take responsibility for themselves.” Responses from the questionnaire confirm that members see formal certifications as increasingly co-opted by agro-industry, detached from the real meaning of ecological farming, and financially inaccessible to small producers. PGS, by contrast, reclaims the authority to define “good” farming from below. This is crucial for the Association as “relationships are the only thing we have that can defeat the neoliberal and capitalist system,” explained interviewee 9.

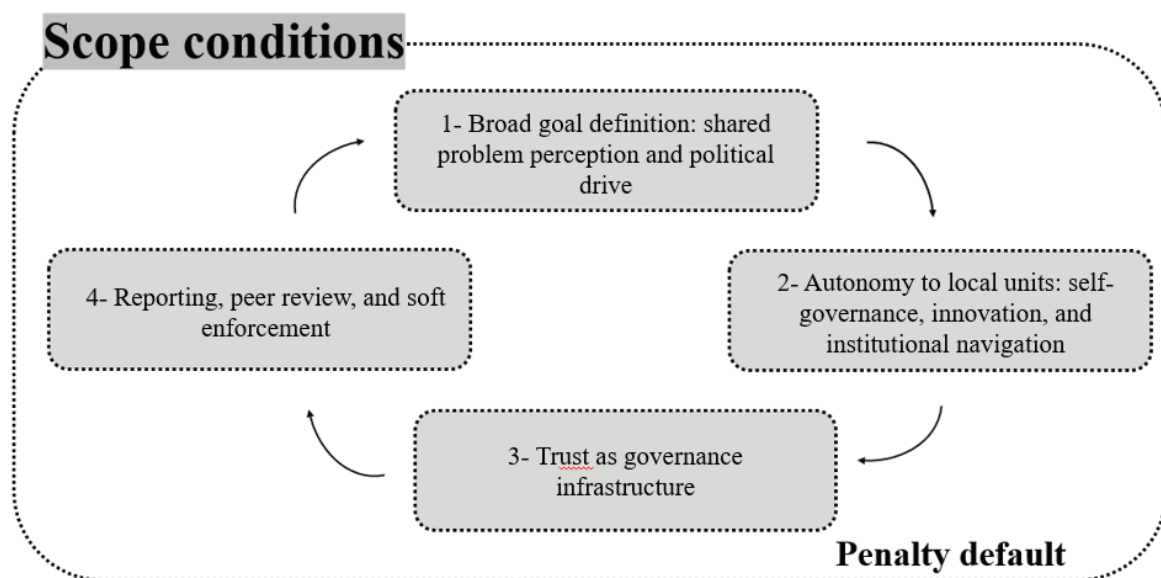
Penalty Default

The final aspect of experimentalist governance considers the penalty default. In the case of a local framework, the threat of engaging in traditional rule-making may not be suited to the local context, particularly given that AFNs are often characterised in the literature as governing themselves around relations of trust and transparency (Martindale, 2021; Thorsøe and Kjeldsen, 2016). For this reason, we argue that reputational loss or exclusion from trust-based networks functions as an informal yet effective penalty default at the local level.

In Campi Aperti, trust is the central value that holds the network together and fosters cooperation. It is at the basis of the Association's internal guarantee and monitoring mechanism, known as the Participatory Guarantee System (PGS). As interviewee no. 4 (referent of the PGS group) explained, members do not believe that third-party organic certifications can meaningfully bridge the gap between producers and consumers, particularly in local contexts. Instead, trust, built through direct relationships with fellow producers and co-producers, is a more legitimate and effective assurance. This trust-based approach facilitates monitoring, community-building, and collective learning. Members regularly exchange production advice, share inputs, and generate knowledge through informal interaction. Moreover, trust enables members to act politically beyond the confines of the Association—organising or participating in events and initiatives while maintaining transparency through internal reporting (e.g., the Association's mailing list). However, trust is not unconditional. Campi Aperti formalises accountability through its Participatory Guarantee System, which is envisioned in the Association's statute. This peer-based mechanism specifies the conditions for entry, continued membership, and potential exclusion. Members are expected to comply with collectively defined standards. Repeated violations, such as withholding information, breaking production rules, or refusing dialogue, can lead to expulsion. In this way, trust is both an enabler of cooperation and a disciplinary force. It replaces external enforcement with internal accountability, reinforcing the Association's political autonomy while maintaining cohesion through soft but effective sanctioning mechanisms.

Based on the above, the locally-adapted framework for experimentalist governance can be summarised as Figure 2.

Figure 2: A visual representation of local experimentalist governance. Source: authors' elaboration



Discussion

Our discussion is organised around two key insights: The relevance of the locally-adapted framework to an analysis of Campi Aperti's internal governance and to AFNs more broadly; and the political potential of a locally-adapted experimentalist governance approach.

Experimentalist nature of AFN governance and the relevance of the framework approach beyond Campi Aperti

Our analysis shows that the internal governance of Campi Aperti resonates with an experimentalist framework, particularly through recursive internal revision of rules throughout the organisation's history. Existing rules



were adapted, or new ones were created, in response to emerging challenges or when previous rules proved ineffective. Rules, codified in a statute subject to continual review, draw the line between what is allowed and what determines elements for expulsion. The shared definition of these rules creates a self-governed community in which trust is a fundamental building block and all members are allowed to actively engage in activities and collaborations to reinforce the goal of the Association.

Campi Aperti actively engages in the transformation of the current food system in two directions: first, by participating in political advocacy and engaging local institutions; second, by creating autonomous networks (such as **Genuino Clandestino**) that reinforce its practices and offer 'safe spaces' where farmers can keep carrying out their activities even without the support of the Municipality.

Analysing Campi Aperti through the lens of experimentalist governance sheds light on their goal, their internal power dynamics, the networks created, how decisions are made, how conflicts are addressed, how internal rules are reviewed, and the actors with which they collaborate. Broadly speaking, by analysing these elements, it was possible to capture the political nature of an alternative food network and its innovations and obstacles.

We note that these innovations described above are not unique to Campi Aperti but are also identified in broader literature around AFNs as summarised in Table 2. This points to the transferability of the framework beyond this single case. Moreover, it allows for an understanding of the political dimensions of these realities. This is important because AFNs are not merely social, economic, or environmental entities but inherently political. In the case of Campi Aperti, this is immediately noticeable from their organisational chart, which challenges the conventional hierarchical model by adopting a horizontal structure that revolves around a general assembly in which decisions are made using a sociocracy model.

Governance structures within AFNs have internal influence (defining who gets to participate, who benefits, and how decisions are made) and external (with which actors interact with, what innovations are transposed by other actors, and their relations to institutional actors), revealing underlying political dynamics. Our findings show that the experimentalist governance framework provides a critical lens through which the interplay of power, policy, and participation can be examined and thus helps to address a critique advanced against AFNs. This refers in particular to the current debate around the true alternativeness of AFNs, and their role in the transformation of the current food system (Watts et al, 2005; Treagar, 2011) and the depoliticisation tendencies of AFNs (Swyngedouw, 2009). We argue that it is difficult to grasp their transformative potential and innovations without a deeper understanding of their governance.

Political potential of an experimentalist approach

Our findings show that a locally-adapted experimentalist approach to governance makes space for the political to the extent that it allows people to explore and experiment with novel ways of creating consent, managing power relationships, defining internal rules, building communities, managing conflicts, and, consequently, to express divergent opinions. Campi Aperti demonstrates that such governance can generate transformative practices by making power visible and contestable. By politicising governance processes, Campi Aperti fosters more equitable and inclusive participation.

Furthermore, its governance model reflects ethical and ideological commitments (such as ecological sustainability, social justice, and food sovereignty) that frequently oppose dominant food system values. These commitments are enacted through governance innovations that challenge conventional hierarchies and reconfigure relationships between producers, consumers, and institutions. Trust, mutual support, and political values (DuPuis & Goodman, 2005) become organising principles here. Swyngedouw (2009: 603) asserts, 'political struggles are central in shaping alternative or different trajectories of socio-metabolic change.' In turn, as we have shown, Campi Aperti effectively generates political struggles that translate into tangible actions, such as the creation of novel farmers' market regulations.

Through these governance innovations, Campi Aperti addresses internal disparities and actively participates in broader political struggles, advocating for systemic change and redefining the principles and practices of food governance. This internal politicisation is essential for the emergence of transformative practices that can inspire and inform larger shifts within the global food system, by continually negotiating and reshaping their governance structures (central to the iterative phase of experimentalist governance). Our analysis shows how Campi Aperti's political nature is facilitated by adopting practices aligned with experimentalist governance. Table 1 highlights the theoretical alignment between local experimentalist governance and the political. It summarises how the core features of experimentalist governance, such as recursive learning, distributed authority, and penalty defaults, are operationalised within Campi Aperti and intersect with political values such as contestation, inclusivity, and autonomy. This alignment illustrates that when grounded locally, experimentalist governance can serve not just as a mode of coordination but as a space of political agency and transformation.

Table 1: Elements of local experimentalist governance linked to the political. Source: authors' elaboration

Elements of Local Experimentalist Governance	Associated political dynamics
Plurality of local actors, each holding partial and overlapping authority.	Contestation over legitimacy and influence; negotiation between institutional and informal forms of authority.
Uncertainty due to institutional inertia, power asymmetries, and resource constraints, not just the complexity of the issue itself	Struggles over knowledge and agenda-setting; uncertainty creates room for experimentation and conflict.
Framing problems like “broken food systems” or “food justice” in locally resonant ways.	Conflict over problem framing and metrics; different actors embed global issues into divergent local narratives.
Informal actors (e.g., cooperatives, food activists) take initiative without formal delegation.	Emergence of grassroots agency; challenges to institutional monopoly over solutions and scaling.
Knowledge-sharing through networks, assemblies, and informal dialogue—not formal audit systems.	Power in visibility; information disclosure becomes a terrain for recognition and legitimation.
Continuous renegotiation of strategies, roles, and goals based on feedback and trust.	Political learning and identity shifts; iterative reconfiguration of actor roles and power relations.
Risk of reputational loss or exclusion from trust-based network functions as informal enforcement.	Soft power enforcement; reputational mechanisms discipline behaviour through relational accountability.

As our findings show, the political engagement of Campi Aperti extends beyond mere policy advocacy: it involves a fundamental rethinking of how food systems should be governed. For example, Campi Aperti seeks to democratise food governance by adopting a sociocratic decision-making model and refusing the creation of vertical power relationships as much as possible. This democratisation effort is political to the extent that it challenges traditional power dynamics and advocates for a redistribution of power within the food system and a rediscovery of the role of the farmer.

However, our analysis also shows that Campi Aperti is against the conventional food system. As our findings revealed, the set of novel practices, informed by innovations in governance, frequently conflict with the dominant systems currently in place, creating friction between Campi Aperti and traditional institutional frameworks. This prevents the widespread adoption of innovative practices carried out by Campi Aperti. In particular, the goals of Campi Aperti did not align with the goals and topics of the Municipality and the Emilia Romagna region (see Figure 3). In this way, we found the framework helpful in uncovering mismatches in values and priorities and understanding where bottlenecks originate.

Moreover, what emerged from our analysis is the absence of the iterative cycle envisioned by experimentalist governance. Despite expressing interest in food system transformation, the Municipality of Bologna continues to rely on top-down governance, struggling to connect with horizontal organisations like Campi Aperti.



While municipalities and regional governments recognise the value of AFNs in promoting community resilience and sustainability (Sonnino & Marsden, 2006), they often fail to integrate them into policy frameworks still shaped by industrial food logics that have historically favoured conventional agribusiness models. Yet, when it comes to implementation, conflict arises. Campi Aperti's practices are perceived as too radical or disruptive, requiring changes not only in production models but also in decision-making cultures, consensus-building, and long-term political vision. According to Feindt (2020, pp. 511–512), policy development involves sunk investments. In turn, 'reducing or terminating the policy is more difficult than expanding it'. This resonates with the apparent inertia of the Municipality, which is still promoting the creation of new superstores. Structural policy change might require action at the regional level. However, when heard, the Region demonstrated its lack of perception of AFNs, as it remains inaccessible to bottom-up initiatives like Campi Aperti. For example, to participate in regional discussions, it is necessary to be an association or a trade union with at least 2,500 members, which is quite unrealistic for bottom-up initiatives.

From our analysis, two primary barriers emerge. The first is the absence of awareness from institutional actors about AFNs. In particular, the Municipality of Bologna still perceives Campi Aperti as a cultural initiative, not a political actor, and demonstrates timidity about its initiatives. The Emilia Romagna region does not perceive Campi Aperti; moreover, it focuses more on macro topics such as Nutri-Score and artificial proteins. The second is the absence of polyarchic distribution of power: Campi Aperti may practise horizontal governance, but the broader system it engages with remains hierarchical.

Given this, our analysis reveals that governance innovations flourish within Campi Aperti but lack external uptake and recognition. AFNs often encounter tensions with local municipalities as they navigate the complex interplay between grassroots initiatives and more formalised governance structures. In the case of this study, the clash between the flexibility inherent in Campi Aperti and the rigidity of municipal regulations hinders innovation and limits the growth of this network. Our framework helps to identify precisely where these tensions lie—highlighting how grassroots governance may enable internal transformation while still being constrained by institutional path-dependencies. As a final point, we want to be explicit that just because an organisation, or a network, adopts an experimentalist approach, it does not mean it will engage with the political. Instead, we argue that adopting an experimentalist approach creates space for political practice.

Conclusion

In this paper, we have analysed the political dimension of AFNs through the lens of experimentalist governance by studying a farmers' market association in the city of Bologna to better understand the network's internal governance and its transformative potential. Our findings suggest that without politicised governance, the stances and set of innovations carried out by AFNs would hold less transformative potential.

We have demonstrated how an experimentalist governance setting can benefit institutional actors because, as Bos & Brown (2012) envisioned, experimentation is a crucial instrument to support the transition to sustainability and the development of new knowledge. We conclude that by using an experimentalist governance approach, it is possible to advance the understanding of the governance of AFNs and their political dimension while capturing tensions and alignment with other actors. We encourage the further development and application of the locally-adapted framework for experimentalist governance in at least two ways. First, in the analysis of the internal governance of different AFNs initiatives. This can contribute to debates around alterity and the socio-political dimension of AFNs and the understanding of their transformative potential, allowing for the theorisation of different categories of AFNs based on their 'degree' of transformative potential instead of their organisational structure. Second, is to comparative analysis among AFNs in other contexts, allowing for a better understanding of the drivers and the local conditions that push towards the emergence of these initiatives and how they embed political values and actions.

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