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## Alternative Food Networks: Sustainable Business Models for Anti-Consumption Food Cultures

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## Alternative Food Networks: Sustainable Business Models for Anti-consumption Food Cultures

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## Abstract

**Purpose:** The aim of this paper aims is to analyse a sustainable business model implemented by an Alternative Food Network, namely the Italian Food Assembly, with the goal of exploring its drivers of success and explaining how it can contribute to enhance sustainable and anti-consumption behaviours. This research aims at combining principles from both sustainable business model innovation and user-driven anti-consumption and well-being habits, in order to develop more successful, comprehensive and community-centred sustainable value propositions.

**Methodology:** Given the research goal, an exploratory case study was prepared where multiple sources of data were employed, namely in-depth interviews, participant observation, focus groups and document analysis.

**Findings:** In the light of the Bocken et al. (2014) framework, this paper provides evidence on the implementation of an Alternative Food Network where it is possible to observe a strong sharing of knowledge regarding sustainable consumption behaviours and an effective dissemination of best practices between members. We developed four propositions that support the creation of a sustainable food supply chain, laying the foundation for spreading consumer behaviours and motivations so that they become more sustainable in their consumption habits.

**Limitations:** Even though the case study is very rich in the amount of data gathered, it cannot be generalised. Further research will overcome this limitation by adding more cases within a comparative approach and through a quantitative methodology.

**Originality:** It adds value to recent literature and practice by focusing on how networks of producers, consumers and other actors could act to improve food anti-consumption behaviours, by embodying alternatives to conventional food systems.

## 1. Introduction

Consumption is globally recognized as being an element which finally leads to unsustainable development. The United Nations, whose vision is of a “world free from hunger and malnutrition, where food and agriculture contribute to improving the living standards of all (...) in an economically, socially and environmentally sustainable manner” (FAO-UN, 2017: vii), reaffirmed the need to promote more sustainable consumption behaviours and thus suggested transformative changes in food systems worldwide. Moreover, in the Sustainable Development Goal n.12 of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, the need to achieve economic growth and sustainable development by changing the way of production and consumption was highlighted, while promoting prosperity and people’s well-being. Sustainable consumption research has grown rapidly as a research field (Fischer

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3 et al., 2017; Geiger et al., 2017; Reisch et al., 2016), in response to the question of how consumers  
4 can be motivated to re-direct their consumption practices towards more sustainable ones.

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6 Against this backdrop, Alternative Food Networks (AFNs) are promising business models that can  
7 cope with anti-consumption challenges in a sustainable way, changing the way people produce and  
8 consume. The term AFN covers emerging networks of producers, consumers, and other actors that are  
9 alternatives to the more standardised industrial mode of food supply (Murdoch et al., 2000; Forssell &  
10 Lankoski, 2015; Allen IV et al., 2017). The Food Assembly (FA) has therefore emerged as an  
11 alternative network of communities, buying fresh food directly from local producers and farmers.  
12 Thus, through the analysis of a specific FA case, precisely the Italian Food Assembly (IFA), the  
13 research study explores the potentiality of this sustainable business model (SBM) in order to analyse  
14 its elements and drivers of growth and diffusion throughout the territory, explaining how it contributes  
15 to anti-consumption behaviours and the well-being of consumers and producers.

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17 This study illustrates how a SBM can leverage sustainable consumption habits in a practical way,  
18 through the participation of consumers and producers in a community created around a FA. In the  
19 light of the Bocken et al. (2014) framework, it provides empirical evidence on the design and  
20 implementation of FAs where it is possible to observe firstly a strong sharing of knowledge on  
21 sustainable consumption behaviours, and secondly an effective dissemination of best practices  
22 between members. As a result an exploratory case study (Eisenhardt, 1989) was prepared, attempting  
23 to answer the following phenomenon-driven research question:

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32 *How can an AFN's business model develop the community's attitude and motivation to become more*  
33 *sustainable, enhancing the awareness of food anti-consumption behaviours?*

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37 The remainder of the paper is structured as follows. Section Two highlights the theoretical  
38 background concerning SBM and anti-consumption and sustainable consumption habits. Section  
39 Three provides the details of the methodology. Section Four illustrates the findings, while Section  
40 Five discusses the results and ends with the conclusions drawn.

## 41 42 43 44 **2. Theoretical framework**

### 45 46 47 *2.1. Sustainable Business Models*

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49 The subject of IFA lies fully within the field of studies on the Sustainable Business Model (SBM), in  
50 that they are one of the AFNs used to make food Business Models (BM) more sustainable on a  
51 practical level. This sustainability enables the IFA to capture economic value for itself through  
52 delivering social and environmental benefits (Lüdeke-Freund, 2010; Schaltegger et al., 2012;  
53 Laukkanen & Patala, 2014; Evans et al., 2017; Yip & Bocken, 2018).

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3 Following the theoretical basis that lies behind this research, we can accept the definition of BM as a  
4 system by which a firm creates, distributes and captures value not only for itself, but also for its  
5 partners and customers (Osterwalder et al., 2005; Osterwalder & Pigneur, 2010; Zott et al., 2011).  
6 This definition invariably leads to the observation that the concept of BM must be integrated with that  
7 of sustainability, because one of the pillars of sustainability is that firms should no longer see  
8 themselves as isolated players but as part of a more complex system, which lasts only if it is able to  
9 create economic, social and environmental well-being for every stakeholder of its ecosystem (Lee &  
10 Casalegno, 2010). This means that company boundaries must be crossed and they must embrace new  
11 ways to create widespread and systemic value (Milne, 2007; Stubbs & Cocklin, 2008).

12 Sustainability in AFNs might also be considered to be an innovation of the more traditional food BM.  
13 Indeed, numerous authors are focusing their studies on sustainability as a true type of Business Model  
14 Innovation (BMI). A sustainable business is not only achieved through innovation in technologies,  
15 products or services, but also through BMI, namely a different approach to value creation (Girotra &  
16 Netessine, 2013; Yang et al., 2017). Along the same lines, Baldassarre et al. (2017) stated that  
17 sustainable BMI could be combined with user-driven innovation in order to address the challenges of  
18 sustainable development through the design of value propositions, combining economic, social and  
19 environmental objectives (Schaltegger et al., 2016).

20 In this study, research was conducted into the functionality of IFA in pursuing sustainability towards  
21 innovation, adopting the framework of Bocken et al. (2014) who revised the frameworks of  
22 Osterwalder et al. (2005) and Richardson (2008). The elements representing their SBMs were  
23 summarised with the identification of three main components: i) value proposition, namely the role  
24 carried out by values and exchanges of values between the different stakeholders interacting in the  
25 organizational system; ii) value creation and delivery, which are the operative ways by which the  
26 production and distribution processes can establish long-term relationships between all the players,  
27 spreading sustainable behaviours as a means to convey these values; iii) value capture, which is the  
28 way an organization uses resources and generates income by selling products and services, which  
29 translate into cost and revenue flows which should be fair and remunerative for the whole system,  
30 focusing also on immaterial values that are developed and shared with a holistic sustainable approach.  
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## 46 *2.2. Perspectives on anti-consumption and sustainable consumption behaviour*

47 Although consuming provides comfort while satisfying physical needs (Ewen, 1988), in our  
48 contemporary model of consumption we do not consume to satisfy essential needs, but rather to  
49 satisfy a desire. Nowadays consumption is being increasingly challenged by consumerist and anti-  
50 consumption movements (Forno & Graziano, 2014; Lim, 2017). The International Centre for Anti-  
51 Consumption Research underlines that there are several reasons for practicing anti-consumption, and  
52 the number of social groups reducing their purchases is now growing more than ever.  
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3 Anti-consumption literally means against consumption (Lee et al., 2009). According to Cherrier et al.  
4 (2011), this phenomenon can be classified in three ways: intentional non-consumption (the decision  
5 not to consume something), incidental non-consumption (the choice towards a preferred alternative),  
6 and ineligible non-consumption (when a person cannot act as a consumer for a particular product).  
7 Anti-consumption takes on different forms, ranging from resistance (i.e. active behaviours like  
8 boycotting) to rejection (i.e. products not purchased) with different degrees of visibility (Hogg et al.,  
9 2009).

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13 From a micro-level perspective, anti-consumption comes from the subjectivity of the consumer  
14 (Cherrier et al., 2011), including self-interested and socio-environmental motivations (Iyer & Muncy,  
15 2009; Sandıkcı & Ekici, 2009; Lim, 2017). It operates on the everyday level of mundane consumer  
16 choice through critical discourses about the market itself (Blinkey, 2008), and is a deliberate choice  
17 based on decisions consistent with one's values (Kozinets et al., 2010).

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21 Scholars have categorised consumer resistance behaviours and defined different anti-consumer types,  
22 i.e. Ritson & Dobscha (1999) divided consumer resistance into two groups: "not futile", which means  
23 rejecting particular aspects of marketing in a very active way such as boycotting a specific  
24 manufacturer, and "futile" resistance, where consumers carry out more private actions. There are  
25 different types of resistant consumer identities, namely "hero identity", related to discourses against  
26 exploitative consumption in opposition to the ideology of economic progress, and "project identity",  
27 related to discourses against positional consumption (Cherrier, 2009). We can also distinguish two  
28 types of anti-consumption with respect to their tacit collectivistic or individualistic rationalities and  
29 orientations (Binkley, 2008). Finally, Iyer and Muncy (2009) depicted a taxonomy of 4 types of anti-  
30 consumers: "Global Impact Consumers", aimed at reducing the general level of consumption for the  
31 benefit of society; "Simplifiers", who wish to move to a simpler, less consumer-oriented lifestyle;  
32 "Market Activists", who try to use the power of consumer dollars to impact societal issues and might  
33 avoid using a product/brand if they feel it causes societal problems and "Anti-Loyal Consumers", who  
34 show a personal commitment towards the avoidance of purchasing a product. The simplifiers in  
35 particular are also considered to be sustainable consumers (Balderjahn et al., 2013).

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43 Thøgersen (2017) investigated how the country of residence and food related lifestyle interact in  
44 shaping (un)sustainable food consumption patterns, and, in general, how sustainability, anti-  
45 consumption and consumer well-being strictly relate to each other. In fact, scholars agree that  
46 consumer behaviour plays a vital role in achieving sustainable development (Jackson & Michaelis,  
47 2003). Anti-consumption also has a significant role in sustainability issues (Cherrier et al., 2011).  
48 Block et al. (2010) focussed on the characteristics of anti-consumption within sustainable living and  
49 found that anti-consumption is an essential part of the attempt to live a more sustainable life. In  
50 particular, it seems that individuals implement sustainable consumption in three interconnected ways,  
51 through the use of eco-friendly products, anti-consumption practices such as rejecting, reduction and  
52 reuse, and the sustainable disposal practice of recycling. However, bringing together three  
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3 perspectives on consumption seems to be critical to sustainable consumption issues. These three  
4 perspectives are responsible consumption, anti-consumption, and mindful consumption, thus resulting  
5 in a more comprehensive approach towards a sustainable consumption which is able to meet the basic  
6 needs of the current generation without impoverishing future ones. The efficiency with which  
7 resources are used is actually improved, as well as the quality of life, and hyper-consumption is  
8 avoided. (Lim, 2017).  
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13 Previous studies on AFNs (Karner et al., 2010; Dansero & Putilli, 2014) stated that they are new BMs  
14 which are engaged in the public concerns about community, social justice and health issues, such as  
15 nutrition, food safety and environmental sustainability. However, it should be highlighted that they  
16 are mainly focused on improvements of environmental aspects, limiting the social aspect to the  
17 development of codes of conduct and guidelines (Schaltegger, 2012; Bazzani & Cannavari, 2013;  
18 Barbera & Dagnes, 2016). They therefore so far lack a systemic approach that is the implementation  
19 of a SBM which combines a web technological platform and digital social communication with the  
20 short supply chain. The creation of an innovative BM formed by a community wishing to change the  
21 way shopping is done and reducing consumption by exploiting digital technologies, has not attracted  
22 scholarly attention so far. Accordingly, to the best of the authors' knowledge, an empirical  
23 investigation into the integration of sustainability in an AFN's BM, matching the technological  
24 innovative platform with direct exchanges between local farmers and the consumer community, as  
25 well as its impact on anti-consumption behaviours, is still missing.  
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### 34 **3. Methodology and research design**

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37 This study examines how IFAs adopt business-relevant activities oriented to affect consumer welfare  
38 and spreading food anti-consumption practices within a SBM. A case study was carried out in order to  
39 answer the research question. This is an appropriate method when the question is in the form of a  
40 'how' question (Brinkmann & Kvale, 2008), as is the case in this research study. The method offers  
41 vivid illustrations from the reality of organizations, and insights into cause-effect relations which go  
42 beyond what can be observed from the quantitative analysis (Denzin & Lincoln, 2017). In the design  
43 of the case study we refer to the approach developed by Eisenhardt (1989) with the specific aim of  
44 generating the theory (Harris & Sutton, 1986; Eisenhardt, 1989). This means that this research was  
45 designed according to the following stages (Eisenhardt, 1989): 1) getting started, namely defining the  
46 research question; 2) selecting cases, namely selecting the theoretical sample; 3) crafting instruments  
47 and protocols, namely defining the multiple data to be collected and how to collect them; 4) entering  
48 the field, which implies an overlap of data collection and analysis; 5) analysing data, namely to make  
49 a within-case analysis; 6) shaping hypotheses, which means sharpening the theory being developed 7)  
50 enfolding literature, namely to compare conflicting as well as similar literature; 8) reaching closure,  
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3 that is to achieve the principle of theoretical saturation. In order to answer our research question (stage  
4 1), a single-case study was designed (stage 2) for theoretical rather than statistical reasons in order to  
5 extend the emergent theory (Eisenhardt, 1989; Eisenhardt et al., 2007). Our case, namely the Food  
6 Assembly platform, is particularly used as a “revelatory” case (Yin, 2014) as part of the European  
7 Network, IFA, namely “The Hive Who Says Yes” was recently born in Italy but in less than two  
8 years it has gained the first position in terms of performance parameters, such as the number of active  
9 Assemblies and their earnings. Furthermore, Italy was a forerunner in Europe, together with France  
10 and Spain, of these particular AFNs (Bazzani & Canavari, 2013; Dansero & Puttilli, 2014; Barbera et  
11 al., 2014; Barbera & Dagnes, 2016; Fonte & Cucco, 2017). Despite its limits, the single-case design  
12 has the ability to provide a thorough description of the existence of a particular phenomenon  
13 (Siggelkow, 2007), and this research specifically sheds light on the potentiality of AFNs to foster  
14 anti-consumption behaviour and sustainability issues.  
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17 The case relied on multiple data collection (stage 3): focus groups, interviews, observations, and  
18 archival documents, which enables triangulation, finally providing “stronger substantiation of  
19 constructs and hypotheses” (Eisenhardt, 1989: 538). It consisted of two main data collection phases,  
20 where the authors entered the field taking field notes, with data analysis taking place together with  
21 data collection (stage 4 and 5). The scoping phase (i) included a few exploratory interviews with  
22 general managers and participant observation within two Food Assemblies in the region of Piedmont;  
23 the second phase (ii) included the focus groups and all the other interviews with the FA members. As  
24 will be specified below, 2 focus groups (each one about 2 hours long), the first with a group of 6  
25 customers, and the second with a group of 6 producers, were designed in order for the significant  
26 thematic areas to evolve and be examined in detail in the individual interviews with a further 4  
27 producers and the 4 customers, who had been selected thanks to the previous focus groups following  
28 the snowball sampling principles (Goodman, 1961).  
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31 In order to understand the IFA’s vision and mission concerning sustainability, anti-consumption and  
32 well-being issues, two in-depth interviews were carried out with the IFA’s CEO and the Piedmont  
33 Coordinator in order to describe and explain the origins and evolution of the BM in question. These  
34 interviews investigated whether the IFA’s governance, strategies, and value proposition could  
35 enhance sustainable consumption habits, thus making it possible to acquire and share value creation,  
36 delivery and capture. The CEO was then interviewed once more as well as the Communication  
37 Manager, so as to better understand the different operative ways in which the IFA promotes and  
38 communicates sustainability and anti-consumption issues. Furthermore, a sample of 4 local IFA  
39 leaders were interviewed in order to examine how the different values and principles of the main IFA,  
40 namely “Mother Hive”, are then communicated and later customised by local IFAs, namely “Local  
41 Hives”. Meanwhile, participant observation was made by the authors during different events: i) the  
42 ‘birthday party’ for the third year of the opening of the first Italian local hive, and ii) the weekly  
43 distributions at the hive in Grugliasco. During these events, authors had the opportunity to meet  
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3 producers, consumers, and local as well as general IFA managers at the same time, personally seeing  
4 how the network works in practice. It is worth noticing that this research study also benefits from  
5 the first author's active participation as a regular customer of the platform in question, which leads to  
6 an internal perspective that enriches data collection. After these general interviews, two focus groups  
7 were conducted. The first had a sample of 6 producers whereas the second had 6 customers. Focus  
8 groups were organised aimed at identifying the main areas which emerged from the opinions of the  
9 producers and customers on the topic being analysed. We particularly aimed at identifying common  
10 approaches to and visions of sustainability issues among the different categories of IFA members –  
11 namely producers and customers -. Then, interviews with 4 producers and 4 consumers recruited with  
12 the help of the local managers were conducted. A final interview with the CEO took place in order to  
13 clear up a few remaining issues concerning the IFA's functioning and mission. During the whole  
14 research process the authors repeatedly shaped their hypotheses, while comparing the different bodies  
15 of literature (stage 6 and 7). According to the principles of theoretical saturation (stage 8), meaning  
16 that research "has continued sampling and analysing data until no new data appear and all concepts in  
17 the theory are well-developed" (Morse, 2004: 2). A total number of 17 interviews were conducted,  
18 and 2 separate focus groups. The sample is shown in Table 1

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31 The 6-month long lasting participant observation was highly relevant, where the first author acting as  
32 an active customer gained and then shared with the second one a great knowledge and awareness of  
33 the complex mechanisms of how the IFA functions. Through this research process, the authors  
34 explored how the different IFAs communicate with each other on anti-consumption and sustainability  
35 issues and how these issues are finally perceived by consumers and producers. Figure 1 shows the  
36 case study research design.

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44 The data was collected between June 2017 and December 2017. The data analysis was inductively  
45 oriented, following open and axial coding techniques (Corbin & Strauss, 2008) in order to identify  
46 and link the data collected to the research question. Particular attention was paid to coding the  
47 categories of objective descriptive data separately on the one hand, and to interpretative data based on  
48 perceptions on the other. More precisely, during the open coding, the data was first broken down by  
49 taking apart a sentence or a paragraph and giving a conceptual label to each separate idea or event.  
50 The ideas and events were then re-grouped into categories, pulling together around them groups of  
51 ideas and events as sub categories. Then, during the axial coding, the concepts were structured into  
52 sub-categories and finally grouped into coherent and integrated conceptual categories. As a final  
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stage, the sub categories were linked within and between each other. Finally, the conceptual categories were linked in a coherent explanatory pattern. A detailed picture of consumers, producers and FA managers' perspectives emerged on the connection between sustainability, anti-consumption and customer well-being, as well as the role played by IFA as an innovative BM able to engage individuals in achieving well-being via anti-consumption behaviours.

#### 4. Data collection, analysis, and results

##### 4.1. *The Italian Food Assembly*

The Food Assembly is an AFN which originated in France in 2010 with the name of "La Ruche Qui Dit Oui!" (meaning "the hive that says yes"), as a hybrid form of farmer's market and online buying group. At present, the network is developed in the major European countries with more than 1,400 assemblies. 800 are in France, 200 are in Spain, there are 169 in Italy, and 88 in England.

The project came to Italy in 2014, to Turin, through a start-up of the Polytechnic of Turin's incubator. It is like a mix between a farmers' market and a food-buying group which has already reached more than 47,600 members across the country.

The network is an online platform aimed at strengthening the relationship between local producers and consumers through organized pop-up markets, called "Food Assemblies". It is a pop-up and pre-order food shopping system that bypasses the large distribution supply chains, bringing together the modern side of retail which is the online ordering side, with all the benefits of face-to-face retail. It combines a web technological platform with the short supply chain, thus creating a consumer community of people wishing to change the way they do shopping and reducing their consumption. The sales platform enables direct exchanges between local farmers and the consumer community, once a week, creating small, temporary markets.

The vision of this AFN is a world with a shorter supply chain, creating a community of people sharing a better way to eat, where everyone has access to local produce and is connected to the producers who make it. By combining technology and sustainable agriculture, the mission of this AFN is to connect neighbours to farmers, neighbours to each other, and everyone to a sustainable consumption concept of food, supporting a healthier world where everyone can thrive.

Concerning the situation in Italy, 2016 was the first full year of activity, with 121 assemblies registered on the site and a growing number of requests. The global turnover for 2016 was 500,000 euros and the trend is positive. Indeed, the objective is to reach a turnover of two million euros at the end of 2017. The network is mostly made up of women (80% of IFA's leaders). The producers are on average 35 years old and among them, about 30% are organic producers, confirming that it is a BM that meets the favour of new generations, increasingly dedicated to small businesses linked to field and sustainable agro-food production. See table 2 for a summary.

PLEASE INSERT TABLE 2 HERE

The global project has a collective logic, but every local assembly carries out projects individually, depending on the place where the hive is located and on the manager's temperament.

The 169 Italian assemblies are concentrated in the North (80%), but the aim is to bring the network to the south too. IFAs are a sort of new social enterprise model where solidarity and strong social relations impact on consumers' food consumption habits, with the aim of distributing local, fresh, genuine and zero-kilometre food products more efficiently, combining the technological innovation of an e-commerce site with a direct market experience.

The most innovative aspect with respect to other similar AFN models is the union between social network technologies and territoriality, combining their spatial organisation, link to resources and social relations (Dansero & Putilli, 2014; Doernberg et al., 2016). This BM is centred on the community of consumers and local producers, emphasising the genuineness of products, their quality, the traceability along the short chain, and the fairness of production (in terms of respect for work rights) and price for all the involved actors. Social values, sustainability and the care of local communities are the main focus of the IFA's BM, which consequently becomes a sort of "social model".

The role of each local leader is to find a place (i.e. a café, a restaurant, a parish youth club, etc.) for the delivery of products, contacting producers within a 250-kilometre radius to join the initiative. All the producers are visited by the assembly leader, who controls, on the customer's behalf, some key value factors related to sustainability dimensions (i.e. soil quality, animal welfare, employment practices, etc.) ensuring the inclusion in the assembly of only truly sustainable realities. A selection of locally sourced products are published on the page each week alongside prices set by the producers who personally take care of the disclosure of any information about their company in general and the periodic availability of products to be sold.

The consumers have to pre-browse and pre-order the local products within a six-day period, paying for them online. They then go to the weekly assembly's collection point to meet producers and to collect the purchases. For the producers, the advantage is that food is pre-sold and the actual assembly event is a two-hour time slot necessary for people to collect their food.

The local leader improves communications between members, also proposing activities like farm visits, tastings during collection, dealing with issues of community interest, and finally putting producers and consumers in direct contact with each other.

Therefore the platform makes knowledge and sharing (not only on the products) possible for both the customer and the producer. Seminars and events on information regarding food labels, on the use of products close to the expiry date, etc. are periodically arranged, and they are often in relation to the promotion of anti-consumption behaviours. For example, a seminar on the selection of food that is functional to combat diseases related to consumerism, such as obesity, has been organised. For the

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3 producer anti-consumption is also visible in the dynamics of zero waste, as the goods are ordered in  
4 advance and all the packaging is designed to be reused, raising awareness in the consumer, for  
5 example, on the need to return containers and crates of fruit and vegetables. Products can be organic  
6 or standard. However there is a strong emphasis on small farming systems which share the philosophy  
7 of sustainability interpreted in all its dimensions (good governance, economic resilience,  
8 environmental friendly, and social well-being).  
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11 In this SBM, all producers set their own prices, so that they are remunerated in a way they perceive to  
12 be fair. More precisely, they receive over 80% of their goods sold. The rest is split between the  
13 corporate IFA and the local leader. The “80-10-10” model allows farmers to receive fair remuneration  
14 and at the same time maintains affordable prices for consumers.  
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17 Many tools are employed concerning the various ways in which the IFA promotes sustainable  
18 consumption behaviour and anti-consumption habits. They are virtual (general and local websites,  
19 Facebook, Instagram, a dedicated blog) as well as face-to-face. Fig. 2 summarises how the network  
20 actually works.  
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28 In order to reduce consumption, local managers encourage people to purchase only what they really  
29 need – for example 100 grams of meat instead of a pack of 3 kg - which is the opposite of what a  
30 supermarket normally does, encouraging people to buy. Interestingly, IFAs not only sell products but  
31 offer a direct relationship with producers, going even beyond what the open air markets normally  
32 propose.  
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35 Concerning customers, they clearly perceive the sustainability ‘mantra’ spread both by the IFA  
36 “mother”, as well as local IFAs, through face to face and virtual channels along the value chain. Thus,  
37 IFAs also help consumers to become more frugal in their consumption behaviours. For the consumers,  
38 one of the distinctive elements of the assembly is that it revives urban areas, strengthening the sense  
39 of community, since going to pick up the products bought becomes a social event, allowing the people  
40 of the neighbourhood to get together once a week. Consequently, this fosters individual relationships,  
41 increasing social capital. When asked if and how an IFA contributes to spreading information  
42 concerning sustainable and anti-consumption behaviour, customers show they particularly appreciate  
43 some types of information, namely that concerning local production, product seasonality, reduction in  
44 packaging, the respect of work rights and the impact of consuming less.  
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50 It is worth noticing that for all the interviewed customers the IFA also helps to achieve well-being  
51 through the promotion of a more sustainable way of living, supporting them to reach their ideal  
52 concept of well-being.  
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## 5. Discussion, conclusions, and limitations

The aim of this research was to contribute to the literature on SBMs and on sustainability consumption behaviours, highlighting the IFA's role as an enabler to bring power back to producers and consumers, with shorter supply chains where people connect to food in a better way.

The IFAs' vision is to support a healthier world where everyone can thrive, by combining innovation technology and a sustainable food system through the diffusion and sharing of conscious anti-consumption behaviours.

The main way in which the network's members act as consumers can be classified as incidental non-consumption (Cherrier et al., 2011), while these customers' anti-consumption practices generally take the form of rejection (Hogg et al., 2009). The analysis showed that anti-consumption behaviours appear to be a deliberate choice based on decisions consistent with IFA's customer values (Kozinets et al., 2010). These customers exhibit what Cherrier (2009) calls "project identities", and mainly act as "simplifiers", who are also considered to be the most sustainable consumers (Balderjahn et al., 2013). Particularly concerning food, these customers have a holistic vision, reinforced by the different ways in which all the actors within the network communicate the IFA's vision. Through virtual as well as face to face communication channels, IFA encourages all its members to perform sustainable consumption, particularly regarding what Block et al. (2010) defined as being the three interconnected ways: the use of eco-friendly products, anti-consumption practices such as rejecting, reduction and reuse and the sustainable disposal practice of recycling.

The study addressed the following question: how can an AFN's business model develop the community's attitude and motivation to become more sustainable, enhancing the awareness of food anti-consumption behaviours? In order to answer it, value proposition, value creation and delivery and the value capture components of the Bocken et al. (2014) framework were examined, as observed in the IFAs and the community belonging to the network. Findings showed how the IFA's network was set up with the specific intention of empowering people to create a better way to eat, by enabling farm-to-neighbourhood access to fresh local food and to re-evaluate food and its role in fostering community and customer wellbeing.

As suggested by the adopted methodology, we derived 4 theoretical propositions aimed at widening the perspective of SBMs and combining it with perspectives on food anti-consumption. Tab. 3 shows each proposition - along with a selection of supporting quotations taken from the interviews - and its related impact on the SBM.

PLEASE INSERT TABLE 3 HERE

For the IFA network, value proposition, value creation and delivery and value capture founded upon the sustainability concept, move from the IFA "mother" to those that are part of the value creation

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3 chain, permeating all the business processes. Therefore for the IFA to be truly deemed sustainable, it  
4 is essential that its producers must also be sustainable, as well as the entire sales and distribution  
5 processes. Such a significant result has been achieved with the ability of all the local assemblies to  
6 share values and principles of sustainability, adapting their operational processes coherently, so as to  
7 benefit also in terms of income and cost flows, thus guaranteeing profitability.  
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10 The IFA becomes the operative community used to reach these ends in the most effective way,  
11 because all the organizational and managerial aspects are specified to the members that are part of the  
12 network and are presided over in an almost symbiotic manner.  
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14 The platform and its social media are the tools through which the IFA transfers its value proposition  
15 to all the components of the network, permeating their sustainable behaviours and values by sharing  
16 questions, concerns and ideas for moving forward.  
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19 The effects of the value proposition “transfer” show a simultaneous synergy in value creation and  
20 delivery processes, which are extended from the corporate IFA standards, through the network’s  
21 commitment, to the other network actors in the upstream (producers) and downstream (consumers)  
22 value chain. The BM of the network is also sustainable from an environmental point of view, because  
23 it includes the reuse, recovery and recycling of the resources which have been utilised, as well as the  
24 use of organic food systems together with the adoption of protocols for the protection of the  
25 environment during the distribution and maintenance process.  
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29 Consequently, the impact on the value capture of the network is relevant, due to the support provided  
30 by the Assembly in determining fair farmers’ prices and making cost-efficient processes, also in  
31 environmental terms (by means of an agricultural system which respects the agronomic rules and  
32 environmental sustainability). This also comes from the fact that all the firms in the network can  
33 optimise the purchasing and delivering process by knowing the quantity to harvest and to produce in  
34 advance, thus reducing waste and making it possible to limit indirect and direct costs.  
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38 Concluding, the ability of IFA leaders and producers to evoke a sense of belonging to a territorial  
39 context as well as trying to reconnect people with their community and economy is clearly present.  
40 The IFA is a perfect expression of a form of neo-localism (Goodman et al., 2012) where food  
41 systems are linked to a story, often built on a romantic rediscovery of tradition and closely linked to  
42 the territory. The IFA combines sustainability and technology in a simple and intuitive way, bringing  
43 thousands of producers and citizens together to find new ways of producing and consuming food  
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46 Finally, while the case study is very rich in the amount of data gathered, it cannot be generalised. We  
47 acknowledge this is a fundamental limitation. Since it cannot be generalised, it has a limited practical  
48 application. Actually, the objective with a case study is to identify particular phenomena that are  
49 sufficiently significant so as to have an impact on the subject of the study, both theoretically and  
50 practically, as well as on the conclusions and related recommendations for research and practice.  
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55 However, further research will try to overcome this limitation to include more cases belonging to  
56 other European countries where FAs are successfully developed, within a comparative approach.  
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Moreover, further research is desirable, since our research set-up does not focus on the comparison between sustainable and conventional food networks. Follow-up research could, for example, take paired samples of sustainable as well as non-sustainable food networks to further verify these findings. Once more, the qualitative data emerging from this study must be strengthened by a quantitative approach. Consequently, a future step will be to arrange questionnaires for all IFA producers and consumers in order to effectively understand their consumption habits, generalising present results at a nationwide level.

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British Food Journal

**TABLE 1, 2, 3****Table 1 – Sample**

Number of interviews	ID	Member interviewed	Length of interviews and means employed
1	C1	Customer	About 50 min through skype
2	C2	Customer	About 45 min face-to-face interview
3	C3	Customer	About 1 h face-to-face interview
4	C4	Customer	About 40 min face-to-face interview
5	P1	Producer	About 40 min face-to-face interview
6	P2	Producer	About 45 min on the phone
7	P3	Producer	About 1 h face-to-face interview
8	P4	Producer	About 40 min face-to-face interview
9	Man1	CEO	About 1 h face-to-face interview
10	Man1	CEO	About 1 h face-to-face interview (follow up)
11	Man1	CEO	About 1 h face-to-face interview (follow up)
12	Man2	Corporate Purchasing Manager	About 45 min face-to-face interview
13	Man3	Corporate Communication Manager	About 50 min face-to-face interview
14	Lead1	Local Food Assembly Leader	About 50 min face-to-face interview
15	Lead2	Local Food Assembly Leader	About 50 min on the phone
16	Lead3	Local Food Assembly Leader	About 50 min on the phone
17	Lead4	Local Food Assembly Leader	About 50 min face-to-face interview

**Table 2. IFA's network Trend of Growth**

Year	Italian Food Assemblies (N)	Farmers/Producers (N)	Members (N)
2015	4	23	748
2016	121	419	25,000
2017 (September)	169	847	47,604

Source: Authors' analysis on FA data

**Table 3. Propositions for enlarging and combining SBM and food anti-consumption and well-being perspectives**

Proposition (P)	Selection of supporting quotations	Impact on SBM
<p><u>P1</u></p> <p><i>An AFN's sustainable business model could be designed as a social model as well, with the aim of promoting and creating sustainable consuming behaviours and strong relationships within the network community</i></p>	<p>"Our purpose is to give the means in order to generate purchasing groups and neighbourhood points. Then it is the local manager that creates his/her own project. Depending on the local manager's disposition we have "Hives" more focused on organic food, while others are more built around the idea of creating a local community. It clearly depends on the place where the hive is located and on the manager's temperament" (Man2)</p>	<p>- Value proposition</p>

	<p>“Rather than talking about the IFA’s business model, we’d better talk about the IFA’s social model. This will be certainly more appropriate. In fact, our value proposition is to create a better way to eat, where everyone has access to the pleasure of local food, and is connected to the people who make it” (Man1)</p> <p>“Through creativity, we make a daily effort to design new solutions to the challenging problems facing food production. Innovation is key to the success of creating a better food system for everyone, and is at the heart of IFA’s mission” (Man3)</p> <p>“Cooperation is the collective heartbeat of IFA. Everyday, we harvest and nourish this cooperation within our community, by sharing questions, concerns and ideas for moving forward. Being decentralised, it takes our collective network to succeed, and to build trust and give the autonomy to those that work in the field” (Man1)</p>	
<p><u>P2</u></p> <p><i>An AFN’s sustainable business model should foster the sharing of intangible values beyond the offering of food products.</i></p>	<p>“The IFA offers the relationship with the producers (...). The relationship is in the attempt to explain to consumers what I’ve learnt from producers. This is only possible if you visit producers, then I can tell the story to consumers. I do this in order to foster good practices, and also to remove preconceptions coming from mass media, for example concerning organic food” (Lead1)</p> <p>“Our approach to food quality is strongly shaped by the context of production, including culture, rural tradition, terrain and local knowledge systems, with an emphasis on re-vitalising local knowledge and culture” (P2)</p>	<p>- Value creation &amp; delivery</p>
<p><u>P3</u></p> <p><i>An AFN’s sustainable business model must be sustainable with respect to all the sustainability dimension, namely good governance, economic resilience, environmental friendly, and social well-being.</i></p>	<p>“I really appreciate that the choice between products you can purchase is limited to products belonging to the territory and seasonal products in favour of quality and freshness; this induces me not to waste because I give more value to the product I purchase, also because I really know where the product comes from and I know the producer. I also appreciate the idea I can do without plastic bags and other kinds of packaging” (C4)</p> <p>“Because you can purchase only seasonal products, consequently the hive educates all the members to consume locally and to follow the rules imposed by the nature” (C2)</p> <p>“When you buy directly from the producer and you know you have in your hands products of great quality ... well,</p>	<p>- Value creation &amp; delivery</p> <p>- Value capture</p>

	<p>this is enough to convince you that you mustn't waste or at least you must minimize your consumption" (C3)</p> <p>"I appreciate information concerning the respect of work rights and also concerning the importance of consuming less, particularly with respect to some specific products, such as meat" (C1)</p> <p>"As a focal company, we wish to be an economic, environmental, and social asset in the local communities where we operate, connecting people together and helping them achieve more than they could alone, also to increase social inclusion" (Man3)</p>	
<p><u>P4</u></p> <p><i>An AFN's sustainable business model should support producers, consumers, local leaders and, more in general, all the community members in their effort of achieving an ideal concept of well-being</i></p>	<p>"IFA helps me in reaching my ideal concept of well-being through a sustainability model" (C1)</p> <p>"The online sales system is easy to administrate, and it is a brilliant way for producers to meet and build relationships with their customers and with each other. Our FA leader does an excellent job at promoting it" (C4)</p> <p>"In my opinion, well-being means eating in a healthy and informed way, having a respectful relationship with the territory, being part of a community of people with which to share values and experiences and enrich myself with others' experiences. That is exactly what FA means" (C3)</p> <p>"The IFA's network allows us to sell our products at a price slightly higher than the market, supporting our small and local farming activities, with the guarantee for the consumer that the harvest is done in the morning and distributed on the same day only for the quantities requested on line, without waste. This is our concept of well-being" (P3)</p> <p>"We enable producers to set their own prices, ensuring that they are remunerated in a fair way (no dumping prices). All producers receive 80% of their goods sold. The rest is split between the IFA "mother" and the managers that can earn fair wages for the management of the local Fas" (Lead1)</p>	<p><i>- Value creation &amp; delivery</i></p> <p><i>- Value capture</i></p>

**FIGURE 1, 2**

**Fig. 1 Case Study Research Design**

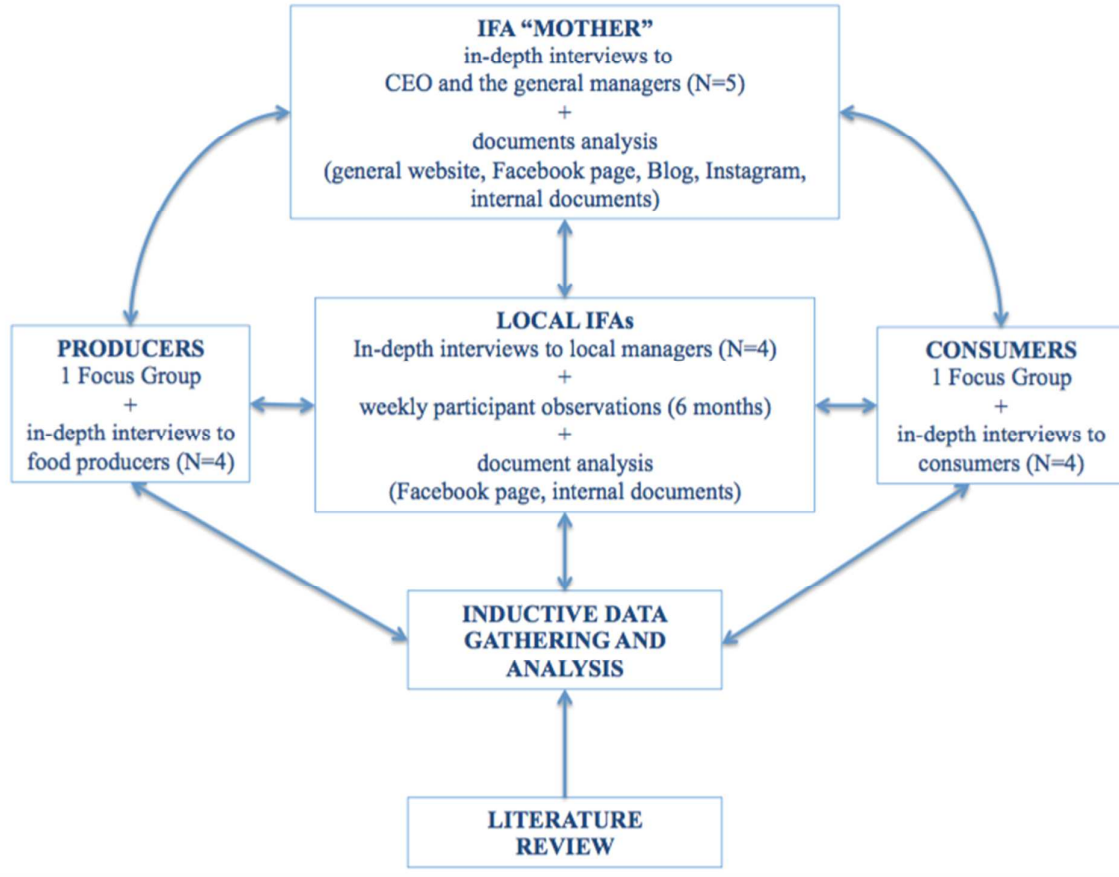
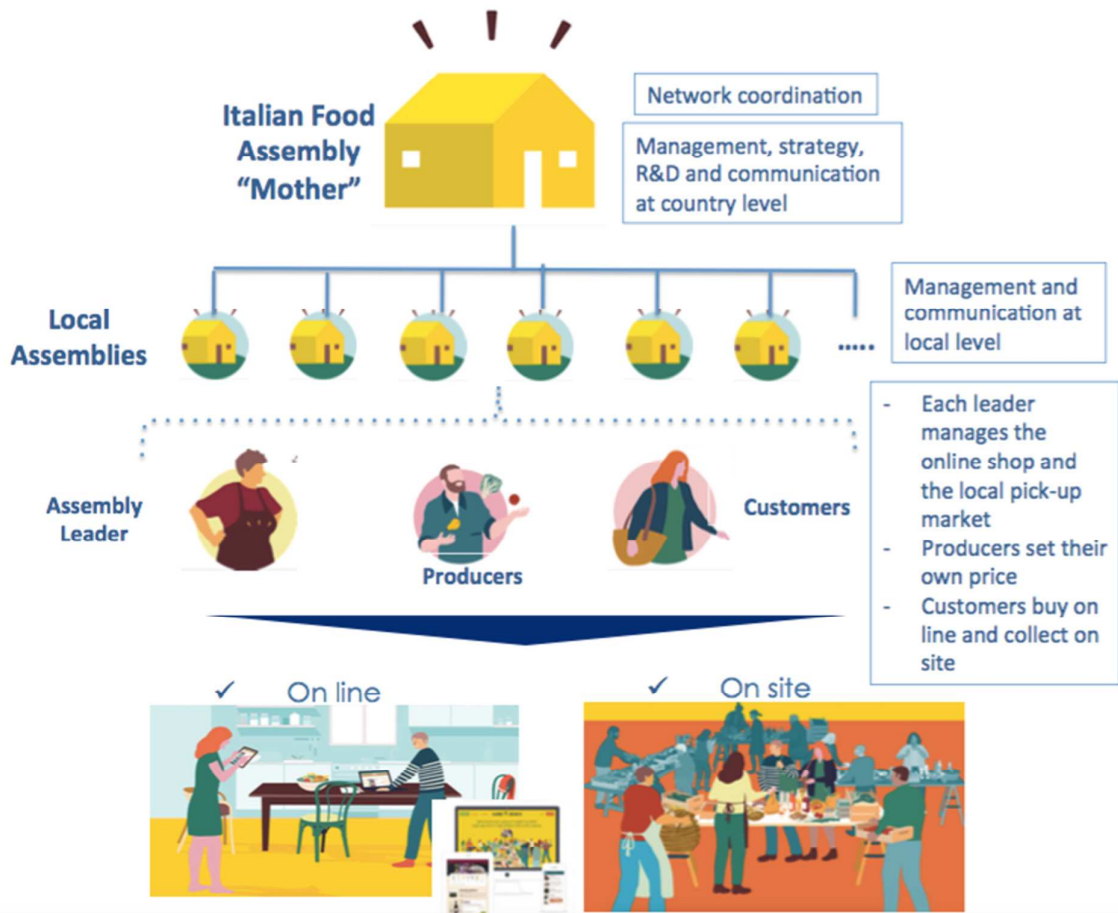


Fig. 2 How the Italian Food Assembly operatively works



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