Taking Food Back into Our Own Hands: Economic Diversity and Commoning in Alternative Food Networks

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MSc International Relations and Diplomacy

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Abstract

In light of the need for a transformation of the conventional agri-food system, this research addresses the transformative capacity of Alternative Food Networks (AFNs). These networks seek to challenge conventional food chains by reconnecting producers and consumers. Yet, AFNs vary significantly in their economic and social practices and values. This raises the question in how far economic diversity in AFNs leads to the commoning of food – that is, a community-led process of sustainably managing food as a shared resource.

Following a comparative case study approach, this research analyzes and compares two different types of AFNs, one located in Germany, the other one in the Netherlands. Data in form of interviews and participant observation was collected through field research. Firstly, the diverse economic practices of both case studies were mapped. Secondly, processes of commoning in both AFNs were traced through discourse analysis. The analysis highlights the challenges arising from bridging economic sustainability and values of solidarity and sustainability as a community. It is collective processes of negotiation and learning associated with commoning, that drive the transformation of food-systems.

Keywords: Food Sovereignty; Food Systems; Alternative Food Networks; Commoning; Social Mobilization; Diverse Economies.

Preface

Over the past two years, Lekkernassuh's Wednesday market has given me a feeling of home and family. It is a place of abundance and generosity, of occasional chaos and challenge. I would like to dedicate this thesis to the people of Lekkernassuh. It is driven by pure interest in how community-based initiatives like ours work and how we can deal with the difficulties that come with it. My intention is to channel experienced voices and take their insights to produce something that might be interesting and helpful to members of food communities.

For this research, I did field research with Regionalkollektiv, a community supported agriculture in my hometown of Landshut in Germany, and Lekkernassuh, a food initiative in The Hague of which I am a member. Clearly, my perspective is not neutral. I experienced these food communities as remarkably friendly and inclusive spaces, made up of people that are driven by passion and idealism. A lot of their transformative potential is immediately visible – hundreds of vegetable crates, filled and distributed every week by dozens of helpers and picked up by people that value their quality. Seeing the big impact that a small group of people can have on the global issue of food-systems change, it was a conscious decision to focus on this lowest level of community organization. While part of the solution to transform our agri-food systems surely lies in policy, law, and international agreements, much of it lies with the people and their capacity to take food provision back into their own hands. Initiatives like Regionalkollektiv and Lekkernassuh show that this is possible.

But supplying fresh vegetables to hundreds of people is a lot of work and it does not take long to come across interpersonal conflicts and organizational difficulties. What issues do we have to be conscious of, when coming together to change our food system by collectively taking charge of our food? With this thesis I aim to contribute to an exchange of experiences between initiatives to help us learn from each other.

I want to thank my interview partners at Regionalkollektiv and Lekkernassuh for their time, honesty and sharing with me what they are passionate about. I am grateful to the communities for letting me observe their everyday activities. Thank you to my supervisor Carina, Caro, Ange, Phineas, and Ana-Maria for your inspiration, help and feedback.

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1. Introduction

What is wrong with our food system?

Throughout the 20th century, the production of food has shifted from communities to a "global food system based on principles of industrial production" (Clapp and Moseley 2020, 1395). In its current state, the global food system is harming the climate, biodiversity, and peoples' right to food. We need to transform our agri-food systems so they can be the solution rather than the problem for human and nature's health. But how can we achieve sustainable, resilient, and healthy food systems?

'Food systems' refer to all actors and activities that are involved in production, storage, aggregation, transport, processing, distribution, marketing, disposal, and consumption of food[1] (Fakhri 2022). Industrial agriculture is producing historically high quantities of food for a low price. Yet, the large amount of cheap calories provided by this system comes at a high cost that is borne by "nature, other people, future generations [and] taxpayers" instead of agrobusinesses and the food industry (Rundgren 2016, 105).

The current global agri-food system creates severe food injustice, that is, it undermines people's right to "access to safe, sufficient and nutritious food", agreed upon by global leaders at the World Summit on Food Security 2009 (Rundgren 2016, 116). While we produce enough food to feed 10 billion people, 795 million are going hungry (FAO 2019). This is tied to inefficient food distribution systems that lead to 30-40% of food being wasted globally (Godfray et al. 2010). At the same time, there is an epidemic of malnutrition, obesity and preventable disease stemming from inexpensive, calorie-dense foods, 60 percent of whose dietary energy is based on maize, rice, and wheat alone (UNEP 2021). Additionally, power and production is increasingly concentrated on large-scale farms, while small farms, which account for 72 percent of all farms, occupy merely 8 percent of agricultural land (UNEP 2021).

The current agri-food system also causes a global climate crisis, environmental degradation, and the near collapse of ecosystems: Food production is responsible for around 35 per cent of global greenhouse gases and the primary driver of global biodiversity loss (Charles 2021; Benton et al. 2021). While industrialized food comes at a low retail cost, it results in externalized costs for the environment of around 3 trillion USD every year (UNEP 2021). The transformation of agri-food systems is thus a crucial lever in times of severe climate crisis and global inequality.

[1] The term 'agri-food systems' is used interchangeably with the term 'food systems', with the purpose to include the role of food for non-human consumption.

What needs to change?

Treating food as a commodity is a historic anomaly. Until recently, food was never just a tradable priced good but had many dimensions, including its ecological role of upholding biodiversity and connecting nature with society and the economy (Vivero-Pol et al. 2018). While the relationship with nature has always been integral to agriculture, industrial food production has led to conceptions of 'nature as an enemy' in a struggle for "survival against pests, weather, and diseases" (Federico 2010, 6). The transformation of agri-food systems thus requires a political reconceptualization of food and land. As the ecologist Aldo Leopold remarks in his 1949 conservation movement classic 'Sand County Almanac':

> We abuse land because we regard it as a commodity belonging to us. When we see land as a community to which we belong, we may begin to use it with love and respect. (Leopold 1949, viii)

If food is de-commodified, it could be re-conceptualized as essential to satisfy human nutritional, cultural and social needs and as based on values of justice, democracy and the recognition of ecological limits and moral obligations (Vivero-Pol et al. 2018).

To bring food *back* to its role of reproduction of life rather than capital, various authors suggest to explore practices of *(re)*commoning: a postcapitalist and posthuman politics located in a community of commoners (Gibson-Graham, Cameron, and Healy 2016; Vivero-Pol et al. 2018; Zhang and Barr 2019). While the 'commoners' are the subjects that collectively participate in the process of commoning, 'posthuman' here refers to politics and communities that are more-than-human and may include other animate being as well as inanimate entities "that share an existence on this planet" (Gibson-Graham, Cameron, and Healy 2016, 207). Creating those communities with other organisms and an environment that sustain our lives and introducing an ethics of care towards the world around us can lead to the fulfillment of the needs of all community members. The commoning of food, however, requires a diversification of food systems and economic alternatives.

How can we change?

Alternative food systems are being proposed by communities ranging from customary indigenous food systems to contemporary grassroots movements that resist the commodification of food. In the 1990s, Alternative Food Networks (AFNs) began to emerge as one reaction to "the standardization, globalization, and unethical nature of the industrial food

system" (Edwards 2016, 1). AFNs counter the disconnection of consumers and producers in the globalized food economy, where food is transported thousands of kilometers and sold as an anonymous product in supermarkets (Zoll, Specht, and Siebert 2021). Instead, they are seeking to increase transparency and establish loyal relationships between producers and consumers by establishing short supply chains, facilitating personal contact, and exposing consumers to the realities of agriculture.

A research agenda

This research addresses the potential of Alternative Food Networks (AFNs) to facilitate the *commoning* of food – that is, a community-led process of sustainably managing food as a shared resource. Despite their goal to "diversify and transform modern food provisioning" it cannot be assumed that AFNs are automatically transformative (Edwards 2016, 1). Practices, values and processes vary significantly between AFNs, leading some scholars to question their 'alterity' (Zoll, Specht, and Siebert 2021; Leitner, Cadieux, and Blumberg 2020; Born and Purcell 2006). AFNs display a diverse array of economic practices, since they are simultaneously geared towards economic feasibility on the one hand, and ideological, social, and ecological goals on the other hand. The resulting puzzle thus relates to AFNs' ability to bridge economic sustainability and the values and practices connected to the commoning of food. Can AFNs provide the sustainable economic alternatives that are needed for a socio-ecological transformation of the agri-food system or are they merely reinforcing existing social inequalities of the conventional food system?

Determining AFNs' real social and economic benefits requires an understanding of their economic models and how they practice commoning. By examining case studies of two AFNs, one in Germany, the other in the Netherlands, my thesis seeks to answer the question of *how economic diversity in alternative food networks leads to the commoning of food*.

I will begin by outlining the existing literature on AFNs and address the contested concept of 'alterity' (chapter 2). To capture the heterogenous empirical realities found in AFNs, I adopt the *diverse economies framework*. The concept of *commoning* serves as an additional theoretical perspective on economic and social practices to unveil their transformative capacity (chapter 3). I will then present my case studies, the adopted data collection methods of semi-structured interviews, participant fieldwork and online sources, as well as discourse analysis as a method of analysis (chapter 4). In the analysis, I firstly map the economic practices of both case studies and secondly perform a discourse analysis of processes of commoning in them

(chapter 5). In the discussion I present three main findings about the commoning of food in AFNs based on the results of the analysis (chapter 6). I conclude with a reflection on the future of the commoning of food (chapter 7).

2. Literature Review

2.1 What are Alternative Food Networks?

AFN is a broad umbrella term, describing initiatives that provide alternatives for production, distribution, and consumption of food outside of conventional food chains. Despite their diversity, all AFNs are generally based on short supply chains and reconnect consumers, producers and food "with the aim of confronting existing market forces and governmental power structures" (Zoll, Specht, and Siebert 2021, 640). Based on "an ethics of environmental sustainability, social justice, and animal welfare", many AFNs develop new economic practices outside the mainstream market that reflect these values (Edwards 2016, 1). A core characteristic of AFNs is the 'quality turn', which refers to locally, ethically and ecologically produced food that is based on relationships of trust and knowledge between producer and consumer (Goodman, DuPuis, and Goodman 2012). As a result, food in AFNs comes to the consumer embedded with information about place of origin and quality characteristics, which poses a contrast to the anonymous products found in supermarkets.

In the European context, AFNs emerged from organic and environmental movements and as a result of EU Common Agricultural Policy (CAP) reforms. These reforms shifted the CAP from a centralized policy aiming to increase production to a more decentralized model that included rural development support (Edwards 2016). The emergence of AFNs in Europe was often tied to a rural base and aimed to endorse local agriculture and its cultural identity against corporate globalization dominated by the US (Goodman, DuPuis, and Goodman 2012). Until today, many AFNs aim to preserve rural agriculture from the pressures of global trade and competition, such as the driving out of small-scale farmers.

In order to gain an understanding of the different types of AFNs, a classification by Venn et al. (2006) serves as an orientation. The authors created a databank of AFNs and subsequently grouped them into four different categories according to the 'connectedness', that is "particular sorts of ethical relationships", between consumers and food production (Venn et al. 2006, 250).

Firstly, ‘producers as consumers’ includes networks such as community gardens, where consumers produce their own food. Secondly, ‘producer-consumer partnerships’ refer to models such as community supported agriculture (CSA), where risks and rewards of production are shared (to varying degrees). In CSA, members are usually contractually bound to farmers by agreeing to buy produce for at least one season and thereby providing a stable income to the producer regardless of the actual harvest (Zoll, Specht, and Siebert 2021). Thirdly, ‘direct sell initiatives’ facilitate closer producer-consumer relationships by cutting out middlemen and include examples like farmers markets or box schemes[2]. Such food co-operatives are marked by participation and non-hierarchical organization (Moragues-Faus 2017). Fourth, ‘specialist retailers’ operate as intermediaries in a shortened supply chain of mostly high quality or specialty foods.

2.2 Alternative Food Networks beyond ‘Alterity’

Overall, AFNs constitute a heterogenous group of actors, practices, and philosophies who are critical of the dominant industrial food system. As a result, there is no single agreed upon definition of AFNs. An issue arising from this is the question of ‘alterity’: In how far is it possible to delineate the ‘alternative’ and the ‘conventional’ in food networks?

The two concepts are “increasingly permeable and highly contested terrain” (Goodman and Goodman 2009, 1), leading some scholars to question the alterity of AFNs altogether. Such concerns often refer to the economic realm, where AFNs adopt various practices. A prominent criticism from a political economic perspective is that AFNs may actually “reinforce neoliberal subjectivities, and exclusionary processes” (Blumberg 2018, 2) and operate on the “green consumerist terrain of individual market choice” (Goodman and Goodman 2009, 6). On the one hand, Poças Ribeiro et al. note that AFNs are based on challenging unequal power relations in food supply chains and seek to limit the impact of market forces on food provision (2021). But on the other hand, Renting et al. show that they still operate within the wider market and are “certainly not immune to the ‘price squeeze’ effects characteristic of conventional markets” (2003, 408). This may lead to the exclusivity of AFNs, limiting equitable participation and privileging ‘white, middle-class do-gooders’, raising the question whether AFNs actually reinforce existing unequal power relations in a ‘competitive quality turn’ (Edwards 2016).

[2] Box schemes refer to the provision of boxes commonly containing vegetables, fruit, and other locally produced food.

Taking these criticisms of AFNs seriously, while at the same time acknowledging their transformative potential, requires a more nuanced conceptualization of alterity. So far, research tends to bifurcate food systems into 'mainstream'/ 'conventional' vs. 'alternative'. Specifically in political economy, alterity is often conceptualized as economic practices that counter mainstream capitalism. Yet, these approaches have been increasingly criticized, since such a clear separation does not reflect reality (Murdoch, Marsden, and Banks 2000). Rather than operating within the boundaries of 'conventional' and 'alternative', most food systems "dip into, or borrow from, diverse logics over time" (Tregear 2011, 424). While most AFNs are geared towards economic viability and are a means for the involved actors to make a living, their underlying social and environmental goals tend to go beyond financial profit. Many models are 'alternative market based', operating "within the market logic but outside the capitalist norm of sole profit orientation" (Rosol 2020, 59).

However, there are scholars that embrace multiple theoretical perspectives and highlight the importance of different "values, practices and social arrangements, regardless of whether they overtly challenge capital" (Blumberg 2018, 3). Feminist geographer Gibson-Graham[3] for example, criticizes the academic "capitalocentrism" of focusing only on capital flows and ignoring multiple non-capitalist economic practices (1997).

2.3 A New Focus on Social and Economic Practices in Communities

Borrowing from these critical perspectives, it is possible to move beyond a narrow political economic conception of alterity as 'anti-capitalist' towards one of *economic diversity* that sees alterity as a way of "establishing relationships that is not primarily based on making the most money or farming the cheapest product" (Blumberg 2018, 8). Additionally, putting the analytical focus on *communities* shows the breadth of economic diversity in food systems. By resisting unilinear narratives of 'the economy' centered around the capitalist sector, we can uncover the global prevalence of 'marginal' economic practices in communities (Gibson-Graham 2008b). Yet, much of the current academic inquiry is limited to a reductive field of meaning, which also leads to new economies as readily being dismissed as "capitalism in another guise" (Gibson-Graham 2008b, 618). If our goal as academics is however to contribute to the proliferation of diverse economies, Gibson-Graham highlights the necessity to "disinvest in our paranoid practices of critique and mastery and undertake thinking that can energize and support 'other economies'" (Gibson-Graham 2008b, 618). An open exploration of local projects

[3] J.K. Graham is the pen name shared by Julie Graham and Kathrine Gibson, who will be referred to with the pronoun she/her.

and the "many mundane forms of power in them", tolerates coexistence and is open to surprise (Gibson-Graham 2008b, 619). It is these new conceptions of power, responsibility and value emerging from communities that I seek to uncover in this research. This is an academic gap left by mainstream theories that are bound to the conventional conceptions of power as hierarchy and economic value as generating profit.

Furthermore, the transformative effects of AFNs have to be critically evaluated. The focus on *commoning* as a way of de-commodifying food through communal processes sheds light on this capacity without taking a transformative effect for granted or romanticizing 'the alternative' (Holloway et al. 2007). This is filling a gap in literature on AFNs, which has largely overlooked the role of commoning. While Zhan and Barr have applied a commoning approach to AFNs and show that this perspective serves to reveal their transformative capacity, their study is limited to one direct-sell initiative (2019).

By combining an economic perspective with a focus on commoning and comparing a producer-consumer partnership to a direct-sell initiative, I seek to fill these gaps in the literature. I want to generate deeper understanding of the impact different types of AFNs have on their commoning capacity, which, to my knowledge, has not been researched before.

3. Theory

This research is based on a broad conception of alterity that goes beyond the alternative/conventional binary by embracing the possibility of *economic diversity*. Accordingly, I adopt the *diverse economies framework* as a theory that captures the heterogenous empirical realities of AFNs. I further add the concept of *commoning* as a theoretical lens on the social processes behind these economic practices in AFNs. Combining these two approaches enables an analysis of AFNs' economic and social structures, as well as their transformative potential.

3.1 The Diverse Economies Framework

The *diverse economies framework* is based on the work of feminist geographer J.K. Gibson-Graham. Going beyond dominant capitalocentric approaches, this framework enables a view of global capitalism as open to challenge, and a political vision that accepts transformation without systemic collapse. Economies are seen as "heterogenous spaces composed of multiple class processes, mechanisms of exchange, forms of labor and remuneration, finance, and ownership"

(Healy 2009, 338). Conceptualizing economic models as 'diverse' avoids a problematic alternative-conventional dualism, overlooking the contingency of 'alterity' and the reality of "mixed situations and continuous rather than binary choices" (Corsi et al. 2018, 13).

Gibson-Graham traces economic diversity along the dimensions of enterprise, labor, property, transactions, and finance (Table 1). She categorizes economic relations as capitalist, alternative capitalist, and non-capitalist. These relations coexist in an economic mosaic, where capitalist practices may appear alongside non-capitalist practices. Her conceptualization of economic diversity can be applied as a heuristic to analyze heterogenous economic practices within AFNs.

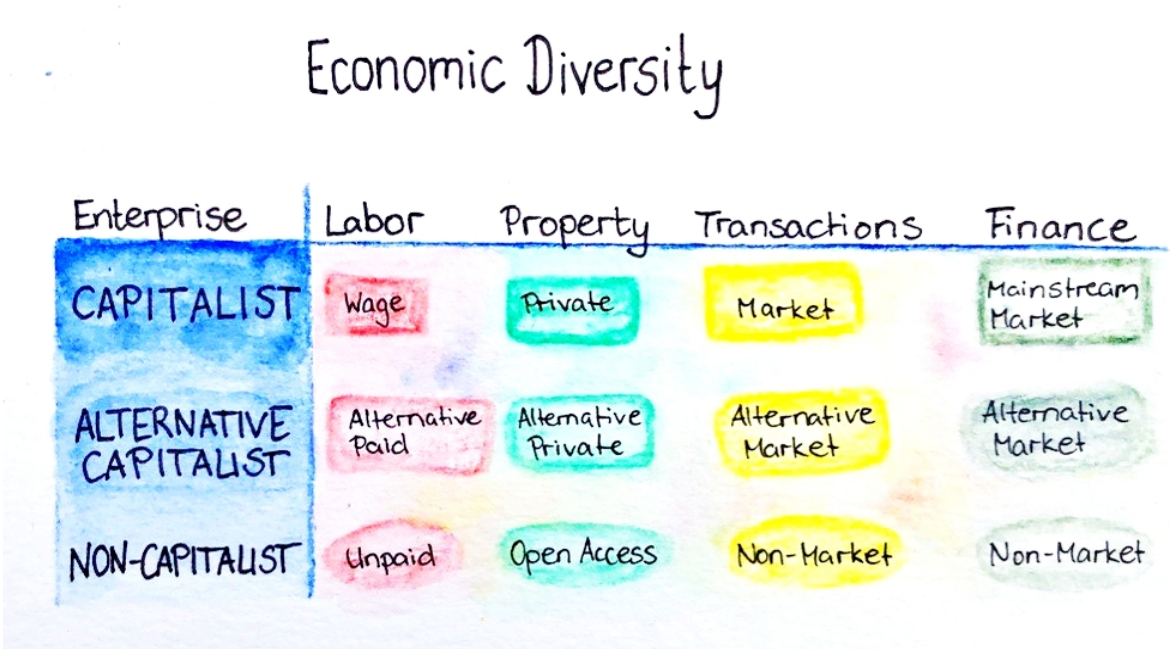

Table 1: Diverse Economies Framework (based on Gibson-Graham 2006)

Economic diversity and poststructuralism

The diverse economies framework is based on a poststructuralist way of knowing what exists, what should be studied and what the basic nature of the subject is (Shepherd 2010, 17). Poststructuralism is a theoretical approach to knowledge and society that embraces the "ultimate undecidability of meaning, the constitutive power of discourse, and the political effectivity of theory and research" (Gibson-Graham 2008a, 95).

Gibson-Graham presents three poststructural strategies to guide research in economic geography:

First, *deconstruction* serves to question assigned meanings in binary and hierarchical structures. Deconstructing the way capitalism and non-capitalism are placed as a binary in economic discourse highlights how capitalism appears as the naturally dominant economic

form, intrinsic to 'globalization' and able to reproduce itself. Non-capitalist practices on the other hand are subsumed and understood only in relation to capitalism. Feminist economic theorists deconstruct this binary in order to represent non-capitalism as diverse practices, rather than "an absence, insufficiency, or dependency" (Gibson-Graham 2008a, 102). While the common binaries are still present in Gibson-Grahams conceptualization, "they are in the process of being deconstructed" (Gibson-Graham 2008b, 616). With regards to AFNs, this opens up a space to grasp the economic complexity found in these networks, which include volunteer, self-employed, unpaid, alternative-paid and barter models next to market sectors.

Second, poststructuralist *discourse analysis* seeks to uncover the power dynamics behind the construction of meaning in language and social practices. Analyzing discourses around 'the economy' shows how they shape what is possible, constrain the actions of economic agents, and determine conceptions of economic change. Gibson-Graham recognizes that economic practices commonly seen as 'marginal' are actually more prevalent and generate more value than the capitalist sector (Gibson-Graham 2008b). Applying discourse analysis to AFNs highlights the way alterity is conceptualized in them and how socio-economic transformation is envisioned.

Third, *performativity* refers to the power that discourse wields in "constituting the reality it purports to represent" (Healy 2009, 338). Recognizing performativity opens up the possibility of poststructural interventions that challenge hegemonic knowledge and power systems. Rather than a mere analytical tool, poststructural knowledge appears as a political act, relativizing existing knowledges and validating new subjects and practices. Poststructural research deconstructs meanings and reconstructs power, subjectivity, and social possibility. Indeed, the diverse economies approach seeks to make visible "marginalized, hidden and alternative economics" (Gibson-Graham 2008b, 613).

Critical adoption

The diverse economies framework is adopted as a performative poststructural endeavor. As a 'weak theory', it does not pre-determine any outcomes of alternative spaces. Rather, the approach enables an open-ended exploration and interpretation of those spaces, encountering their challenges and limitations as "issues of struggle and not as reasons for resignation" (Gritzas and Kavoulakos 2016, 921). Gibson-Graham further states that she aims not to assume any a priori judgement about whether any practice is good or bad or whether alternative practices should proliferate.

In this line, drawing on Samers' criticism of the approach, I take into account that non-capitalist economic practices are not automatically less exploitative than capitalist ones (2005). Indeed, "left thinkers may celebrate economic practices that are highly exploitative" (Gritzas and Kavoulakos 2016, 919). This research therefore does not seek to simply present alternative practices as transformative, but rather aims to trace the challenges they face.

While assuming a critical position when exploring diverse economies, I do however contend with Gibson-Graham that knowledge is performative and that as a researcher I am able to use theory to "see openings, [and] to provide a space of freedom and possibility" (Gibson-Graham 2008, 619). Gibson-Graham herself assumes a political stance in stating that her "political and strategic concern is to build community economies" (Gibson-Graham 2008b, 630). Introducing her framework as a new economic ontology, she aims to contribute to novel economic practices. Rather than using theories to confirm and explain what already exists, a diverse economies approach can uncover new possibilities and transformative potential. My adoption of the diverse economy framework likewise follows the intention of challenging the hegemonic framing of capitalism, specifically in regard to how it is shaping current agri-food systems. It seeks to uncover, understand, and energize different economic practices in AFNs.

3.2 Commoning

The concept of *commoning* serves as the second theoretical perspective taken up in this research. Gibson-Graham et al. show that an anti-capitalocentric diverse economies perspective enables us to see commoning as a form of postcapitalist and posthuman politics (2016). Commoning departs from the concept of the 'common good', which refers to "a specific resource that is shared with and benefits all or most members of a given community" (Vivero-Pol et al. 2018, 6). Establishing food as a common good rather than a commodity, necessitates the act of commoning. Gibson-Graham et al. define commoning as a process of "establishing rules or protocols for access and use, taking care of and accepting responsibility for a resource, and distributing the benefits in ways that take into account the well-being of others" (2016, 195).

The commoning of food is a strategy within the wider food sovereignty movement. Originating from the peasant movement[4], food sovereignty refers to the right of peoples to "healthy and culturally appropriate food produced through ecologically sound and sustainable

[4] The international peasant movement is represented by *La Vía Campesina,* an organization founded in 1993 in Belgium, which advocates for family far-based sustainable agriculture and coined the term 'food sovereignty'. La Vía Campesina is present in 81 countries and represents 200 million small-scale food producers worldwide (La Vía Campesina 2021).

methods, and their right to define their own food and agriculture systems" ("Declaration of Nyéléni" 2007, 1). Opposing the commodification of food in the current agri-food system that runs under the logic of profit maximization, commoning is a way for social systems to cooperate around sustainable and democratic production and consumption of food. The emergence of AFNs as a way of communities resisting industrial food systems and food safety scandals may therefore present "an excellent example of commoning" (Zhang and Barr 2019, 773). Processes of commoning may be used to understand AFNs' capacity to alter economic and social identities, as well as their impact on food-systems transformation. This requires a more structured understanding of the concept of commoning.

Conceptualizing 'commoning'

Practices of commoning occur at the level of the community, since "without a commons, there is no community, [and] without a community, there is no commons" (Gudeman 2001, 27). Likewise, the loss of a commons means the loss of a community (Gibson-Graham, Cameron, and Healy 2013). Commoning refers to community-building processes that underlie communal sustainable resource management. Rather than seeing 'the food commons' as a fixed systemic entity, this perspective shifts the focus towards processes of 'performative ordering' – that is, networks that are always in the making (Whatmore and Thorne 2004). Processes of commoning are based on the relationships between humans and nature. Therefore, the commoning community of food is not confined to humans but is "more-than-human" and includes other beings, inanimate entities and social movements (Sarmiento 2017). As a result, the notion of *community* has a processual character uniting both human and nonhuman life forms that coexist in interdependence and togetherness.

Gibson-Graham at al. outline five characteristics of commoning which can be applied to analyze commoning processes in AFNs (2016). Firstly, *access* to a property is shared by the community. Secondly, the community negotiates the property's *use*. Thirdly, *benefit* gets distributed to the community and beyond. Fourth, a community shares *care* for property and fifth, assumes *responsibility* for it. These aspects of commoning processes appear when a community commons either previously enclosed property (that is, privately owned) or unmanaged open-access resources[5] (Figure 1). In terms of commoning food, this refers to a

[5] Unmanaged food resources such as wild growing fruit and vegetables or fisheries are also captured by this framework but are intentionally excluded from this research.

community collectively managing its food provision as opposed to a commercial actor producing food for the mainstream market.

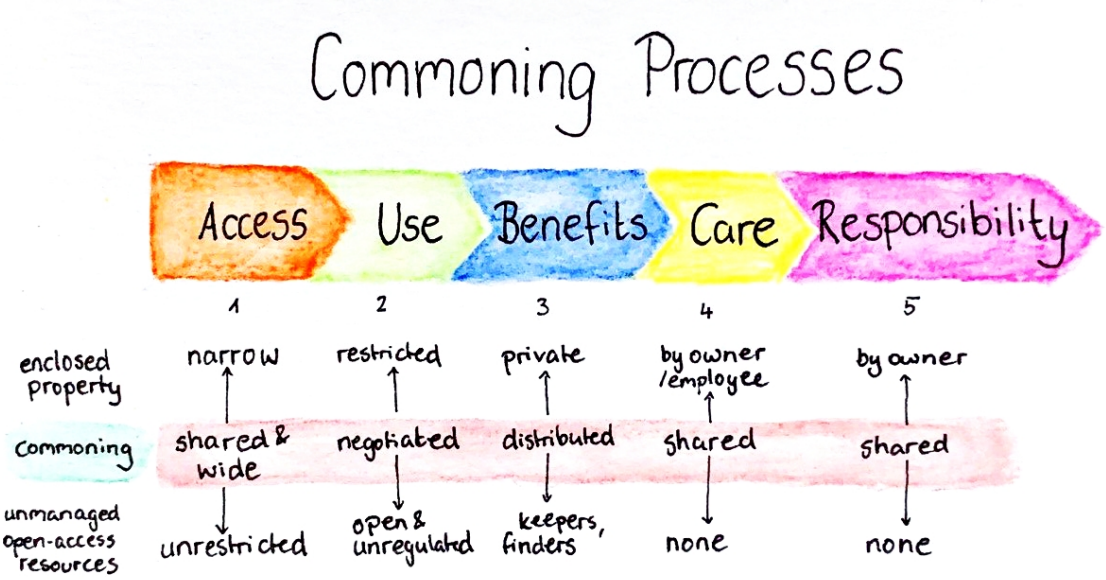

Figure 1: Characteristics of Commoning (based on Gibson-Graham et al. 2016)

4. Research Design

This research takes an interpretative approach to answer the research question in how far economic diversity leads to commoning of food in AFNs. Utilizing a comparative case study approach, one producer-consumer partnership and one direct-sell initiative were selected to facilitate analysis and comparison of two different types of AFNs. In the ensuing field research, data was collected through interviews and participatory observation. This data was combined with online data sources (AFN websites and documents). In the analysis, the diverse economic practices were analyzed for both case studies. Subsequently, discourse analysis was used to trace processes of commoning in both AFNs.

4.1 Case Studies

The analysis will be based on primary empirical data gathered in two AFNs. Case study research was chosen because it provides "a holistic view of a process" (Kohlbacher 2006, 25). Specifically, I adopt a comparative case study approach (CCS) as a heuristic that is in line with the critical theoretical perspective of this research (Bartlett and Vavrus 2017). CCS does not engage in a priori bounding of cases by pre-defining variables and hypothesizing relationships. Rather, it enables an open-ended comparison that is based on an exploration of "processes that have produced *a sense of* shared place, purpose, or identity with regard to the central phenomenon" – in this case, the commoning of food (Bartlett and Vavrus 2017, 10).

Case description

Regionalkollektiv[6] is a community supported agriculture located in Landshut, Germany. It can be classified as a producer-consumer partnership because it operates as a cooperative [Genossenschaft] that is co-owned by its members ('comrades') who enter into a yearly contract with their producer. The cooperative is registered as "Regionalkollektiv eG" under the German Cooperative Society Act [Genossenschaftsgesetz, GenG]. This makes it a commercial entity under German law, which is allowed to carry out commercial operations, though its business policy is determined solely by the interests of its members. The cooperative is based on the values of democracy, fairness and transparency and is organized as a grassroots democracy [Basisdemokratie] - a form of direct democracy which distributes as much decision-making authority as possible to its members. Members can purchase harvest shares, which they receive in the form of weekly vegetable boxes. Regionalkollektiv cultivates most of its food on its own farmland, where it employs two gardeners who run the cooperative garden. The rest of the produce is directly purchased from local organic farmers. In addition, Regionalkollektiv has seven employees responsible for organizational and operational tasks (such as packing boxes and transportation).

Figure 2: Logo (Regionalkollektiv 2023)

Lekkernassuh is a food initiative located in Den Haag, The Netherlands. It can be classified as a direct-sell initiative because it establishes a direct link between local producers and consumers. Lekkernassuh is registered as a foundation [stichting] at the Dutch Chamber of Commerce. It buys vegetables from local organic suppliers and farms. The initiative supplies between 400 and 600 vegetable boxes per week that can be ordered by anyone the week prior and be picked up at the Wednesday fresh market or at pickup

Figure 3: Logo (Lekkernassuh 2023)

[6] The information on both Regionalkollektiv and Lekkernassuh was retrieved from the initiatives' respective websites (Regionalkollektiv 2023, Lekkernassuh 2023) unless otherwise specified.

points around the city. The fresh market also gives local food entrepreneurs the opportunity to sell their products. Furthermore, there is a packaging-free shop for dry goods on Saturdays. Lekkernassuh is a self-organized community, meaning that it is based on a flat hierarchy and fully run by its members who are paid through an alternative payment system called 'Timebank'. Products can be paid both with money as well as in Timebank hours. The initiative is organized as a 'holacracy', a decentralized management method that shifts decision-making authority to self-organizing teams.

Case selection

The two case studies present different types of AFNs. While 'Regionalkollektiv' is a producer-consumer partnership, 'Lekkernassuh' is a direct-sell initiative. Both initiatives provide a weekly vegetable package, picked up by members at pick-up points across town.

Regionalkollektiv and Lekkernassuh differ widely in terms of their age, scale, economic practices, and organizational structure. Regionalkollektiv has around 160 members both from the city of Landshut and the surrounding villages that commit themselves to co-ownership of the cooperative and yearly harvest-shares. Founded in 2019, it still operates on a loss but employs 9 people. Lekkernassuh supplies around 500 vegetable packages per week, which people can order on demand without regular commitment. It is run fully by volunteers, uses an alternative payment system and has been operating without making overall losses since its foundation in 2014.

The selection of two dissimilar cases shows the heterogeneity of economic and social practices across AFNs and enables conclusions about the role they play for the commoning capacity of an initiative. Yet, while Regionalkollektiv and Lekkernassuh represent two different categories of AFNs, they are individual cases whose economic models and social practices cannot be generalized for their respective category.

4.2 Data Collection

This study is based on primary data collected through field research on the two case studies, consisting of interviews and participant fieldwork. Online sources, first and foremost the case studies' websites, serve as additional information.

Interviews

In-depth semi-structured interviews were conducted for both case studies. Four one hour-long in-person interviews were conducted with two organizers each from Regionalkollektiv and

Lekkernassuh. An additional half hour interview specifically on the topic of finances was conducted with the person who is responsible for the financial administration of Lekkernassuh. Prior written consent was obtained from every participant. Interviews with Regionalkollektiv were conducted and transcribed in German, interviews with Lekkernassuh in English. The five interviews produced a total of 50 pages of interview transcripts (see appendix 9.1). The interview partners included founders of each initiative as well as people working specifically on the financial or organizational aspects of their AFN. The participants were chosen based on their deep knowledge of the development of their AFN as well as their specific expertise regarding the topic of this research.

The interviews were conducted in the style of narrative interviews, which aim to give the respondent the opportunity to freely develop an impromptu narrative (Hopf 2004). The interview questions were grouped under the following themes: goals and values of the AFN, organizational set-up, working conditions, finances, inclusivity, and participation. Depending on the role of the respondent within their AFN, different emphasis was put on the respective topics.

While the interviews are the main source of empirical evidence used in the analysis, I take into account that they represent the subjective perspectives of the respondents. Additionally, the limited amount of 5 respondents allows for some conclusions on the process of commoning, but of course reflects only singular perspectives from the communities.

Participant fieldwork

Participant fieldwork was used as an additional method of gathering information. The goal of participant observation lies in taking part in everyday practices to create familiarity and allow for an observation of participants' everyday performance (Luders 2004). Rather than approaching participants to engage in conversations, this method focusses on watching, listening, and potentially asking questions. The ethnographic approach is based on the assumption that situational practices and local knowledge can only be accessed through a co-presence of observer and events (Amann and Hirschauer 1997). This method of data collection provides both first-hand empirical insights on the implementation of social and economic practices, as well as anecdotal evidence that describes the theoretically abstract social phenomenon of commoning.

On April 5th, 2023, I observed a meeting of Regionalkollektiv's core team, and participated in their weekly community meeting at a local pub. At Lekkernassuh, I joined the

weekly setting up of the market in an observant role on May 3rd, 2023. Field notes were taken for all participant fieldwork activities (see appendix 9.2).

Desk research

Information available on the initiatives' websites was included into the research as additional background material. This was done firstly through a preliminary desk study, to guide the case selection, get an understanding of the basic principles of the cases, and to formulate interview questions. Secondly, online information was included in the discourse analysis and additionally served to compare and fact-check data obtained through field research.

Positionality and reflexivity

Positionality addresses the dynamics of identity and knowledge production. In other words, "who we are matters to what we experience and how we know" (Kinkaid 2022, 926). This plays an especially important role in feminist geography and poststructural approaches which seek to deconstruct meaning by offering interpretations of empirical realities. Furthermore, reflexivity - the reflection on the role of the researcher and power relations and politics in the research process – should occur throughout the entire research process in such endeavors (Sultana 2007). Being an active member of Lekkernassuh, participating regularly as a volunteer in the weekly market set-up, and being a user of the Timebank system influences my perception of commoning processes in this AFN. This also means that I maintain a personal relationship with one of the interview respondents and have a general understanding of the community structure at Lekkernassuh. Regionalkollektiv is located in my hometown, which means that I could conduct interviews in my native language and dialect and share an understanding of the societal structures in Landshut. For both case studies I engaged with people not as a neutral researcher but as a fellow member of an AFN and the surrounding communities. I did however refrain from giving any value judgements or personal interpretations in interview contexts.

4.3 Discourse Analysis

Discourse analysis is applied to analyze processes of commoning in the AFNs by interpreting the collected primary data. This method of analysis complements the critical approach taken in this research. Going back to Foucault, the term "discourse" refers to a rule-governed practice that includes meanings set within a knowledge system as well as institutions and social practices that produce and maintain these meanings (Gibson-Graham 2008). Acknowledging the "discursive space that imposes meanings on [the] world and thus *creates* reality" this method

serves to uncover economic and social narratives and *how* they make various practices in AFNs possible (Doty 2023, 303). In other words, discourse analysis aims to interpret what discursive practices *do.* By addressing the 'how-question', attention is directed towards the role of *power* in constituting subjective realities and hierarchies. Interpreting how individuals position themselves towards discursive norms can show how they may be disempowered through compliance or empowered through resistance (Waitt 2005). This perspective not only shows how specific understandings of the world are privileged, but also identifies the underlying processes of inclusion and exclusion of perspectives through discourse.

Revealing power relations is a "*sine qua non* component in the analysis of collective action" and relates to the commoning approach adopted in this research (Gritzas and Kavoulakos 2016, 930). The practice of commoning in itself is transformational and counter-hegemonic, challenging the hegemony of the profit-ethos of the market economy as well as the state's claim on the monopoly over the common good (Vivero-Pol et al. 2018). I firstly familiarize myself with the texts of the collected data and start identifying themes. This step is structured by the categories of commoning deducted from my theoretical framework. I will apply three discourse analysis strategies (Rose 2001). Firstly, investigating for effects of *truth*, I will look for devices that are used to claim that a respondent is 'speaking the truth'. Secondly, I will make note of *inconsistencies* within and across my sources. Thirdly, I will explore the "active presence of absent items" and interpret the meaning of *silences* (Waitt 2005, 184).

5. Analysis

The analysis proceeds as follows: In the first analytical step, the diverse economic practices occurring within each case study will be mapped (chapter 5.1). The second analytical step consists of a discourse analysis of commoning in both case studies. For each category of commoning processes (Figure 1), an open-ended interpretation of discourse is performed that traces imbued values and meanings (chapter 5.2).

5.1 Diverse Economic Practices

The economic practices of both case studies are traced along the categories of 'enterprise', 'labor', 'property', 'transactions', and 'finance' (Table 1), based on Gibson-Graham et al. (2016). The corresponding practices found in the AFNs are subsequently visualized in a table of diverse economic practices for each case study (Table 2 & 3).

5.1.1 Regionalkollektiv

Regionalkollektiv is generally a non-capitalist *enterprise*. It is owned by its members and any profit it makes is dedicated to the maintenance or enlargement of the cooperative (Regionalkollektiv 2023). The cooperative owns a company called "Regionalkollektiv eG", whose goal it is to provide its members with "ecological, socially sustainable, preferably regional products and services" (Regionalkollektiv 2019).

Regionalkollektiv is upheld by both wage *labor* and unpaid labor. On the one hand, the cooperative employs nine people in part-time and mini job[7] positions, who are paid an above pay scale salary of 18€ an hour[8]. Every employee, regardless of his or her job, earns the same wage. On the other hand, the cooperative is also sustained through non-paid voluntary work, both by community members as well as by regular employees doing extra work.

Regionalkollektiv operates mostly on alternative private *property*. Since 2022, the cooperative has been leasing 6.6 hectares of land in the outskirts of Landshut where it has created its community garden including two foil tunnels (Figure 4). The land also holds the community orchard, a trailer and a room to store vegetables and assemble the packages.

Figure 4: Regionalkollektiv's Community Garden (Regionalkollektiv 2023)

Regionalkollektiv's company capital is made up of the fees for cooperative shares and the contributions for the harvest shares. This financial model is based on the cooperative's ability to collectively sustain its operations and to enable necessary investments.

[7] In Germany so-called 'Minijobs' are defined as marginal employment with a maximum monthly salary of 520€ and a maximum of 70 workdays per calendar year. A mini-job does not pay into social insurance and therefore does not provide social security (Bundesagentur für Arbeit, 2023).

[8] An 18€/1h salary lies 6€ above the German minimum-wage. Regionalkollektiv salaries are "gross as net", meaning that employees who pay taxes earn 18€ an hour and those who do not pay taxes (holders of mini jobs) earn 14€ an hour.

Regionalkollektiv's *transactions* lie between non-capitalist and alternative market based. To determine the collective financing of the yearly harvest through members' harvest-shares, a so-called 'bidding round' [Bieterrunde] is done at the beginning of each year. The bidding round follows pre-determined procedural steps (Regionalkollektiv 2022). First, the cooperative presents the calculated budget for the upcoming year, and the according guideline price for the harvest shares. Subsequently, members make an anonymous binding bid about the amount of harvest shares they want to receive and what they are willing to pay (it is also possible to contribute financially without receiving a harvest share). In this step members commit themselves to an amount of harvest shares and the price they will pay for the next twelve months. Finally, the bids are added up to check whether they cover the costs of the yearly harvest and production. If this benchmark is not reached, another bidding round ensues. The bidding round makes it possible for the collective to distribute its costs among members according to their different financial capabilities.

Regionalkollektiv's *finance* includes alternative market and non-market instruments. The infrastructure of the collective, such as its greenhouse, water pump or agricultural equipment, is financed through cooperative shares. To become a member of Regionalkollektiv and receive harvest shares, it is necessary to purchase at least two cooperative shares with a value of 100€ each. According Regionalkollektiv's charter, this deposit can be paid back after two years upon termination of the membership if the cooperative reaches a minimum of 85% of its value preservation at that point in time[9] (Regionalkollektiv Interview 2). While most of Regionalkollektiv's financial capital stems from cooperative shares, the collective also received private interest-free loans from cooperative members to finance its operations.

Enterprise	Labor	Property	Transactions	Finance
Capitalist	Wage Employees	Private	Market	Mainstream Market
Alternative Capitalist	Alternative Paid	Alternative Private Farmland	Alternative Market Harvest shares	Alternative Market Cooperative shares
Non-Capitalist Regionalkollektiv	Unpaid Volunteers	Open Access	Non-Market	Non-Market Interest-free loans

Table 2: Economic Practices, Regionalkollektiv (based on Gibson-Graham 2006)

[9] Due to the extensive investments in the creation of the community garden last year, Regionalkollektiv is currently "significantly below the 85% benchmark" (Regionalkollektiv Interview 2).

5.1.2 Lekkernassuh

As an *enterprise,* Lekkernassuh leans towards an alternative capitalist model. The foundation operates as a "link between you and local farmers, market gardeners and other producers" with the goal of providing healthy and local food to people and without the aim of making financial profits (Lekkernassuh 2023). While it is a community-run organization, it is not co-owned by its members. Lekkernassuh's economic model is based on its ability to purchase produce from local organic suppliers and farmers on a weekly basis, financed by the purchases of the community. As a result, the initiative is striving for a balance between financial income and output. While it has made pluses in some years and a minus last year, it is overall operating without making financial losses (Lekkernassuh Interview 3).

In terms of *labor,* Lekkernassuh combines volunteer and alternative paid models. The initiative is fully run by its members which are all paid in Timebank hours, regardless of the position they have. There are however additional tasks and extra hours that are performed on a purely voluntary basis. For every hour worked, a member receives 0.65 Timebank hours, meaning 65% of the time is compensated and 35% counts as voluntary work (Lekkernassuh 2023). Lekkernassuh calculates that one Timebank hour paid to a volunteer costs the foundation 10€ (Lekkernassuh Interview 3).

Lekkernassuh's main market location 'The Gymzaal' (see Figure 5) is an alternative private property, owned by a non-profit foundation. This separate foundation called 'Stichting Lokaal Voedsel Den Haag', which used to be the umbrella foundation of Lekkernassuh before its independence, purchased the Gymzaal in 2022. Lekkernassuh pays rent for the Gymzaal, as well as for its three other market venues, Spinozahof, Toverbosch, and Mozartlaan.

Figure 5: The Gymzaal (Lekkernassuh 2023)

Lekkernassuh conducts both regular market and alternative market *transactions*. Vegetable packages and other products at the market can be paid in Euros as well as Timebank hours. While a package for example costs 12,50€, it can also be purchased with 1.25 Timebank hours. Thus, the market, where the vast majority of customers pay fixed prices with Euros, functions mostly as a regular market. The Timebank system is intended to keep the organization

running in terms of the labor it requires. Timebank hours can however be spent anywhere in the Timebank.cc community.

The Timebank system is a community currency that enables transactions based on time instead of conventional money. Timebank.cc is a free online platform where users can sign up and offer or purchase services[10]. The 'cc' stands for 'complementary currency', signifying that the intention is not to replace the Euro currency but to enable a parallel economy for the exchange of services (Timebank, 2023). In this system, one Timebank hour equals one hour of work. Timebank is mostly used in Den Haag, though there are also users in Amsterdam and Brussels.

Figure 6: Logo (Timebank 2023)

Lekkernassuh operates with an alternative market *financial* system. The foundation is financially sustained through members' contributions. That is, what customers pay for vegetable packages and other products purchased at the market. Lekkernassuh also received some subsidies from funds for specific projects over the years and charges a 10% commission from third-party vendors, who sell their locally produced products at the market. However, these additional sources of income are marginal. The foundation depends on this income to pay the farmers and producers, cover the cost of Timebank hours and its fixed costs, such as rent, transport and IT. It also has a reserve of approximately 40.000-45.000€ which serves partially as backup finance and partially to fund projects, such as the renovation of the Gymzaal (Lekkernassuh Interview 3).

Enterprise	Labor	Property	Transactions	Finance
Capitalist	Wage	Private	Market Market sales	Mainstream Market Market sales
Alternative Capitalist Lekkernassuh	Alternative Paid Timebank-paid	Alternative Private The Gymzaal	Alternative Market Timebank hours	Subsidies Alternative Market Commissions
Non-Capitalist	Unpaid Volunteers	Open Access	Non-Market	Non-Market

Table 3: Economic Practices, Lekkernassuh (based on Gibson-Graham 2006)

[10] In this sense, Lekkernassuh's use of Timebank hours to sell its products is not necessarily part of the intended use of the Timebank system (Timebank, 2023).

Analyzing the economic models of Regionalkollektiv and Lekkernassuh shows how both initiatives combine diverse economic practices spanning from the non-capitalist to the capitalist realm. Adopting this economic diversity perspective highlights two important points: Firstly, it makes clear that while an AFN might be perceived or classify itself as one particular kind of enterprise (such as 'anti-capitalist'), it can still contain a multitude of economic practices. As a result, different levels of commoning cannot simply be assigned to a specific type of enterprise but require a more complex evaluation. Secondly, several practices, such as Regionalkollektiv's bidding round and the Timebank payment system for volunteers at Lekkernassuh, cross the boundaries between 'alternative capitalist' and 'non-capitalist'. There is thus fluidity even within the economic diversity categories.

Overall, the analysis shows that Regionalkollektiv is leaning more strongly towards the non-capitalist economic realm. It has more mechanisms of collective financing, meaning that it relies less on market mechanisms than Lekkernassuh, which shows more alternative-capitalist characteristics. This is in line with theoretical expectations, since producer-consumer partnerships such as Regionalkollektiv tend to have higher levels of consumer engagement and agency (Venn et al. 2006). Regionalkollektiv's economic model is based on a high commitment on behalf of its members, who have to become co-owners of the cooperative and commit themselves to purchase their weekly harvest shares for 12 months in advance. Direct-sell initiatives such as Lekkernassuh more often create 'moments of connection' which are more limited to the point of purchase (Venn et al. 2006). The foundation operates with lower levels of commitment and sustains itself economically through the purchases of customers, first and foremost of the vegetable packages which can be ordered on a weekly basis.

5.2 Commoning Food

The core of this research concerns the process of commoning the resource 'food'. While the analytical focus lies on a community's management of food as a shared resource, it is equally important to capture the constituent effects of AFNs beyond just food. That is, the emergence of collective action and solidarity through commoning. Furthermore, in order to understand commoning in AFNs, it is crucial to avoid a discussion of "what they are" and instead treat them as "collective becomings" (Zhang and Barr 2019, 780). This means focusing on the role that commoning played in the development of each AFN, instead of only analyzing their current form.

After determining the respective economic models of both case studies, this section will analyze and compare commoning processes at both Regionalkollektiv and Lekkernassuh. The

discourse analysis is structured by the five aspects of commoning processes: sharing *access*, *use*, *benefit*, *care*, and *responsibility* for the resource of food (Figure 1), based on Gibson-Graham et al. (2016).

5.2.1 Access

A first step of commoning processes is making *access* to a resource shared and wide. When commoning food, this refers to extending access to foodstuffs to the community by establishing food provision outside of the commodified distribution via the mainstream market. Regarding AFNs, this raises the question how and to whom an initiative makes food accessible.

Regionalkollektiv

Regionalkollektiv's mission is to provide sustainably produced local food to as many people as possible. The cooperative grows most of its own vegetables, which is due to the limited access to local organic vegetables as there are "few organic vegetable farmers around Landshut" (Regionalkollektiv Interview 1, [RI 1] [11]). Being in its start-up phase, Regionalkollektiv is still expanding and trying to find more members to broaden access.

Growth is part of a meaningful process of widening access.

> I don't have a stomachache with this kind of growth because we don't produce anything useless, on the contrary - with every box we distribute, the awareness of how great and important a vegetable cultivated in this way is, also increases. (RI 1)

The notion of growth is tied to the commoning of access in AFNs. Here, growth is framed as positive, based on the shared notion that what Regionalkollektiv produces is valuable and useful and can be done with good conscience. This is rooted in the contestation of the conventional system through intervening in the market and enabling people to access non-commercial food.

> I think growth in this sense is good, because it is ecological growth connected to people's basic needs. It is not luxury growth or surplus growth. (RI 2)

[11] All quotes from my interviews with Regionalkollektiv are my own translation.

This quote shows that growth is justified through distancing the own business model (providing for people's basic needs without making a profit) from the mainstream profit-oriented form of growth, which in turn is framed as unsustainable: "What is happening right now, that just anything gets produced and is trucked around everywhere" (RI 2). Furthermore, both respondents signal truth by tying their positive perception of growth to their own conscience and judgement.

At the same time, the discourse also reflects that Regionalkollektiv experiences a pressure to grow. The cooperative's financial break-even point lies at 400 harvest shares, which is currently far from reached. Regionalkollektiv puts significant effort into advertising (see for example Figure 7) and frames the necessity to grow as a given ("you need growth") (RI 1). This has even led the cooperative to talk people into purchasing harvest shares in the past, which led to "a lot of trouble" in form of complaints and discussions "where we constantly had to defend our products" (RI 1). The increased effort on broadening access thus created a lack of appreciation for the product and led to a change in policy, where new members are now encouraged to first try a 'test box' for a month.

Figure 7: Advertising Poster "Savoy cabbage with a vision" (Regionalkollektiv 2023)

There are some inconsistencies in the desired extent of growth.

One respondent argues that "if we reach 500 or 1000 people […] we would *of course* have reached much more" (RI 2, emphasis added), signaling that more growth equals more success. The other respondent expresses some worry about the impact of growth on the community: "my personal ideal would be to stop now at 250 comrades […] but that is not possible", expressing that the situation is perceived as a dilemma.

> If you know Kartoffelkombinat [*a CSA in Munich*] with 1500 boxes – that's a factory, you don't know anyone anymore! (RI 1).

This quote shows that the cooperative's identity is tied to its sense of community, of knowing one another and that anonymity ("a factory") is perceived as a threat to this identity. Regionalkollektiv experienced that with increasing membership, new members are "simply interested in the box as a product […] [creating] more anonymity and less community" (RI 2). This further demonstrates that 'the community' is made up of people who know each other and who are interested in interaction that exceeds the mere picking up of food.

The sense of community is based on the idea of a shared political identity.

> I think, in contrast to *other* left-wing associations, we are very open. (RI 2, emphasis added)

The discourse constructs a left-wing identity of the community at Regionalkollektiv and organizing as a cooperative is described as something "conceptually leftist" (RI 2). While the term 'left' is never used explicitly to describe the political orientation of the cooperative, upon repeated inquiry (alluding to some silence) it was confirmed that Regionalkollektiv is perceived as left-wing [*"linke Socken"*] (RI 1).

The foundation of Regionalkollektiv goes back to people from Landshut's left-alternative scene, and original promotion was done in locations associated with this scene. This created an "incredible spirit at the founding assembly" and led to the explicit adoption of the values of antifascism, antisexism, and antiracism in the cooperative's charter (RI 1). The political identity thus serves as a binding element of the community.

However, there are both inconsistencies and silences on how much political activism and positioning this should entail. Neither respondent mentioned internal debates on this issue, nor explained the conflict potential of the cooperative's political identity. They did however highlight some issues including that individual members quit their membership due to political positioning of the cooperative. This occurred for example after Regionalkollektiv supported a citizen's petition for a pedestrian zone in Landshut (RI 1).

> Some [people] even perceive us negatively because they perceive us as political. That's sometimes a point of criticism even among our own comrades." (RI 1)

This quote reflects the conflict potential tied to the cooperative's political identity. There is also some awareness that this impacts the ability of commoning access: "the question is of course

how much you can grow if you focus so much on this [*the political identity*]" (RI 2). In turn, the cooperative's slow growth is implicitly linked to the "very traditional bourgeois, very rich society" of Landshut, signifying that the attributes 'traditonal', 'burgeois', and 'very rich' do not fit within its self-perception (RI 1).

In summary, negotiations of how and which political values are adopted and put into action, including their impact on access, is part of the commoning process at Regionalkollektiv.

Lekkernassuh

The purpose of Lekkernassuh is based on the idea of providing access to "local healthy food to as many people in the city as possible" (Lekkernassuh Interview 1, [LI 1]). This is linked to the observation: "How is it that access to organic food is so bad actually? While there are local farmers around the city", which shows that the lack of access is not only problematized, but also seen as a contradiction to the existence of local organic food growers (LI 1).

Growth is an integral part of Lekkernassuh's mission of commoning access to food.

> For the initial purpose growth was important – you want more people to have access to locally grown food. But then at some point we also realized, our purpose is not growth. […] Growth was not top-down driven, it just happened […] By people for the people. (LI 1)

This discourse constructs Lekkernassuh as a people-driven, bottom-up initiative, where growth is an organic byproduct of commoning access. While growth is deemed necessary for the immediate commoning, it is not the initiative's main purpose anymore. This shows that the commoning of access is seen as accomplished to some extent.

The idea of commoning access is extended to the entire population.

Lekkernassuh severely grew in the last three years. During the Covid pandemic it nearly doubled in size.

> And a lot of new people came in for completely different reasons. To be honest there were quite a few people with totally different ideas than we had. They had the weirdest ideas: corona deniers, really radical, […] people who want to go local because of

> nationalistic thinking. We thought 'oh my goodness this is not what we are aiming for'. But obviously they are welcome to fetch their package like everyone else. (LI 1)

The use of the word 'we' to describe the existing community constructs a separate identity from the 'new people', that came with different ideas and ideologies, some of which are also problematized as 'not what *we* are aiming for'. However, it is 'obvious' that people with ideas that counter the collective 'we'-identity are also included in the commoning of access. While there are some collective values attributed to the community, participation is open to everyone regardless of their political identity. Being asked whether Lekkernassuh is a political project, the answer "I mean, everybody needs to eat" highlights the very fundamental political idea that guides the initiative – granting access to food (LI 2).

Nevertheless, the initiative also created conflict potential through political positioning. The initiative expressed solidarity with an Extinction Rebellion[12] blockade on Facebook and caused reactions "of people saying we should be apolitical" and "one lady [who] said: 'I'm going to stop picking up the package' […] And then we said: 'that's a shame but you're always welcome to come back for your fresh vegetables' "(LI 1). While the reaction again reflects the value granting access to food, this nonetheless shows that political identity and positioning is an issue of collective negotiation.

Comparison

The differences between Regionalkollektiv and Lekkernassuh show that the meanings and practices attached to the commoning of access depend on the identity of the AFN. What unites both cases is the generally positive framing of growth. Limited growth is seen as both meaningful in terms of its societal and environmental impact and necessary for the economic health of each AFN. This idea comes with a desire not only to grow in size, but also to spread the own model geographically. At the same time, both initiatives grapple with the effects that growth has on the sense of community by creating more anonymity.

Both cases differ significantly in how they construct the broadness of access. While Regionalkollektiv's identity is more closely associated with a political position and embraces explicit values, Lekkernassuh explicitly welcomes anyone independent of their political ideas. This is connected to the goals of each AFN: while the producer-consumer partnership is based on a cohesive community, the direct-sell initiative sees itself more as a provider of food to a

[12] Extinction Rebellion is a global environmental movement using nonviolent civil disobedience to compel government action on the ecological and climate crisis (Extinction Rebellion 2023).

diverse group of consumers. Despite those different identities, both case studies share a strikingly similar experience of conflict potential that arises from any political positioning of an AFN.

5.2.2 Use

The second element of commoning lies in negotiating the *use* of a resource. For AFNs this relates to the production and distribution of food and the meanings and values that are attributed to those practices.

Regionalkollektiv

Regionalkollektiv negotiates the use of food and produces most of its own vegetables as a cooperative. Food is distributed in form of harvest shares to members of the cooperative.

Commoning food at Regionalkollektiv is based on the political goal of becoming less dependent on the conventional food system.

> The reason why we created Regionalkollektiv was to break away from this capitalist system, from this dependence on a food industry that palms everything off on you, destroys everything, even in the organic sector where there is also endless waste and only the most beautiful appear on the market. That is political. Food is political. (RI 1)

The underlying motivation is based on stark criticism of the conventional food system (including the organic sector to some extent) as deceptive, destructive, and wasteful. This criticism includes the commodification of food in the current system, where growing vegetables is tied to exploitation of farmers and the cheap labor that they often rely on[13] (RI 2). The identity of the cooperative is thus based on the procurement of food outside the capitalist system, whose modes of production and distribution are seen as unacceptable. This identity is furthermore based on discontent with the political system where "far too little is done" on behalf of the state to initiate an agricultural turnaround [*Agrarwende*] (RI 2).

[13] In Germany, a disproportionately high number of low-wage employees are found in agriculture (Grabka and Göbler 2020). The inadequate protection of seasonal workers in Germany has resulted in a lawsuit brought against it by the European Commission in April 2023 (dpa 2023).

The community collectively decided to operate as a CSA because they "don't only want to be purchasers" (RI 1). By producing its own food, Regionalkollektiv wants to establish access to basic supplies that are "there for people and do not exist in an economic system ruled by money" (RI 2). Instead of the conventional goal of making profits, 'the people' are put at the center of the cooperative's business model. Alluding to the wider political mission of the cooperative, CSA is seen as an act of self-empowerment, though "it is only the beginning" (RI 2). Commoning food is thus performed as an emancipatory act from an agri-food system where adequate transformation is seen as lacking.

Lekkernassuh

The emergence of Lekkernassuh as a direct-sell initiative was an organic process. Seeing that access to local organic food was limited, the founders were looking for farms that would sell their products directly.

> We found one, in the close neighborhood – Hoeve Biesland. We actually went there with a van. Just drove there and asked: 'Hey, do you have vegetables?', that's literally how it went. (LI 2)

The basic idea and process of Lekkernassuh's foundation was simple: establishing a direct connection between farmers and consumers. Over time, the initiative developed a system of buying from farmers and organic brokers that offer both their own vegetables as well as additional organic products they buy from other farms. Lekkernassuh is not profit-oriented, but "the daily operation of Lekkernassuh would be best when there is a balance between costs and income", allowing the business model to function (LI 3).

The relationship between producers and consumers is a process of continuous development.

> The way we buy vegetables is pretty conventional. The farmer says: 'We have carrots, they cost so much, do you want them?', we say 'yes' or 'no'. It's a bit... in contradiction to how you can actually organize stuff. Now Lekkernassuh is a community in Den Haag. In the future the Lekkernassuh community could be people who eat food and people who grow food and Lekkernassuh is the broker. (LI 2)

While Lekkernassuh has also started experimenting with harvest shares, the basic purchasing model of the initiative is described as 'pretty conventional'. While it is removed from the mainstream market, it still follows the basic principle of supply and demand. The discourse constructs this model as a 'contradiction' to other forms of organizing, that unite producers and consumers into one community. Describing the latter as 'actually organizing stuff' constructs this form as a normative guideline of how things should be done. This goal is also reflected by practices of "aiming to engage with the famers more directly" (LI 1), showing that a closer producer-consumer relationship is continuously developed in the process of commoning.

Comparison

Regionalkollektiv and Lekkernassuh differ significantly in terms of the commoning of the use of food. It is this aspect of commoning, where the case studies' different economic models play the largest role. Regionalkollektiv's deliberate decision to become a CSA based on a cooperative goes back to its strong values of anti-capitalism, independence, and a critique of the entire food system. These values have led the community to decide that they want to be more than purchasers and grow their own food.

Lekkernassuh grew more organically as an initiative that aimed to overcome the lack of access to local organic vegetables. While also critical of the conventional food system, Lekkernassuh developed into a direct-sell initiative, where the consumers are largely separated from producers. However, the initiative is continuously developing its purchasing model and the producer-consumer relationship.

5.2.3 Benefit

Thirdly, commoning leads to a distribution of *benefit*. Rather than having private entities keep the financial benefit of commodified food production, the commoning of food spreads the benefit to the community and beyond. In AFNs this includes the distribution of food itself but also the benefits tied to values like community, solidarity, and sustainability.

Regionalkollektiv

Benefit at Regionalkollektiv is seen as going beyond just food and includes a sense of community. The cooperative aims to distribute benefits to both its members and the broader public.

Distributing the benefits of a community supported agriculture is a wider societal mission.

> It's about community and it's about changing agriculture - those are our messages. (RI 1)

Regionalkollektiv actively strives to be perceived as more than a producer of vegetables and increasingly tries to spread its messages (changing agriculture and building community) to society by talking to groups ranging from charity clubs to schools, where selling vegetable boxes is not the primary aim. In schools for example, the motivation is that "kids really have to know again where the stuff [*food*] comes from" (RI 1). Regionalkollektiv is planning to use resources and subsidies specifically for educational purposes in the future.

In addition, Regionalkollektiv's mission may become more than CSA in the future. Going beyond the current model, there is the possibility of new cooperatives being created in other counties [*Landkreise*] or, in case there is excess capital at some point, housing or carsharing could be organized by the cooperative (RI 2). This shows that Regionalkollektiv has a vision that goes beyond just the commoning of food and includes goals such as education of the wider public and the commoning of other basic needs.

The idea of a sense of community is a core benefit.

> For me, the idea of community is very important for Regionalkollektiv, because it's simply fun to work hard in the garden with people who share a similar mindset [*ähnlich ticken*] and to have a beer in front of the trailer afterwards; the togetherness - celebrating parties together, successes and failures. (RI 1)

More than just supplying vegetables, this quote highlights the importance attributed to providing people with a sense of community and collective activities. It also demonstrates that the idea of a shared mindset, or a shared set of values (the translation alludes to both those factors), and collectively bearing 'successes and failures' are sustaining the feeling of community. The value of social inclusivity also plays a role in this, as the cooperative is "organizing community activities where people feel comfortable […]. People who maybe are otherwise not so connected to others can find this connection." (RI 2)

That the sense of community is crucial for the identity of the cooperative, becomes even more clear regarding the challenges around community-building. To the question about how they

perceive the development of a sense of community in Regionalkollektiv, the respondents answered: “I think that is a little bit difficult” (RI 2) and “This is somewhat dramatic with Regionalkollektiv” (RI 1), reflecting their personal emotional involvement in this process. While there are silences about the exact reasons, both respondents mention that there have been conflicts within the board since the beginning.

However, both respondents share the perception that the sense of community is stabilizing at the moment, due to the current team and the cooperative’s move to its own land. The discourse about the importance of community is also reflected in practice, where a lot of energy is invested in creating community: “last year we had two general assemblies, three parties, and every Saturday is ‘field Saturday’ [*Ackersamstag*], so there’s something happening” (RI 2).

The role of community and teamwork also became clear during participant observation of the core team meeting in April 2023 (see Figure 8):

> The meeting focusses on the collective’s needs and the satisfaction of its members – even the concerns of single members are taken seriously. The well-being of the team of employees also matters. By the end of the meeting, everyone is asked about how they feel about their work and what is going on in the collective – the response is general contentedness. The chair emphasizes how happy she is about the team and how everyone is working together. (Fieldwork Diary, Regionalkollektiv)

Figure 8: Regionalkollektiv Team Meeting (Regionalkollektiv 2023)

The observation reflects the emphasis that is put on the harmony and well-being of the team. Interpreting this in the context of previous inter-personal conflicts, the process of facilitating a communal working environment appears as an important part of commoning.

It is problematized that immediate distribution of benefit is limited by social class.

> The vegetables of course cost more than elsewhere and not everyone can afford it so easily. (RI 2)

Regionalkollektiv's success in distributing the benefit of local vegetables is largely limited to "those with a lot of money" (RI 1). While the bidding round allows for some people to pay less for their harvest share, this option is barely used because "it is fraught with shame, even though it is anonymous" (RI 1). This is problematized in the discourse. Signaling truth, one respondent links this to their personal values: "This is actually the most difficult thing for me" (RI 2). The other respondent is establishing contacts with a local foodbank to distribute excess products and tries to set up social financing models. The discourse and practices show that limited distribution runs counter to the values and intentions of commoning, as it upholds the role of money as a barrier to access – something that is criticized about the conventional food system. This constitutes a real challenge for the CSA: "This [*the higher price*] is actually understandable, because vegetables are only cheap somewhere else because of exploitation of labor or nature and we try not to do that, so it is more expensive with us" (RI 2). Yet, even as a cooperative, food provision still happens within the wider market, meaning that "at the end of the day, you're still kind of caught up in the system and competing" (RI 2). The AFN operates in a dilemmatic space where the distribution of benefit is a balance between upholding its values (not exploiting labor or nature) and competing (at least to some extent) within a market.

Lekkernassuh

Lekkernassuh aims to distribute benefits as an initiative of wider social and economic transformation.

Lekkernassuh constructs its identity as an initiative for social, economic, and ecological transformation.

> When people speak of sustainability, it's mostly green sustainability – recover soil and stuff like that. My personal focus for sustainability is social-economic. We should close some gaps before we can actually change other things. (LI 2)

This answer to the question which motivation lay behind the founding of Lekkernassuh constructs a wider societal and economic purpose of the initiative. Broadening the term 'sustainability', the existing 'gaps' in the economic and social system are problematized. This further constructs a focus on only environmental sustainability as too narrow.

> While experimenting with this we were learning a lot, and then looked at what we are actually doing: We are actually working towards a transition in the whole food system. (LI 1)

Signaling truth ('actually'), the collective learned through the process of commoning food that its purpose goes beyond just food. The 'experimenting' and 'learning' plays a crucial role in this process, enabling the realization that the provision of vegetable boxes is only part of the benefit that Lekkernassuh generates. Part of this benefit lies in limiting the environmental impact of food through the way it is cultivated (organic small-scale farming), delivered (the initiative is currently switching to electric transport within The Hague and transports boxes to pick-up stations by bike) and distributed (without packaging, and with minimal food waste). Yet, an equally important part lies in the social impact of commoning food.

The initiative is motivated by the value of creating an inclusive community.
Lekkernassuh is based on a fluid conception of community: "The community is an organism, it's moving" (LI 1).

> Once you realize that everybody has value, and it doesn't really matter what that value is. As long as you acknowledge that by letting everyone contribute, you have a whole and complete organization. It might be that someone's value is sitting at the table, drinking coffee. Or others carry crates. Somebody else takes care of the Lekkernassuh treasure […] As long as you realize: it's only if everybody is there and everybody can take part - everybody is basically equal – then it gets somewhere. (LI 2)

This quote was an answer to the question which value has been successfully implemented at Lekkernassuh. It creates the idea of 'community' as an inclusive space, 'an organism' that works as a combination of its diverse members. Only with the appreciation and acceptance of people's diversity and different abilities, a 'whole and complete organization' can emerge. This is reflected in the consistency of perceptions of the diversity of people that make up the community: "No money, a lot of money; no kids, a lot of kids; old, young" (LI 2). At the same time, there are still some structural barriers to the diversity of the community, where "non-western people are not overly present yet" and operations are still concentrated "in neighborhoods where people are quite well-off" (LI 1). These barriers are problematized throughout the discourse through the wish for Lekkernassuh to spread into less privileged neighborhoods. Accordingly, the initiative's temporary move to one of those neighborhoods due to constructions at the Gymzaal this summer is explicitly welcomed by all respondents. The move is seen as an opportunity where "we might see what appeals to people there" (LI 1).

At the same time, the initiative is grappling with the fluctuations within the community dynamics. The pandemic, which led to a large influx of consumers on the one hand, and limited possibility for community activities on the other hand, impacted these dynamics.

> […] it used to feel more as a community when we were smaller – that was also a part, everyone knew everyone, we all fit into the Gym [*Gymzaal*], it was all a bit simpler. (LI 1)

This quote especially alludes to difficulty of creating a sense of community amidst the initiative's growth, which also includes obvious issues such as the space available at the Gymzaal. 'Everyone knowing each other' appears as an important feature of the community, which is challenging to uphold. There are some silences across the discourse about the additional challenges such as the temporary stop of community dinners in 2019.

> I have to be honest – the meals together were powerful. They brought everyone together. The participants, the people who worked on different markets. It was a gathering. Now you have sort of almost sub-communities within the community. (LI 1)

This effect of truth ('I have to be honest') underlines the importance attributed to communal dinners, and the forming of sub-communities is somewhat connected to their lack.

What does a community need?[14]

At least a table where you can sit.

That's very basic.

Yea, but it's that basic. *laughs* Do you see a table at the market now?

No.

So, do you think the sense of community is not something that just happens?

No. It's real work. It needs attention. (LI 2)

The quote reflects a desire to create community. Yet, community-building at Lekkernassuh is based on individuals' commitment ('real work' and 'attention') and thus fluctuates. An example for this is the volunteer lunch that started during the pandemic. The statement that "97% of the people are in the role of consumers, which is ok" (LI 2) shows that 'the community' being limited to 3% of all people taking part in the initiative is an accepted part of Lekkernassuh's identity as a collective. At the same time, the sentiment persists that "people really feel like: 'oh I'm heard, I belong'. People drop in. So I do think it [*the sense of community*] is still there" (LI 1).

Comparison

The commoning of benefit is where we find the biggest overlap of the two case studies. Both Regionalkollektiv and Lekkernassuh see themselves as initiatives for a wider ecological, economic, and social transformation whose benefit goes beyond the mere provision of food. At the same time, both AFNs problematize that the distribution of benefit is limited (despite to varying extents) by socio-economic factors and are actively aiming to broaden accessibility. Furthermore, both Lekkernassuh and Regionalkollektiv conceptualize the value of community as their core benefit. The two initiatives equally struggle with the fluctuations of the sense of community due to effects of growth and inter-personal conflicts. Yet, both AFNs also consciously put in effort to create community and, interestingly, all respondents were hopeful and positive about strengthening their communities at the current moment.

[14] In block quotations my own voice is in bold letters.

5.2.4 Care

Fourth, commoning processes shift *care* into the hands of community members. Care for food production and/or distribution may shift from private owners and their employees to AFNs. While commoning moves the provision of food away from profit orientation, 'care' still means work that needs to be distributed amongst community members. This raises issues of working conditions and the distribution of workload.

Regionalkollektiv

Care at Regionalkollektiv covers many tasks ranging from growing vegetables to organization and logistics. While much of this work is done by paid employees, the cooperative also depends on voluntary work. Especially Regionalkollektiv's working groups that work on the topics of marketing, food preservation, and finances make a crucial contribution to the cooperative on a voluntary basis.

It is part of the ideational foundation of Regionalkollektiv to create a fair and meaningful working environment.

> My dream would be of course that we make the boxes quite cheap and pay the employees well - finding a middle ground so that as many people as possible can participate. (RI 2)

Regionalkollektiv deals with the dilemma of making high-quality food accessible and affordable on the one hand and providing good working conditions on the other hand. That the middle ground is "a dream", shows the complicated and idealistic nature of striking this balance.

The cooperative is aiming to employ more and more people and to create "jobs that are self-determined and meaningful" (RI 2). This quote highlights the values that are attributed to a 'good' working environment and shows that Regionalkollektiv's identity is based on providing these conditions. Working conditions are constructed as a binary: The large amount of work done by volunteers is described as "bad working conditions", which is attributed to the remuneration of "only snacks and drinks" (RI 2). 'Paying the employees well' thus constitutes another core element of the conception of 'good' working conditions. This discourse is reflected in practice, where employees are paid 6€ above German minimum wage and are free to propose

new solutions and modes of working in a system based on low hierarchies. Yet, since Regionalkollektiv is currently operating at a loss, being "more responsive to the employees and at the same time making sure that we don't make too many losses" is a central element of debate in the cooperative (RI 2).

Both respondents trace the prominent role of honorary work back to the cooperative's genesis which was enabled by volunteers. In the founding period, the collective started producing vegetables right away, "creating incredible stress for ourselves that would not have been necessary" (RI 1). Gardening on a remote plot of land without tools, professionals, and infrastructure, the group "did it, but with an incredible wear and tear [*Verschleiß*]", which was "unbelievably taxing for people who were already under a full load" (RI 1). While commoning in this phase relied on the voluntary work of the collective, this model of 'care' is discursively constructed as unsustainable.

The commoning of care at Regionalkollektiv thus entails negotiating the space between exploitation and meaningful voluntary contribution to the community. The cooperative faces a tension ratio between being economically sustainable and providing affordable food on the one hand and creating fair working conditions and upholding collective values of fairness, solidarity, and sustainability on the other hand. One respondent expresses this poignantly as:

> We definitely don't want to exploit people, but we inevitably do. (RI 1)

Lekkernassuh

During its foundation, Lekkernassuh struggled with an overburdening of the people that were voluntarily working to create the initiative. This led the initiative to temporarily stop its operations as "there was a lot of work, to be honest it was too much work" (LI 2).

> We actually sent out a message [*Facebook and email*] to the contact list, explaining that we are doing this project. But the only way to continue it is as a community – 'help us'
> **That worked?**
> Yes. People came to help. (LI 2)

By commoning care for food provisioning, the collective succeeded in re-starting its operations. Lekkernassuh thus emerged as an initiative that is fully run by the community, something that becomes clear through the participant observation done on the 3rd of May, 2023.

> It's a sunny Wednesday morning in The Hague and starting 9 AM, people are arriving at the Gymzaal to prepare today's market. In total, around 50 people are involved in setting up, helping throughout, and cleaning after the Lekkernassuh market in three locations all over The Hague. The largest group has gathered at the Gymzaal, an old school gymnastics hall, where around 250 people will pick up their weekly vegetable package and buy bread, cheese and other products in the afternoon. Volunteers are wrapping cheese, setting up the vegetable crates and start preparing additional boxes that are transported to pick-up points by bicycle couriers. Today, one farmer who delivers his vegetables to the market is arriving extraordinarily late. The market coordinator asks people to please stay and help – the market can only happen when the community sets it up. There's a little murmur going through the group, but in the end, everyone stays and around 50 crates of vegetables are packed within half an hour - "That wasn't so bad!". After the work is done, the group of volunteers sits in a circle for lunch and chatter. By 1 PM, the volunteers disperse, before the next group starts coming in an hour later, to help at the market, weigh vegetables and work at the cash registers. By 8 PM, after hundreds of people, vegetables, and little conversations have passed through the Gymzaal, the cleaners close the door. (Fieldwork Diary, Lekkernassuh)

Figure 9: Lekkernassuh Team (Lekkernassuh 2023)

The commoning of care at Lekkernassuh is an experimental process based on the negotiation of the value of solidarity.

> People are sometimes limitless in their passion and they feel they cannot say no. So, in a way we are also a practice for people to discover their own boundaries. […] But also you get good energy. You get friendships. […] You give something and you get something back. Something many normal jobs don't give you. And it's a fantastic playground. You can try out. If you have great ideas - you can do it, why not? (LI 1)

The initiative still includes work being done on a purely voluntary basis. Here, the role of honorary work is constructed as a collective and individual learning process of negotiating 'boundaries' in a system that requires people to 'say no' when workloads are too high or unevenly distributed. The value of honorary work is described as something only a community can offer – 'good energy', 'friendship', and the freedom to implement one's own ideas.

In 2017, the initiative introduced Timebank as an alternative payment and remuneration system.

> […] we noticed that a lot of people who volunteered their time for Lekkernassuh are often people who may have time but not a lot of money. So often they are […] jobless, unemployed, suffered a burnout, or for whatever reason are not working, or are students, etc. But that's almost always people who don't have a lot to spend. (LI 1)

This quote reflects that the introduction of this system was based on values of solidarity and inclusion, in an effort to make the commoned food more accessible.

> […] when we started Lekkernassuh there were a lot of people who put in time, we called it because of passion, because of your ideology, because you want to meet people, because you believe in something. […] But with the Timebank system […] the whole idea of the passion hours disappeared. People actually started to write down ridiculous amounts of Timebank hours […] We lost a bit the track of how that is for our financial health. […] the system is not really in balance. (LI 1)

> If you say you are a community, and if you approach a community as a very very big family, you're not gonna say: 'I was reading the kids a bedtime story' *pointing at an

> imaginary watch*. It did change something in the mentality. People actually now have it in their head: 'I'm doing something, so I'm gonna get paid man'. (LI 2)

The Timebank system comes with certain contradictions. While it is a means to value time invested into shared care, it did impact how value is collectively attributed to this care. The discourse consistently highlights a shift in mentality from a more community service-driven approach ('passion hours') towards one where some reward is expected. While receiving something in return for work is in line with the initiative's aims in principle, finding a balance in this exchange presents a challenge. The discourse reflects that people's behavior does not always correspond to the expected value of sharing care within a community. The demanded Timebank hours are described as 'ridiculous' and the general demand for compensation is constructed as a contradiction to the idea of care within 'a family'. Furthermore, the challenges with Timebank expand the normative realm and have economic reasons, namely the limited possibility of spending hours outside of Lekkernassuh, creating a relatively closed system between Lekkernassuh and its volunteers (LI 2 & 3).

Despite the difficulties in both the moral and economic realm, Timebank is welcomed as a social and economic experiment:

> I mean we need to start learning how a diverse economy works. It makes sense to do it within Lekkernassuh. People talk all the time about biodiversity […] But there's nothing as 'mono' as the economic system. So, to implement a diverse financial payment system – it makes sense. It's healthy. (LI 2)

Building a bridge to the ecological mission of the initiative (supporting biodiversity through sustainable cultivation) this quote frames the implementation of the Timebank system as part of creating economic diversity. That commoning care and experimenting with alternative value systems is a collective learning process is accepted: "Some days, yea, it's like... ok, we did a step back […]. It's ok" (LI 2).

Comparison

Regionalkollektiv and Lekkernassuh differ quite significantly in terms of commoning care. At Regionalkollektiv, a wider range of tasks (including for example the cultivation of food) are distributed to both paid employees and volunteers. Overall, the cooperative is more concerned

about creating a fair working environment by striving to pay higher wages and problematizing unpaid work. Yet, Regionalkollektiv is navigating the difficult terrain creating these conditions while it is still operating at a financial loss.

Lekkernassuh on the other hand follows a different logic of commoning care. Since it is fully run by the community, more responsibility for workload and working conditions is put on the individual. The Timebank system is at the center of this commoning process and poses challenges concerning the value attributed to work and community, as well as economic sustainability.

In the end, both AFNs are going through the process of negotiating how to fairly distribute work. This includes the collective learning process where the line between exploitation and a meaningful honorary service to the community lies. Both AFNs have made progress in this sense, as their similar experiences of overburdening and overworking volunteers during the first phase of each initiative has been overcome.

5.2.5 Responsibility

Lastly, commoning means that a community assumes *responsibility* for their shared resource(s). In terms of commoning food this refers to sharing responsibility in decision-making and financial matters, but also includes issues such as natural fluctuation in harvest quality and quantities.

Regionalkollektiv

Regionalkollektiv shares responsibility for its food as a cooperative. As a CSA, it collectively enables financial planning security for its food cultivation and shares the risk of harvest volatility. Even people who do not receive harvest shares hold cooperative shares to support the project. All cooperative members are part of the decision-making and take a majority vote over issues that concern the business model of Regionalkollektiv, its values, and goals.

Collective decision-making is fundamental to Regionalkollektiv's organizational structure and identity.

> "[Being able] to say: I work with the approval of my comrades - this feeling is very important for people, especially honorary board members […] Not taking top-down decisions and creating a decentralized structure was important to us" (RI 1, reordered).

> We would like to see more participation and greater interest. This also signals 'I am interested in where my company is going'. This enables more active co-creation. (RI 1)

The discourse constructs collective decision-making as an integral value of the cooperative. Sharing responsibility is both an important value as well as legitimatization for decision-making ('approval' of the community). This is further underscored by the problematization of limited participation ('I would like to see more'). Remarking that at a general assembly usually only 50-60 of the 240 members show up, one respondent implies that this does not fully reflect the importance of the event: "And that is, *after all*, where you elect the management board and supervisory board" (RI 1, emphasis added). This is linked to the political values of Regionalkollektiv: "Because we organize this together, democratically as a cooperative, we are somewhat removed from the market" (RI 2). By choosing to distribute responsibility and operate 'democratically', the cooperative separates itself from market forces, yet this only works if people participate.

Sharing the responsibility for food cultivation is attributed to independence and self-determination.

The value of determining how and which food is grown is so important to the cooperative that it accepts the "incredible increase in responsibilities" that producing their own vegetables since 2022 has brought with it (RI 1). In a CSA, this also implies sharing the risk of harvest volatility:

> Failures are included in the solidarity model, and we try to convey this to our customers again and again: sometimes there is not so much because of a caterpillar, or because it rained too much. (RI 1)

The need to 'convey again and again' shows that commoning responsibility constitutes a continuous negotiation process over what the value 'solidarity' and sharing risk means. This process was also observed at the Regionalkollektiv team meeting:

> The group also discusses members' feedback, such as onions going bad too fast. "As a good *Regionalkollektivist* you have to accept that" says one member, followed by general laughter – but they agree to talk to the farmer. (Fieldwork Diary, Regionalkollektiv)

Sharing the risks of food production is conceptualized as a value in its own right. Even if discussed with an ironic undertone, accepting varying quality is attributed to being a 'good member'. This is also tied to the value of limiting waste: "We use up everything, because all the vegetables go into boxes or to excess sales and basically nothing is thrown away" (RI 2).

The challenges of collective decision-making are accepted based on ideological conviction.

> On the other hand, it is of course often extremely annoying in management. It takes longer […] and then people from outside come with 'a great idea' that you have already discussed 17 times, know it doesn't work and you have to discuss it yet again. (RI 1)

> I think it's sometimes difficult to work in such a grassroots democratic structure because many people have a say. That can be exhausting, because processes don't happen very quickly and you often have to be willing to compromise. (RI 2)

The anecdotal evidence and personal feelings shared about the challenges of collective decision-making create an effect of truth. Respondents admit that collective decision-making takes more time, requires compromises, and is 'annoying' and 'exhausting' at times. However, these challenges are relativized as "the price you pay for a grassroots democratic model" – signifying that it is a price worth paying (RI 1). This conviction is reflected in practice: While it is not required by the charter, "for now we have always explained [*plans to make an investment*] to people in a general assembly and went on to do it if there was no big dissent. […] It is very important to us that we are transparent" (RI 2).

Lekkernassuh

Because Lekkernassuh grew organically as an initiative, so did its organizational structure and the way responsibility is commoned.

> I have to be honest, for a long time we didn't have any insight into our balances at all. I wasn't even aware who had the bank pass. But that was in our crazy days. At some point we were called 'Pippi Longstocking Initiative' in a local newspaper, we were happily running around, and we didn't know. (LI 1)

> Well in the beginning there were no figures at all *laughs*. It was just trial and error. (LI 3)

There is a consistent discourse on the lack of organizational structure and financial oversight in the beginning of Lekkernassuh. Although this is not problematized per se, calling it 'the crazy days' and 'trial and error' does not suggest that this model is perceived as sustainable in the long-term.

It was with an increased number of consumers and financial responsibility that Lekkernassuh started managing its finances and adopting a structure they call 'self-organization'. Within this model, there are circles which "have emerged and are basically doing the jobs" (LI 1). These circles have access to resources when needed. Only in the case of big investments, decisions are made in the 'supercircle', a meeting of the circles' representatives. This decision-making system is based on consent, rather than consensus, meaning "you don't need to agree, [and] you can only oppose when you have a valid opposition point" (LI 1).

Self-responsibility and low hierarchies are the basis of Lekkernassuh's form of organization.

> It's way more agile. With consensus you don't necessarily always opt for the best decision, because a lot of people have to put water with the wine […]. The other way is a lot quicker. The other reason which I think is super important is that you can make the best decisions regarding your work. I can have my opinion but most of the time it doesn't even matter, because you know what the best decision is. (LI 1)

Lekkernassuh adopted a model of shared responsibility that is based on radical self-responsibility where the idea is that the people who are 'doing the work' take decisions and other opinions are not necessarily "relevant, important, [or] interesting" (LI 1). Self-organization is based on the principle that "everything is allowed, unless there is a rule against it" (LI 1). The system is adopted due to its attributed values of agility and quick decision-making. However, self-organization is also seen to provide the additional social benefit "that people feel part of a team. That's a really big benefit. In general, nobody feels alone" (LI 2). Yet, the discourse also reflects inconsistencies and challenges about self-organization:

> If something is someone's responsibility, then now people feel free to not pick it up. That's sad. […] When there was no structure, when something really needed to be done,

somebody would pick it up. Now it's like 'no it's not our circle, we don't have to do it'. (LI 2)

On the one hand, the existence of circles here is framed as an obstruction to people's self-responsibility. On the other hand, people's realization that they can step in is another challenge that is part of an ongoing commoning process:

> The key point is that people start seeing what needs to be done, instead of doing what somebody tells them to do. To transition from 'you tell me what to do and I will do it' to 'I see this has to be done and I just do it, I don't need anybody's permission'. (LI 2)

This conception of responsibility is based on a 'transition' from conventional ways of hierarchy towards one of self-responsibility, creating a new, non-hierarchical mode of organizing and management.

A self-organized model of sharing responsibility also leave room for significantly different interpretations of risk.

> If you look at the Gym on a Wednesday morning – it's sheer abundance. That's why when I come in to Lekkernassuh, I always take a piece of cheese, I put it on the table, I take some apples, I eat them. *laughs* And if there comes a kid, I share a cake: 'you want some as well?'[15].
>
> **Well, the thing comes up, if you do commoning like this, how can we absorb risk or responsibility?**
>
> There is no risk.
>
> **Ok, why?**
>
> Because everybody in their right mind – you take what you need, not more. There's enough for everybody. It simply is. [*pause*] I know it's not convincing. *laughs* (LI 2)

Though this idea of commoning is acknowledged as highly idealistic ('not convincing'), an effect of truth ('It simply is') serves to underline its serious intention. As a result of the notion that there is no scarcity of food, the logical conclusion is an absence of risk. Therefore, the

[15] For context: This story refers to a person who acts both as a producer and a community member of Lekkernassuh.

sharing of responsibility does not need to be formalized and depends on people being 'in their right mind' – that is, acting according to the moral standard of only taking what they need. So far, this has worked for Lekkernassuh since the initiative has not run into red numbers overall[16].

Nevertheless, this idea stands in stark contrast to another conception of risk and responsibility found in the discourse:

> **Did I understand you right, that market mechanisms would balance out any losses of Lekkernassuh?**
> Mhm. Yea. And we could also adapt the cost because we have these Timebank hours. Up till now one hour worked is 0.65 Timebank hours. There we could change something. (LI 3)

After stating earlier that prices of the vegetable boxes could be increased given higher fixed costs and a general increase in prices in The Netherlands, this framing of responsibility is removed from the idea of commoning and presents a conventional market logic.
These differences show that the non-hierarchical open mode of participation of self-organization led to a diversity of economic and social perspectives held within Lekkernassuh. However, with competing ideas existing within the initiative the question of power arises:

> They [*new people*] stepped into certain roles, especially finance, and they were conventional thinkers. When you manage money, you manage in the end power. That was tricky because they think differently about risk, about making profit. […] How do you value what they bring? We need proper accounts. […] That balance was and still is one of the main things [*causing discussions and challenges*]. (LI 1)

This quote reflects the challenge that results from conflicting perspectives in combination with power dynamics based on responsibility for money. A 'we'-identity based on unconventional ways of thinking about risk and profit is constructed in separation of 'conventional thinkers'. On the one hand, 'value' is attributed to these other perspectives and skills, especially regarding their role for the initiative's accounts. On the other hand, the discourse reflects a significant

[16] The figures for 2022 show a loss, which can be balanced out by the initiative's financial reserves (Lekkernassuh Interview 3).

conflict potential about Lekkernassuh's values emerging from these differences. Negotiating this 'balance' forms a significant part of commoning responsibility at Lekkernassuh.

Comparison

The commoning of responsibility is perhaps where Regionalkollektiv and Lekkernassuh differ the most. Regionalkollektiv is based on the conscious commitment to share responsibility and risk. Grassroots-democracy is adopted based on the values of transparency and solidarity, despite being a slower and more difficult model of decision-making. This enables a high degree of sharing both agricultural and economic risks as a community.

Lekkernassuh started without a structure and organically developed a model of self-organization. This non-hierarchical mode of decision-making relies on self-responsibility and the initiative of people to 'step in'. It allows for fast decision-making and problem-solving and a high degree of agility. However, it somewhat limits the sharing of risk and responsibility and comes at the cost of largely different perceptions of those concepts within the community.

6. Discussion

The main insights and lessons drawn from the analysis and comparison of Regionalkollektiv and Lekkernassuh are presented in the form of three findings on the topic of commoning of food in AFNs. These findings highlight dynamics that may be overlooked or perceived differently by initiatives, yet I have found them to play an important role for the commoning capacity of AFNs.

1. **Communities cultivate diversity.** Regionalkollektiv and Lekkernassuh are very different. They are based on two different economic models, their communities are structured differently, and the ways the share care and responsibility differ. And yet, both initiatives work. United by the goal of becoming more independent from the conventional food system, they succeed in providing their communities with local organic food. Because both community enterprises have distanced themselves from market pressures, they create a space for collective experimenting – for successes and failures, taking steps forward and backward. At the same time, neither AFN is fully independent of market pressures. Both initiatives deal with similar unavoidable dilemmas: the need to scale up their enterprises to a certain extent, the impact of growth and conflict on communities, the question of how to fairly distribute and reward work,

and how to make decisions. Furthermore, socio-economic exclusivity remains a real challenge for both AFNs, despite awareness of the issue.

Once profit is no longer the goal of producing and distributing food, communities need to step in and negotiate how to collectively manage food in a way that suits their values and needs. Analyzing the discourse around them shows that neither AFN constructs its identity based on strict binaries, for example as being purely 'anti-capitalist'. While both cases are based on a criticism of the conventional food system, meanings of concepts such as growth and labor remain fluid. Both AFNs accordingly find different answers and solutions to challenges. While Regionalkollektiv started out with the conscious decision to be a CSA, based on a cooperative with a charter, Lekkernassuh grew more organically into a self-organized initiative that distributes food. Answering the research question of how economic diversity leads to commoning of food, it is the *diversity* itself that is the key motor for spurring societal transformation.

2. **AFNs are political spaces**. Even if these communities are centered around food provision, they are spaces where people come together based on their beliefs and values. Becoming an active community member in an AFN is often tied to the personal politics of a person. On the one hand, political positions can serve as a uniting element in a community. An example of this, found at both Regionalkollektiv and Lekkernassuh, is the need for climate action and a transformation of the food system as part of it. On the other hand, AFNs and the commoning of food as such are not immediately associated with an explicit political position. While many AFNs may distance themselves from a distinct political position, political confrontation is likely going to occur at some point. This may happen between individual members or between members and the initiative as a whole. In both case studies, a situation occurred where people announced they would quit their membership based on a political position assumed by the initiative. AFNs handle the issue of politics in different ways: they may either openly identify with a political stance and use this to strengthen the cohesion of their community, or they explicitly accept political diversity and open their community as a platform of political dialogue based on the common notion of sharing food.

3. **Building and sustaining a community is work.** The commoning of food requires people to come together, negotiate, cooperate, engage in conflicts, and share responsibility. Creating a sense of community is a non-linear process. It is not a mere side-effect of commoning but requires dedicated and continuous attention. Engaging the wider community of an AFN and transforming 'consumers' into 'members' requires facilitating social interaction and participation. Especially in the absence of structures that require regular participation, such as the general assembly at Regionalkollektiv, the example of Lekkernassuh shows that the sense of community can diminish while the operations of an AFN continue and even expand. Yet even the case of Regionalkollektiv shows that the sense of community cannot be fully controlled and is subject to interpersonal dynamics. An important factor that reappeared throughout the research is the importance of a common location, a 'home' for the community, which makes facilitating social exchange easier. Another challenge to sustaining a community is the growth of AFNs. Both Regionalkollektiv and Lekkernassuh show how difficult it is to include a large number of new members into the community within a short time. Both initiatives deal with this by also accepting that a majority of people act as consumers in an AFN. In the end, both the beauty and challenge of building a community lies in individuals taking initiative, 'setting up a table' and creating a sense of community that, over time, collectively sustains itself.

7. Conclusion

A culture of commoning

Analyzing two examples of AFNs has shown that the commoning of food is a non-linear process. On the one hand, AFNs are based on diverse economic models that expand the concept of 'alterity' by combining economic practices on a spectrum of non-capitalist to capitalist. On the other hand, processes of commoning open spaces of collective experimentation and negotiation that result in a diversity of social practices and identities. Being faced with dilemmas of balancing economic sustainability and values of solidarity and sustainability, AFNs develop different solutions. The way an initiative emerges and grows hereby impacts what type of AFN it becomes, which in turn influences its way of commoning.

The (re)commoning of food takes time.

Not only on a societal level, but also for individuals who decide to contribute to this process. While, if you believe the people interviewed in this research, "you get a lot back" from this, most of them also mentioned a lack of time and energy to improve or expand their AFNs – may that be organizing the next get-together or creating a new market location. At the same time, both Regionalkollektiv and Lekkernassuh prove the immense capacity of communities to develop a mere idea into a network that provides hundreds of people with local organic food within a few years.

How we value time plays an important role in enabling or constraining the commoning of food. In a society dominated by a capitalist market logic that largely ties the notion of 'productivity' to wage work, dedicating time to commoning activities is an idealistic act. Uniting people at Regionalkollektiv, Lekkernassuh, and many other AFNs, is the idea that *there is enough food for everyone.* By organizing and taking back charge of their provision of food, these people are challenging agri-food systems and work towards food sovereignty.

The commoning of food challenges the idea of scarcity of food created by the capitalist system.

> *"If you look at the Gym on a Wednesday morning – it's sheer abundance."* (LI 2)
> *"It is simply something we have planned ourselves and didn't leave to random market mechanisms. It worked."* (RI 2)

This research has shown that AFNs can be organized in diverse ways. Some make all the important decisions together; others rely on the initiative and responsibility of individuals. Some have clear rules and values; others grow more organically. In the end, different models can achieve the commoning of food and all of them face similar problems. To overcome them, we need to move towards a culture of commoning, where dedicating time and energy towards collectively managing our basic needs and resources is seen as valuable and necessary.

On the one hand, we should keep directing academic attention to this. Firstly, by addressing *food-systems transformation* and the impact of agricultural and trade policy, domestic and international law, and economic systems. Secondly, by focusing on the *commoning of food*, which should also be linked to policy, legal, and economic factors. An interesting research agenda in this field lies for example in the connection between de-growth and commoning.

On the other hand, analysis, research, and experiences should be distributed to and shared among AFNs: "We could push that much more, to profit from each other. In the end, everyone makes the same mistakes over and over again, and that's actually a shame" (RI 1).

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