



OPEN ACCESS

EDITED BY

José Luis Vicente-Vicente,
Leibniz Center for Agricultural Landscape
Research (ZALF), Germany

REVIEWED BY

Shuru Zhong,
School of Tourism Management, Sun Yat-sen
University, China
Meike Rombach,
Lincoln University, New Zealand

*CORRESPONDENCE

Zsófia Benedek
✉ benedek.zsofia@krtk.hu

SPECIALTY SECTION

This article was submitted to
Social Movements, Institutions and
Governance,
a section of the journal
Frontiers in Sustainable Food Systems

RECEIVED 15 December 2022

ACCEPTED 06 March 2023

PUBLISHED 23 March 2023

CITATION

Benedek Z (2023) On the transformative
potential of Hungarian local food-buying clubs.
Front. Sustain. Food Syst. 7:1124877.
doi: 10.3389/fsufs.2023.1124877

COPYRIGHT

© 2023 Benedek. This is an open-access article
distributed under the terms of the [Creative
Commons Attribution License \(CC BY\)](#). The use,
distribution or reproduction in other forums is
permitted, provided the original author(s) and
the copyright owner(s) are credited and that
the original publication in this journal is cited, in
accordance with accepted academic practice.
No use, distribution or reproduction is
permitted which does not comply with these
terms.

On the transformative potential of Hungarian local food-buying clubs

Zsófia Benedek^{1,2*}

¹Agricultural Economics and Rural Development Research Unit, Institute of Economics, Centre for Economic and Regional Studies, Budapest, Hungary, ²Hungarian National Bank—Research Center, John von Neumann University, Kecskemét, Hungary

This study describes the development trends of local food-buying clubs (BCs) in Hungary and analyses how this type of grassroots initiative can contribute to the sustainability transition. BC are consumer-driven organizations which aim to connect local food producers with consumers. The study also discusses how the Hungarian implementation differs from other initiatives described in the literature. The empirical analysis employs qualitative techniques, including participant observation, in-depth interviews with three organizers and two external experts, and a survey of 82 BC producers. BCs may be instrumental in facilitating the sustainability transition: on the one hand, they reach a wide range of consumers, and on the other, they are in contact with a multitude of producers, so everything is in place for their successful scaling up, with a particular focus on the maintenance of core values. BCs can thus play an instrumental role in influencing attitudes and fostering community. One of their most significant advantages is that, while they can operate independently of the growth imperatives of the dominant capitalist paradigm, they can also be understood within it. The increase in the number of grassroots initiatives has led to the formation of a meta-organization aimed at generating and sharing knowledge and the joint utilization and development of specific resources, such as information technologies. The variety of organizational forms and operating modes allows the general approach of buying clubs to be tailored to specific micro-contexts. However, there is a potential danger associated with the large proportion of volunteer work. For BCs to be successful over the long term, it is vital that they are self-sufficient in terms of everyday economic activities and that organizers are at least partially compensated for their efforts.

KEYWORDS

sustainability transition, local food systems, alternative food networks, short food supply chains, ethical purchase groups, grassroot activist groups, Hungary

1. Introduction

In line with the Sustainable Development Goals, progress is required to create a just, resilient, productive and sustainable food system (UN General Assembly, 2015). This food system should provide sufficient food for everyone in terms of quality and quantity, offer reasonable compensation to farmers, and contribute to mitigating climate change. There is increasing recognition that alternative food networks (AFNs) can play a critical role in fostering a sustainable transition (Forssell and Lankoski, 2015; Sarabia et al., 2021).

Central and Eastern Europe are associated with exciting developmental pathways and dynamics regarding AFNs (Balázs et al., 2016; Goszczyński and Wróblewski, 2020; Kopczyńska, 2020). Interest in local foods is traditionally high and widespread. There is

a high rate of food self-provisioning, typically not driven by economic factors (Jehlička et al., 2021; Vávra et al., 2021). Furthermore, informal food economies play a significant role (Jehlička et al., 2020; Pinto-Correia et al., 2021). As a result of these processes, “quiet sustainability” may be achieved (Smith and Jehlička, 2013). However, farmers are usually reluctant to cooperate due to negative experiences during socialism, such as forced collectivization (Bakucs et al., 2012). An entrepreneurial approach among farmers is relatively rare, and many farmers seek solutions from a paternalistic state or other external actors (Bakacsi et al., 2002). Consequently, self-organization among farmers in the region is at a very low level compared to in Western European countries. As traditional farmers often lack the skills required to participate in AFNs, non-governmental organizations (e.g., consumer associations) are essential mediators (Balogh et al., 2022).

This study presents insights from Hungary, which has an established tradition of direct consumer-producer interaction through conventional markets, on-farm sales, and other initiatives (Benedek et al., 2018), although the development of modern AFNs is considered to have significant potential (Benedek and Balázs, 2016; Szabó, 2017). Hungarian local food-buying clubs (also known as consumer purchase groups, shopping communities, or basket communities) are voluntary organizations through which local food producers and buyers come into direct contact (Kápolnai and Molnár, 2020). Consumers select and place orders with community organizers on a weekly (less often, fortnightly) basis from a current product list or buy pre-packed boxes of vegetables and other food items. In recent years, the number of buying clubs has proliferated (Szabó et al., 2019), thanks to the commitment of organizations to knowledge transfer. A website (www.kosarkozosseg.hu) has been set up to help create new communities, suggesting that such Hungarian communities have embarked on the path of networking, which could lead to the exploitation of specific synergies. Additionally, buying clubs played an outstanding role after the outbreak of COVID-19 in terms of ensuring food security (Nemes et al., 2020), a phenomenon that appeared to be general among consumer-driven grassroots initiatives across the Global North (Wheeler et al., 2020; Fardkhales and Lincoln, 2021; Nemes et al., 2021; Meixner et al., 2022). The aim of this paper is to discuss the potential of buying clubs in relation to facilitating the sustainability transition in the long term, with a particular focus on recent networking activities.

2. Hungarian local food-buying clubs and other consumer-driven grassroots initiatives

The primary purpose of buying clubs (BCs) is generally to increase collective purchasing power (i.e., to facilitate the purchase of goods at lower prices) or to acquire products that are challenging to obtain independently (Martinez, 2010; Hupper et al., 2019). In addition, buying clubs may improve market relations by coordinating the activities of multiple actors (Morley et al., 2008). Nevertheless, there is a strong emphasis on ethics and the environment in the Hungarian local food context. The main aims

are to demonstrate solidarity with local producers (fair prices are accepted instead of low prices), revitalize the local economy, and obtain healthy, safe, and reliable food associated with the smallest environmental impact.

The pioneering Szatyor (“Shopping bag”) Association started as a box scheme in Hungary in 2005 with the goal of connecting urban consumers directly with nearby organic food producers (Perényi, 2009). According to Haldy (2004), box schemes can be characterized as food subscription systems. The distributor typically defines the range of products, and consumers have only a limited choice (Kummer and Milestad, 2020). In the Hungarian context, the scope of products usually expands until the box scheme character diminishes, or is wholly abandoned. Thus, consumers identify their own “box,” and no subscription or membership fee is required (Szabó et al., 2019); these systems can be termed food delivery schemes (Haldy, 2004). However, the local focus and importance awarded to ethical (and non-protectionist consumption, environmental, and other sustainability) aspects remains, as does the non-profit character (Svensson et al., 2019). Flexibility arrangements (no subscription is required, and the items can be flexibly chosen) make BCs similar to farmers’ markets operating online. The formation and management of such organizations usually depend on a handful of activists who are consumers themselves. Other BC consumers have only a loose connection with the organizations through their purchases; nevertheless, they often report a higher level of commitment to their buying community than patrons of farmers’ markets (Neulinger et al., 2020).

There are examples of well-documented consumer-driven local food-related initiatives in the literature. The following paragraphs discuss their similarities to and differences from Hungarian BCs. The Italian Solidarity Purchase Group (SPG) network is a well-known example. A comparison of SPGs to Hungarian BCs reveals characteristic differences, despite the diversity of the former. SPGs are more idealistic and often politically motivated (Brunori et al., 2012). Although organizationally there is a great variety of the latter (Barbera et al., 2020), SPGs are intended to be small in order to promote a democratic attitude and personal relationships among members (often groups of friends or colleagues), who often undertake management duties (Fonte, 2013). Hungarian BCs are typically more formal; their organizational structure is always hierarchical; individual customers interact with the association. SPG members are perceived to operate on a relatively tight budget and prices in an SPG are lower than in conventional markets (Fonte, 2013). In contrast, prices in Hungarian BCs are usually higher than in conventional retail outlets (Szabó et al., 2019), although perhaps lower than at organic shops (Svensson et al., 2019). Similarly to SPGs, many producers who sell through Hungarian BCs employ organic production practices, although they are only sometimes certified. All the differences between the producers and their practices are clearly communicated, and consumers can choose based on their preferences. Producers participating in BCs often consider this marketing opportunity to be part of their risk-sharing strategy and may have other sales channels where most of their produce is sold (Benedek et al., 2020a). Many BCs organize yearly farm visits, which is an essential element of control for consumers and enhances trust in producers,

similar to their Italian counterparts (Cembalo et al., 2013). In Italy, the rapid spread of SPGs after the appearance of the first one in 1994 made the participation of consumers living further away from main cities possible (Cembalo et al., 2013). The same process is also being experienced in Hungary, with the formulation of newer consumer communities.

Compared to Anglocentric, Scandinavian, or Polish non-profit consumer food cooperatives (as discussed by Deller et al., 2009; Pearson et al., 2011; Katchova and Woods, 2013; Bilewicz and Spiewak, 2015; Thorsøe and Kjeldsen, 2016; Kopczyńska, 2017), Hungarian BCs require no membership fee nor work for the community. Consequently, members do not directly influence their management or logistics. On the other hand, community managers (often volunteers) are consumers themselves; additionally, consumer feedback is regularly collected, and thus the opinion of consumers is articulated. BCs usually operate through pick-up points; the emphasis is always on the hand-over of pre-ordered items. Thus (except for the flagship Szatyor Association), no grocery shops nor de facto farmers' markets are associated with them.

Consumer-driven community-supported agricultural schemes (CSAs) and their French counterparts (AMAPs: *Association de Maintien de l'Agriculture Paysanne*, Associations for the Support of Peasant Agriculture) are an additional point of comparison. Similarly to Hungarian BCs, these systems operate on a non-profit basis. However, no subscription, contracting, or payment in advance is required in Hungarian BCs; thus, consumer commitment is definitely lower (Lagane, 2015; Neulinger et al., 2020). CSAs and AMAPs, as a consequence of the subscription approach, typically supply products using pre-defined boxes with a more or less standardized selection of produce. The CSA movement is also present in Hungary (Kis, 2014; Balázs et al., 2016; Birtalan et al., 2020), with schemes typically being farmer-initiated.

3. Understanding alternative food networks and their transformative potential

Various definitions of alternative food networks (AFNs) exist (Corsi et al., 2018). This is hardly surprising as the term "AFN" is an umbrella one (Nemes et al., 2023). In some cases, AFNs are referred to as the production, processing, marketing, and consumption of food based on sustainable practices (e.g., Seyfang, 2006; De Bernardi and Tirabeni, 2018; Savarese et al., 2020). Others challenge the concept by identifying trade-offs between the different dimensions of sustainability (e.g., Nousiainen et al., 2009; Migliore et al., 2015; Möllers et al., 2022), and emphasize territorial considerations (Brunori, 2007; Harris, 2010), relationships (Marsden et al., 2000; Renting et al., 2003; Kneafsey et al., 2013; Chiffolleau et al., 2019), values (Goodman et al., 2012; Pascucci et al., 2016; Fourat et al., 2020), or quality aspects (Brunori, 2007). There is a tendency in the literature to describe AFNs as being in opposition to conventional, globalized and industrialized food systems (Michel-Villarreal et al., 2019). As Tregear (2011) pointed out, AFNs are often defined by what they are not instead of what they are, in the sense that the term "alternative" is used purely

to express their differences to the "conventional" food system (see also Lamine et al., 2019). According to Maye and Kirwan (2010), the concept of "alternativeness" is contextual, thus, the independent analysis of initiatives is called for. To address the definitional problems and the complexity of AFNs, some authors (e.g., Jarosz, 2008; Tregear, 2011) approach the concept through the identification of broad characteristics.

Acknowledging the diversity and context-dependence of AFNs, this paper applies an understanding of AFNs based on the approach of Forssell and Lankoski (2015), who provided a broad and inclusive identification of AFNs based on their dominant features. (1) Background characteristics include participants' non-conventional sources of motivation regarding values and sustainability. (2) Core characteristics include greater product specificity and mode of production, referred to as "the economies of qualities" (Callon et al., 2002). Additional features include the diverse domains of proximity (Eriksen, 2013), from food geographies to market relations between producers and consumers. (3) As a result of these background and core characteristics, outcome characteristics include strong relationships among the stakeholders of AFNs. Buying clubs make diverse sustainability ("alternativeness") claims; any or all the characteristics of AFNs identified by Forssell and Lankoski (2015) may be addressed.

The general challenge facing AFNs is how to transform the much larger conventional food system, rather than simply inform it (Connelly, 2010). Through participatory and ecological practices, transformative organizations aim to scale up AFNs to induce regime shifts (Pereira et al., 2020); their goal is to build a food system that is sustainable and autonomous. Some authors suggest that consumer-driven initiatives, such as buying clubs, have the potential to efficiently scale up AFNs by being the "missing middle" between small-scale farms and mainstream markets (Blay-Palmer et al., 2013; Milestad et al., 2017; Brislen, 2018; Kummer and Milestad, 2020). In addition, grassroots initiatives can aggregate products in a cost-efficient way, including by reducing of transaction costs (Paech et al., 2021), increasing volume, and to exploiting the economies of scope in a way that is compatible with that of conventional food systems (Day-Farnsworth et al., 2009).

Wittman et al. (2012) argue that an increase in the popularity and sales of AFNs may risk "conventionalization," including the emergence of power imbalances or harmful environmental consequences. The latter suggests that authenticity might be an important protective factor against adverse impacts. However, expansion, the greater involvement of family farms and more interested consumers will not always result in scaling up and (more importantly) transformation if the core values (such as resistance to commodity fetishism) are challenged (Forssell and Lankoski, 2015), or if AFNs remain the playground of affluent consumers (Beckie and Connelly, 2016). Tregear (2011) points out that one problem related to AFNs is the premise that they are inherently beneficial from a social, economic and ecological perspective. The so-called "local trap" describes the intuitive perception of AFNs as "good" without a thorough assessment of the extent to which they challenge conventional food practices (Born and Purcell, 2006; Michel-Villarreal et al., 2018). In this paper, the neutral approach of Corsi et al. (2018) is adopted to avoid taking a position on this issue. Accordingly, this study seeks to increase understanding of how Hungarian local food-buying clubs function in relation to

the context of AFNs, and to assess their transformative potential without exaggerating their virtues or ignoring their shortcomings.

4. Materials and methods

Since the Hungarian buying club movement is still relatively small, comprising around 25 active communities as of July 2022 (and about 30 in November 2022), a mixture of three qualitative approaches was applied—the methods being those most widely used to study AFNs (Michel-Villarreal et al., 2019). First, the technique of complete participant observation was borrowed from the ethnographic toolbox, complemented by in-depth interviews with three BC organizers and representatives of two non-governmental organizations (NGOs) who were familiar with and supportive of the sector. As part of the third approach, 82 semi-structured telephone interviews were conducted with farmers who supply BCs. All respondents provided informed consent for their participation in the research, which was approved by the Ethical Committee of the Center for Economic and Regional Studies (CERS), Hungary (Reference number: 21/02; 04/01/2021).

Complete participant observation comprised two events. The first was a networking event of Hungarian BCs in March 2022, attended by representatives of 13 communities, while two further communities provided data in response to questions asked in advance. These organizations account for about half of the total sample. The author of this paper visited the networking event as a representative of one of the BCs, and experiences at this meeting inspired this research. The approval of BC managers with respect to the publication of their data was obtained later, when the idea of this paper was conceived. Anonymization of the data ensures the privacy and confidentiality of the participants; letters are used to indicate individual BCs. The second event was a facilitated roundtable discussion that took place in September 2022 as part of a series of discussions about post-growth strategies organized by the Human Ecology Master Program at Eötvös Loránd University, the MTA-ELTE Lendület New Vision research group, and the Sustainable Development Presidential Committee of the Hungarian Academy of Sciences. The discussion focused on the possibilities of restructuring the food economy, with the participation of a buying club organizer and two farmers who sell through short food supply chains; the author of this paper acted as a moderator. The discussion (like other events in the discussion series) was recorded and then coded thematically.

The in-depth interviews were designed to complement the participant observation experience. Interview subjects were selected through purposive sampling (key informant sampling), based on the prior experience of the author as a BC organizer. Concerning the organizers of BCs, the main criterion for selection was ensuring that organizations from various backgrounds (size, mode of operation, age, and different municipalities) were represented. Two further in-depth interviews were conducted; one respondent was a representative of an NGO that provides legal advice to and conducts research on the actors involved in AFNs and runs training courses for organizers of AFNs. The other organization provides pro-bono marketing advice to BCs. After approval by the respondents, the in-depth interviews were

recorded. Participants could refuse to answer or stop the interviews at any time. Participants were also informed about the method of recording and how the data would be stored. The interviews were thematically coded.

The local economic structure and history of a settlement influence the image and mode of functioning of an emerging community. The first participant observation exercise created interesting insights into problems associated with the recruitment of farmers. In Hungary, some farmers have preferred to supply wholesalers as opposed to BCs, the latter which may generate more profit but only meet individual needs and involve small orders—thus, some communities failed to launch. According to the agricultural censuses (Hungarian Central Statistical Office, 2021), the number of farmers has dropped from more than 1,395,000 (1991) to <228,000 (2020). The decreasing number of (small-scale) farmers and their lack of capacity for (or interest in) joining modern food distribution channels (Balogh et al., 2022) appears to be a major threat to scaling up; some organizers reported difficulty finding enough farmers willing to supply their BCs. Therefore, the views of farmers about BCs are important for making assessment about the future potential of the movement (an analysis of the attitudes and preferences of BC consumers is presented elsewhere; Benedek and Ferto, under review).

Identifying farmers' perceptions of BCs was thus essential for validating the potential for scaling up. The mapping of opinions was aided by a database that was compiled during earlier research in 2021. This database included the contact details of farmers who had subscribed to the local producer database of an official body (e.g., the National Chamber of Agriculture) or an NGO (e.g., a Local Action Group within the EU-financed LEADER program for rural development) or who appeared on the website or in Facebook group posts of a BC. A list of the websites and organizations that were mapped is displayed in [Supplementary Table S1](#). The resulting database contained 1,514 records. A random generator was used to select producers for semi-structured interviews by telephone between January and March 2021. Respondents were assured that their views would be anonymized and classified into higher-level groups. They were also informed that they could refuse to answer or end the interview at any time. Financial resources permitted 224 short interviews (averaging 10 min each) with a response rate of 47%. Among other things, farmers were asked about the marketing channels they used to sell their products. This sample was further narrowed down to the 82 respondents who also marketed to BCs, regardless of sales volume. According to estimates from the website “kosarkozosseg.hu,” the number of producers that supply BCs was already more than 400 in 2021, meaning that 20% of the total population was included in the final sample. In the interviews, farmers were asked about their demographic background, the start and duration of their connection with BCs, their views about the advantages and disadvantages of this particular mode of sales, and their overall satisfaction with BCs. After taking notes of the responses, the opinions were classified into higher-order groups.

The gender and role of participants are shown in [Table 1](#).

Data analysis in qualitative research involves systematically looking for, categorizing, and analyzing observation notes, transcripts, and other materials to improve understanding of a phenomenon (Bogdan and Biklen, 2007). This study, being an

TABLE 1 Gender and role of participants.

	Variable	No of participants
Gender	Male	51
	Female	51
Role	BC organizer	16
	External expert/researcher	2
	Farmer	84
Total		102

exploratory one, used an inductive thematic analysis to identify emergent patterns (Byrne, 2022). General themes related to BCs' current position and trends were the focus, as well as the role of voluntarism, the collaboration of BCs with each other and their respective local institutions, and the relationship between BCs and farmers. Finally, the scaling-up potential and the transformative impact of BCs were assessed. Specific categories emerged through multiple readings of the transcripts, and constant revision and refinement of the category system (Thomas, 2006).

5. Results and discussion

5.1. Current status and trends

The first community to form in Hungary shortly after the millennium was "Szatyor," followed by a few other initiatives. At that time, the cohesive force between the groups was primarily a familiar "brand" (e.g., the Pécs Szatyor, Kecskemét Szatyor, and Debrecen Szatyor initiatives); pre-existing communities helped create new ones primarily by transferring experience and sometimes by helping establish contact with producers. Some of the newly established communities closed down, others were transformed into farmers' markets, and the sporadic communities that survived typically followed their own path. The constant evolution of different consumer-driven grassroots initiatives is not a Hungarian-specific phenomenon (Kondoh, 2015; Hupper et al., 2019; Kummer and Milestad, 2020).

The Nyíregyháza Basket Community, one of the largest and oldest organizations, was launched in 2013. The financial crisis of 2007/2008 and the following recession significantly increased emigration in Hungary (Bodnár and Szabó, 2014), including Nyíregyháza. Seeing a mass of friends leaving the city catalyzed the bottom-up organization of a series of community workshops, or talking sessions to think over the nature of the crisis and identify possibilities for halting negative processes.

The idea of launching a buying club developed organically, as a means of strengthening the local economy. . . . Some 25 people started to work on launching the Basket Community of the 70 citizens who regularly attended the meetings, and the Basket Community was organized within as little as three months, and it has been operating continuously since then.

The COVID-19 pandemic led to turmoil in the sector. Different convenience-related developments occurred in many communities (such as arrangements for credit card use at delivery points, the development of a user-friendly webshop, setting up home-delivery logistics, etc.). These initiatives were rolled out a little earlier than planned in order to take advantage of the increase in demand generated by the closures, to great success. Development was necessary, as consumers used to the convenience of conventional retail made similar demands of AFNs. In several cases, one of the barriers to engagement with alternative systems (in addition to the relatively high price of products) was found to be their lack of convenience (Feldmann and Hamm, 2015; Albrecht and Smithers, 2018). The big, albeit temporary winners of the rapid reorganization of distribution channels were pre-existing BCs: turnover multiplied from one moment to the next, and these types of AFNs played a very important role in maintaining food security (Nemes et al., 2021).

In many cases, the increase in interest generated by COVID-19 accelerated the launch of new communities, too. Coincidentally, preparatory work for these had often been long ongoing. (Although the momentum of the preparations of some other communities was halted by COVID-related closures) The flagship of the background work aimed at supporting the start-up of new communities was the Nyíregyháza Basket Community, which has been running training sessions for those planning to start organizing since 2017. One interviewee stated that:

We met at a training session that was organized for folks interested in launching their own communities. It turned out that there were several of us [from the same municipality], and later we were joined by 1-2 neighbors and kindergarten parents, so the organizing team quickly came together.

A remarkable training session was held in January 2020, shortly before the pandemic. Many communities were able to take advantage of a combination of inspiration from the training, the sudden increase in free time due to closures that could be used for organization, and the never-before-seen increase in demand.

Table 2 displays the main parameters of some of the communities for 2021. Data were collected during the first participant observation exercise. The number of communities was around 25 in the summer of 2022, and five or six more were expected to start in the autumn of 2022. In addition, the table lists the organizations that attended the network meeting in March 2022, or provided data in preparation for the meeting and did not object to its publication. These organizations include the BCs of Budapest's District 8 ("Vörösbegy Consumer Cooperative") and District 18 ("Végtelen Kosár"), Budafok, Gödöllo ("Dombvidék"), Dunaújváros ("Duna Kosár"), Tatabánya ("Gerecse Szatyor"), Kecskemét, Nyíregyháza, Pápa, Kaposvár ("Somogyi Kosár"), Szatyor Association, Szigetmonostor ("Sziget Kosara"), Szolnok, and Szombathely ("Vasi Zöld Kosár").

Most of the communities are located in the capital or county capitals. However, there are also communities from settlements with a few thousand inhabitants, such as the "Vértesi Kamra" (in Csákvár, 5,200 inhabitants) and "Etyek Szatyor" (based in Etyek, 4,000 inhabitants), which are not included in Table 2. The

TABLE 2 The main parameters of some Hungarian local food-buying clubs.

Code of BC	A	B	C	D	E	F	G	H	I	J	K	L	M	N
Type of settlement	Village	Town	Town	Town	County capital	County capital	County capital	County capital	County capital	County capital	Capital	Capital	Capital	Capital
Population of settlement (thousand)	1.7	25–50	25–50	25–50	50–100	50–100	50–100	50–100	100–150	100–150	1,700	1,700	1,700	1,700
Starting year	2020	2020	2021	2020	2020	2020	2020	2021	2011/2022 ^a	2013	2022	2020	2020	2005
Number of farmers	15	35	12	20	30	25	30	25–28	10 ^b	45	28 ^b	7	11	72
Number of consumers	15	20	25	30	35	20	35	63	40 ^b	140	25 ^b	30	35	140
Number of volunteers	4	8	22	15	22	2	5	n.a	6 ^b	24	6 ^b	12	3	26
Bi-weekly	No	No	Yes	No	No	No	No	No	No	No	No	Yes	Yes	No
Producers and consumers meet	Yes	No	No	No	No	No	No	No	No	No	No	No	Yes	No
Paid workers	No	No	No	No	No	No	Yes	No	No	Yes	No	No	No	Yes

Data refer to the year 2021.

^aAfter a few years, initial momentum ceased, the organizers experimented with other modes of sales, and the community was reorganized in 2022.

^bData from 2022.

smaller the municipality, the more difficult it is to run a BC: as consumers tend to know producers personally, the role of other direct sales channels (e.g., on-farm sales, barter) is proportionally more significant.

Some communities operate their pick-up points as pop-up farmers’ markets where customers can meet the producers and items ordered through the BC are handed over; the community thus coordinates only the flow of information. While this arrangement requires some additional time from the farmers (compared to arranging for volunteers to hand over orders), the former obtain access to marketing (and networking) channels, and BC management requires fewer resources.

5.2. Management of individual communities: The role of voluntarism and paid workers

Bottom-up processes, community-based learning, and cooperative learning are paramount in management processes. Prior planning, measuring and evaluating results, and self-reflection are critical elements.

There wasn’t a leader who knew how to do it, so we decided to become a learning organization: we would learn how to organize a buying club together. We planned, we implemented, we measured, we evaluated, and we redesigned...

Most organizations implement periodic surveys of their consumers and/or producers. Such periodic evaluations of the organizing core and redefining (shared) goals and visions help communities maintain their function and provide an opportunity to resolve any potential conflicts.

Based on data about experiences with organizational development, a core of at least three, but preferably five to six people is required for the stable, long-term operation of an organization. In other words, the key is not necessarily having a single charismatic leader but rather the cooperation of a small but relatively homogenous group of people with similar values. Most organizations rely heavily on volunteers in a variety of roles. Their primary (and often the only) incentive is the “value proposition,” which may be the sense of belonging to a community. The coexistence of paid employees and volunteers is typically acceptable in communities due to the high level of transparency. Most consumers are only loosely connected to organizations through their purchases.

Organizers are prone to burnout, so it is essential to compensate them for at least some of their efforts. However, the level of payment is a critical issue, as behavioral economics literature suggests that incentives that are too low in value can have the opposite effect, reducing motivation (Skinner, 1978; Itri et al., 2019). The networking meeting of BCs indicated that participation in such programs was a valuable source of inspiration for the organizers, and further consideration should be given to networking opportunities in the future (see also Section 5.3) as well as to organizational development at the level of the meta-organization.

Compensation is a double-edged sword when applied to employees. Payment is critical for the survival of BCs, yet introduces some risks, as one of the expert I interviewed explains:

If you get paid for your activity, it can trigger an urge, a kind of dependence. You start to think that you will be paid only when there is enough income. And then it may turn into a capitalist model, when the focus is on generating income, and that decisions must be made or steps must be taken that support this direction—even if they are not entirely compatible with the [original] values or the purpose. It's easy to go off track when you have this dependence on money.... [But] with a mature personality, and in a well-functioning community, this should not be a problem.

In line with earlier research that emphasized the dynamic nature of values (Milestad et al., 2017), the need for periodic reconsideration of the mission of the BC is undoubtedly necessary. In addition to having paid members, it may be pertinent to engage other volunteers who can ensure the continuity of the core value system in a variety of situations. Additionally, the post-growth logic of maintaining a small scale can be applied by organizers to determine what is “enough” in terms of capacity. A more detailed discussion of the transformative power and potential of communities is provided in Section 5.5.

5.3. Connections: Embeddedness and networking

Individual BCs are entirely independent of one another. Some farmers supply more than one community, but this is always the farmer's personal decision. In the life of Hungarian BCs, a significant milestone is the emergence of networking activities or the appearance of a meta-organization that offers a wide range of relationships. A shared website, kosarkozosseg.hu, and a related social media platform have been created to identify existing communities, making it easier for producers and consumers to join them and to act a starting point for those considering setting up BCs. Additionally, active communities communicate primarily through thematic mailing lists and occasional face-to-face meetings. A practical aspect of communication between communities is the sharing of knowledge. Furthermore, in-person meetings are also valuable sources of inspiration, as they allow organizers to experience belonging to a community outside their immediate BC.

A unique link between the organizations is created by a software implemented by the Nyíregyháza Community. This software, which is now being jointly operated by several organizations, is an exceptional platform dedicated to serving the needs of BCs through processing orders and deliveries. The platform also functions as a participatory quality assurance system (products are evaluated according to predefined criteria, including the location of ownership, location of the main ingredient, mode of production, processing, and waste generation). Organizers conduct this evaluation to help consumers make more informed and conscious decisions. Articles and blog posts can also be published through the platform that can be used to raise awareness. The

platform is modular, thus, local communities can select and customize the elements of relevance to them. The IT tool is currently used by approximately half of the communities (15–17 BCs), creating new opportunities. The software was previously developed by volunteers or on a project basis, but now...

communities that join pay a relatively small fee for the use of the software, in proportion to their turnover, and the amount that is collected covers the full-time salary of a programmer responsible only for developing the software, based on the requests that are received.

Participant communities also have access to the source code (for example, so local IT professional volunteers can make changes).

An additional community interface was provided by a marketing study group run by a volunteer professional (one of the interviewees) in the spring and summer of 2022, thus the emergence of the meta-organization fostered knowledge generation. Along with the links described so far, economic ties have also begun to develop between communities—for example, concerning producers supplying several BCs. Although it is not common practice, some farmers now sell exclusively through BCs (in addition to on-farm sales). Overall, the emerging meta-organization may help develop economies of scale and the further concentration of purchasing power.

For each community to be embedded, links with local institutions are crucial. These links take a variety of forms. For example, communities often benefit from volunteers' direct knowledge (human capital) or the broader social capital provided by consumers or producers closely associated with a BC.

We are lucky not to have to pay rent for the use of the pick-up point. Ms. X, the owner of the place, is an old friend of one of the organizers, and she liked the “cause,” so she invited us to use her company's site.

Besides discounted or free delivery venues, advertising space, and legal and food safety expertise can contribute to the management of a community. In addition to being useful at the early stages of development, these solutions can be of assistance during their growth.

For some BCs, the core of the consumer community is another stable community, typically a nearby Waldorf-school-related group. In such cases, the challenge may be to expand beyond this circle. The development of stable buying power is key to the life of any BC. There is ample evidence that the free opportunities available *via* social media can quickly isolate BCs in a bubble, hindering growth. If an organization expands at a different pace than a producer had envisioned, challenges may arise. In general, marketing is a critical aspect of community life: on the one hand, successfully managing this is very demanding, and on the other, values are crucial. As BCs typically seek to avoid the capitalist logic (see Section 5.5), marketing tools must be carefully chosen: a delicate balance must be struck between promotion and attitude formation. For this reason, personal contact and word of mouth are often used to attract new customers.

In many BCs, there is a strong emphasis on being present at local festivals and events, establishing positive relationships

with the local press, and launching a catering service. Establishing good relationships with various local institutions appears to be an essential element of both survival and expansion.

In the beginning, we often went to different authorities and asked questions—most of the time, they didn't understand what we were asking. Then there were inspections, and then they understood. And then, we developed a relatively good relationship with the Food Safety Authority.

5.4. Relations with farmers

A survey of BC farmers revealed that they have been supplying BCs for 4 years on average. Generally (~40%), farmers were contacted or invited to participate by community organizers or through previous acquaintance with the organizers (27%). Fewer business relationships were initiated by producers or at the invitation of a fellow producer (21 and 10%, respectively). New organizations often recruit farmers at nearby farmers' markets. Later, as an organizations become more established, the aim is to increase the assortment by directly inviting farmers to participate. Social media, the databases of organizations such as the Hungarian Chamber of Agriculture, NGOs, and nearby BCs are the most typical sources of contact information. It is also common for farmers to approach more mature BCs.

Interviews with BC organizers revealed that most BCs apply complex evaluation criteria when considering the involvement of a new farmer.

The quality of the product is of paramount importance. For us, this means minimal reliance on fertilizers and pesticides (none of our farmers are certified), ... and no use of additives in the case of processed products. We place emphasis on the content of food items, including the sources of ingredients.

Geographical aspects are also taken into account. The aim of providing a wide variety of products to allow customers to purchase all the essential household items they require through the BC often calls for compromise in terms of geographical distance. For example, many BCs do not apply a pre-defined geographical radius, but priority is awarded to farmers operating nearby, although others are stricter in this regard.

Farmers are highly respected partners. As one organizer explains,

Things should not be determined by profit, but let the producer be in the spotlight, the one who has really worked hard to ensure that the [product] reaches the people at the best possible quality.

According to another organizer,

Markets are deteriorating, and most of the time, it is no longer farmers who [directly] sell [see also Benedek et al., 2018]. That's why it's good to be here; you can show the producers in person.

BCs place importance on maintaining or improving the relationship between producers and consumers. New farmers are introduced on media platforms, and information about producers and production processes is available for all food items. Consumer feedback is constantly collected and organized; thus, farmers are informed about changes in demand. Recognizing the potential of community-building (i.e., that a sense of belonging to a community can strengthen the loyalty of both buyers and producers), several organizations are building awareness through organizing farm visits, harvest days, and other programs.

According to the survey results, several advantages are associated with BCs (Table 3).

For the BCs in the current sample, supply was driven primarily by non-financial interests, which aligns with previous findings (Benedek et al., 2020a). A majority of producers cited marketing benefits as the primary reason for supplying BCs—the fact that their products are accessible to a wider audience. The farmers emphasized that BCs are particularly good with online marketing and being present on social media, which is a weakness of many producers. Many producers liked that they could save time by not having to stand at a market stall all day. BCs are considered secure outlets by many producers. On the one hand, pre-ordering allows goods to be sold regardless of the weather, which always poses a risk in the case of markets; moreover, there are no unsold goods—a relevant factor in the case of perishable products. Producers reported that they liked and perceived BCs as communities. The participants believed that raising awareness is essential and that conscious consumers more highly value their products and the labor needed for their production. Moreover, they also felt a sense of belonging with other producers: many found it motivating to sell alongside others who produce authentic, high-quality goods. Additionally, they commented that dealing with organizers is more direct and personal than with the buyers at a market, allowing for the quicker identification of needs and smoother communication.

A more complex range of disadvantages was found for BCs, and clear-cut categories could not be identified. Several producers indicated that delivery times were lengthy (compared to at a wholesale outlet) and the assembly of individual orders was time-consuming and energy-intensive, with many opportunities for error. Some farmers indicated that they considered the sales commission paid by the producers to be large, and felt that the terms of some BCs were particularly unfair (e.g., if a price guarantee was required, meaning that they could not sell their products at a higher price than at a market). One solution would be to base the commission on profit rather than turnover (with the possibility of making a supporting contribution, allowing a producer to

TABLE 3 Benefits of BCs according to producers (N = 82).

Benefit	Proportion mentioned
Marketing	0.646
Risk sharing	0.5
Time saving	0.397
Monetary	0.171
Other	0.294

offer any amount). Some suppliers found it difficult to deliver to a regular or fixed delivery schedule. Some producers noted the low overall volume of sales as a disadvantage. Many farmers perceived that volunteers lacked capacity and were sometimes disorganized. Consumers occasionally failed to pick up their orders. To address this issue, many communities have various mechanisms, ranging from charging the association's budget to enforcing various sanctions. Sometimes, especially in young communities with a box system, the storage of goods between the points of receipt and sale is not adequately managed, resulting in conflict. An additional disadvantage of box schemes is that they do not allow for direct contact with the consumer. Some producers were dissatisfied that their products were not accompanied by an explanation with the same level of detail as if they were selling them personally. The issue of producers having to deliver even if only a few orders are received was raised by some producers. However, many communities have implemented order thresholds, which make cooperation more predictable and profitable for producers. Another difficulty affects producers of fresh products (e.g., bakery goods and dairy products)– when unexpectedly large orders of items are received, which results in a rush. One producer pointed out as a disadvantage that impulse buying does not increase turnover because products are preordered.

Table 4 presents descriptive statistics regarding satisfaction with BCs.

Overall, producers are satisfied with their cooperation with BCs, which is of great importance when scaling up is considered. Most producers either plan to continue supplying at a similar volume (30%) or expand soon (68%), indicating that even though their sales may be relatively minor, they take the opportunity seriously.

5.5. The potential of buying clubs for scaling up

Organizers with a long history of community activity agree that long-term operations must be self-sufficient in terms of everyday economic activities. External funding or a supportive environment provided by a network of contacts can be helpful at the start-up phase of a community. Nonetheless, external funding can quickly become a hindrance to operating because it obscures the real needs and potential of actors; i.e., it prevents organic growth. In addition to the need to cover the rent for a venue, organizations should at least secure the “employment” of organizers (the magnitude of the latter makes it more accurate to talk of fees) for a period of a few years, which can then be increased as the community grows. According to one expert:

TABLE 4 Satisfaction with BCs from the producer perspective.

Variable	N	Mean	SD	Min	Max
Satisfaction with BCs	77	4.62	0.81	2	5
Organizers are reliable	76	4.83	0.64	2	5
Processes are transparent	75	4.44	0.84	1	5
Shared goals	75	4.45	0.93	1	5

What I see is that in many communities, a lot of energy goes into the day-to-day running and organization, but less into strategic thinking. It's like, “if we have the time, we'll do it.” In this respect, it is the same pattern as in a small business... It is important to develop a core of organizers as fast as possible who can talk over strategic issues.

Barriers to scaling up include the burnout (and rapid turnover) of volunteers, the relatively high commission that farmers should pay, and, depending on the area, the lack of farmers who see the potential in participation, or can meet expectations (Balogh et al., 2022). In some instances, (especially in areas with weak purchasing power), the lack of dynamic community growth in the early stages of an initiative can be dangerous as it may cause the participating farmers to miss their targets and the community to fall apart before it has the chance to grow stronger. Networking may support the expansion of a movement and can contribute to the exploitation of economies of scale.

The number of consumers who believe that globalized consumer society is at a crisis point has increased due to recent wars, epidemics, and ecological crises, including climate catastrophe. One organizer summarizes their motivation as follows:

We are trying to do something. The “buying club” is a tool, a space to build the new economy.

Interviewees explain their expectations of an increase in consumer interest as being due to the intensification of these processes and believe that the role of BCs and their transformative impact will become increasingly critical. Such success is foreshadowed by the recent trend in Hungary for (formerly more expensive) local food to become competitive with that sold in conventional chains due to rising energy prices and a price cap on gasoline applied to private consumption (Sgaravatti et al., 2022). This relative decrease in prices is likely to accelerate the growth of the consumer base, although the pervasiveness of this trend remains a question.

This study has focused primarily on the organizers of BCs and, to a lesser extent, on producers. Consumers have only been partly addressed in conjunction with the other two stakeholder groups. One widespread criticism of AFNs is that their higher prices attract a relatively affluent audience (Martinez, 2010; Kneafsey et al., 2013; Balázs et al., 2016), despite attempts to highlight local products' excellent value for money. Although local production is not always organic, craft foods typically contain fewer additives than conventional products, a factor that is attractive to many consumers (Feldmann and Hamm, 2015). As a result of ongoing awareness-raising activities, the dominance of affluent shoppers is less apparent with BCs than in other modern AFNs. An organizer reports:

Many of our customers are low-income but conscious [environmentally and socially aware] intellectuals. They have small shopping baskets, but they always order.

The participation of disadvantaged and marginalized social groups in BCs is not typical, despite many organizations being

highly sensitive to issues of social inequality. For example, some groups collect food regularly or through campaigns to help needy families and organizations. Others maintain partnerships and participate in joint awareness-raising campaigns with other NGOs and social organizations. For example, several communities reported that they had organized fundraising activities to support refugees from Ukraine. The credibility and transparency of organizations are crucial to this type of community work.

Small-scale food systems, including BCs, can contribute to the transition to a post-growth world if their expansion occurs so long as their core values are sustained, and despite manageable risks related to conventionalization. Although BCs can be interpreted within the mainstream capitalist paradigm (which is relevant, since it applies to the development of connections among actors driven primarily by individualistic interests), their small scale and lack of growth imperative suggest their sustainability. What is “enough” for a small-scale farmer may be defined (e.g., the amount of land that can be cultivated in a day, how many animals a person can feed, etc.). Although most communities are still expanding, some have already reached their limits in terms of the number of customers they can comfortably serve. Additionally, although some communities are more permissive about their delivery-related footprint, farmers may personally define whether it is worth supplying the relatively small volumes of products (compared to other distribution channels). Thus, “enough” can be understood at the organizational level, too. Beyond being more independent of a pro-growth logic, BCs are also beneficial from a sustainability perspective since they tend to distribute rather than concentrate capital. As one participant of the facilitated roundtable discussion summarized:

The money goes into farmers' pockets, not those of multinational retail companies.

Additionally, even if AFNs do not necessarily boost the local economy (Benedek et al., 2020b), they certainly help to retain the population.

6. Conclusions

Based on participant observation, interviews, and a producer survey, this paper was written to improve understanding of the recent evolution and transformative potential of Hungarian local food-buying clubs (BCs). Rather than focusing directly on the various aspects of sustainability that are often difficult to quantify (Corsi et al., 2018), the functioning of BCs is addressed. By helping create a healthier, more resilient, and more inclusive food system, BCs are undoubtedly an alternative to conventional retail and its mass-produced, homogenous imports. These particular types of AFN represent an innovative way to look at the future of food. They advocate lifestyle change, food activism, experimentation, and sustainable food production.

Compared to other types of AFNs, the essence of BCs can be summarized as follows. First, they are more stable and predictable for farmers than standard markets because no surplus is created due to pre-ordering. Producers are exposed to greater risk than those associated with community-supported agriculture (CSA), wherein

consumers reserve capacity at the beginning of the season. Since CSAs are typically organized around a single farmer in Hungary (Balázs et al., 2016), BCs reach more producers; thus, the scaling-up effect is more pronounced. Additionally, markets and CSAs are associated with considerably greater sales volumes per farmer than BCs. Although not as much as with CSAs, BCs involve relatively close relationships between organizers and producers compared to other forms of AFN. Consumer cooperative models are not typical in Hungary, so there is no comparison to be made in this respect.

Social proximity, links between producers and consumers, and transparency are imperative in mediating trust and enhancing consumers' perceptions of food quality (Prigent-Simonin and Hérault-Fournier, 2005). While these processes help maintain authenticity (Wittman et al., 2012), BCs may reach a wide range of consumers, including less affluent ones and institutions. Through organized action and bargaining power, consumers can provide producers with valuable insights, such as how they would like food to be produced, processed, and packaged, which (given the large number of farmers who are involved) can facilitate faster change and more substantial transformation. The relationship works the other way around, too, by educating consumers about the importance of seasonality, food cultures, etc., which may result in dietary shifts.

The relatively small number of small-scale farmers who are willing or able to supply, and the fact that individual BCs play a minor role in the livelihoods of farmers prevents the emergence of power imbalances, the marginalization of farmers and thus conventionalization (Mount and Smither, 2014).

The efficiency of BCs might be attributed to the diverse ways communities contribute to reducing transaction costs (Paech et al., 2021). First, by including many farmers—farmers, who sell their own products, BCs can offer a wide variety of authentic food items; and by pooling the requests of many customers, they facilitate the provision of supply. Institutionalization enhances the cooperation of farmers in a context where collaboration is not typical (Bakucs et al., 2012). Compared to marketplaces, the application of strict and transparent evaluation criteria, and regular farm visits ensure that those who really produced the products come in contact with consumers (Benedek et al., 2018). The use of IT tools throughout the order and distribution process keeps transaction costs to a minimum (King et al., 2010). Finally, through a combination of awareness-raising and transparent communication, BCs mediate stakeholder trust. Considering the weak state of civil society and the low level of cooperation in Hungary, the importance of the work of BCs related to increasing community cohesion cannot be overstated.

Although the financial dependency of paid organizers risks forcing growth or growth at any cost, the presence of the value-based community and, more importantly, the well-defined geographical and capacity limits of individual BCs make this risk manageable. This ensures that core values can remain intact as communities grow and mature. The resulting transformative effect may be a result of the expansion of the movement or networking rather than the growth of individual BCs. This type of AFN may be particularly significant in the Hungarian context during sustainability transition.

Although BCs have a bright future, most such communities are still in their infancy, and are vulnerable due to the high proportion of volunteerism. Growing networks of BCs and annual meetings

could be valuable means of strengthening BCs in the immediate future. It remains to be seen if BCs can strengthen and fulfill their promising role. However, many current trends are encouraging the development of BCs as grassroots initiatives, including the climate crisis and the (sometimes greater) rise in the relative price of conventional products.

The contribution of this piece of work to the literature is twofold. First, the study attempts to fill a knowledge gap by describing the current state and prospects of a specific type of AFN in a region that has its own distinct development trajectory. Second, emphasis is placed on local food-buying clubs, about which there is limited knowledge compared to that about farmers' markets and community-supported agricultural schemes, in spite of the former's recent development and importance with respect to food security.

The research described in this paper is not without limitations. Most importantly, the author's involvement in complete participant observation may compromise its objectivity. In order to overcome this limitation and ensure rigor, additional research methods were employed. A further limitation is that the number of BCs is presently relatively small, and the majority of communities are young, so the generalizability of conclusions may be limited as the movement matures—suggesting an avenue for research. An additional interesting line of research would be an analysis of BCs from the perspectives of marginalized and vulnerable groups, both in terms of producers and consumers. Gaining a deeper understanding of the barriers faced by marginalized traditional small-scale farmers may help empower the latter to join BCs, and perhaps other distribution channels associated with AFNs. As for consumers, while the evidence suggests that less affluent customers are also involved in BCs compared to other forms of Hungarian AFN, the involvement of people with very low socioeconomic status appears less likely. This issue raises concerns about food democracy, although broadening the consumer (and producer) base would ensure scaling up. The related trends, opportunities and challenges call for further research.

Data availability statement

The original contributions presented in the study are included in the article/[Supplementary material](#), further inquiries can be directed to the corresponding author.

Ethics statement

The studies involving human participants were reviewed and approved by Ethical Committee of the Centre for Economic and Regional Studies (CERS), Hungary. Written informed consent for participation was not required for this study in accordance with

References

Albrecht, C., and Smithers, J. (2018). Reconnecting through local food initiatives? Purpose, practice and conceptions of 'value'. *Agric. Human Values* 35, 67–81. doi: 10.1007/s10460-017-9797-5

the national legislation and the institutional requirements. Written informed consent was not obtained from the individual(s) for the publication of any potentially identifiable images or data included in this article.

Author contributions

The author confirms being the sole contributor of this work and has approved it for publication.

Funding

ZB was supported by the Hungarian National Research, Development and Innovation Fund (grant nos. 143247 and 135387).

Acknowledgments

The opinions and data provided by interviewees and representatives of buying clubs are greatly appreciated. Thanks to Gusztáv Nemes, Éva Orbán, Ambrus Michels, Zsófia Smid, Borbála Hernádi, and Eszter Makó for their help with data collection. The language-related contribution of Simon Milton is gratefully acknowledged.

Conflict of interest

The author declares that the research was conducted in the absence of any commercial or financial relationships that could be construed as a potential conflict of interest.

Publisher's note

All claims expressed in this article are solely those of the authors and do not necessarily represent those of their affiliated organizations, or those of the publisher, the editors and the reviewers. Any product that may be evaluated in this article, or claim that may be made by its manufacturer, is not guaranteed or endorsed by the publisher.

Supplementary material

The Supplementary Material for this article can be found online at: <https://www.frontiersin.org/articles/10.3389/fsufs.2023.1124877/full#supplementary-material>

Bakacsi, G., Sándor, T., András, K., and Viktor, I. (2002). Eastern European cluster: tradition and transition. *J. World Bus.* 37, 69–80. doi: 10.1016/S1090-9516(01)00075-X

- Bakucs, Z., Ferto, I., and Szabó, G. (2012). Benefits of a marketing cooperative in transition agriculture: mórakert purchasing and service co-operative. *Soc. Econ.* 34, 453–468. doi: 10.1556/SocEc.34.2012.3.6
- Balázs, B., Pataki, G., and Lazányi, O. (2016). Prospects for the future: community supported agriculture in Hungary. *Futures* 83, 100–111. doi: 10.1016/j.futures.2016.03.005
- Balogh, P. G., Michels, A., Nemes, G., and Szegedyné Fricz, Á. (2022). The missing link - Dilemmas of connecting producers and consumers in short food supply chains [In Hungarian]. *Fordulat* 31, 109–147. Available online at: http://fordulat.net/pdf/29/Fordulat_29_Balogh_Michels_Nemes_Szegedyné.pdf
- Barbera, F., Dagnes, J., and Di Monaco, R. (2020). Participation for what? Organizational roles, quality conventions and purchasing behaviors in solidarity purchasing groups. *J. Rural Stud.* 73, 243–251. doi: 10.1016/j.jrurstud.2019.10.044
- Beckie, M., and Connelly, S. (2016). “The role of the social economy in scaling up alternative food initiatives,” in *Scaling Up: The Convergence of Social Economy and Sustainability*, eds M. Gismondi, S. Connelly, M. Beckie, S. Markey, and M. Roseland (Athabasca, AB: Athabasca University Press), 59–82.
- Benedek, Z., and Balázs, B. (2016). Current status and future prospect of local food production in Hungary: a spatial analysis. *Eur. Plan. Stud.* 24, 607–624. doi: 10.1080/09654313.2015.1096325
- Benedek, Z., Balogh, P. G., Baráth, L., Ferto, I., Lajos, V., Orbán, É., et al. (2020a). The kings of the corona crisis: the impact of the outbreak of Covid-19 on small-scale producers in Hungary. *EuroChoices* 19, 53–59. doi: 10.1111/1746-692X.12292
- Benedek, Z., Ferto, I., and Molnár, A. (2018). Off to market: but which one? Understanding the participation of small-scale farmers in short food supply chains—a Hungarian case study. *Agric. Human Values* 35, 383–398. doi: 10.1007/s10460-017-9834-4
- Benedek, Z., Ferto, I., and Szente, V. (2020b). The multiplier effects of food relocalization: a systematic review. *Sustainability* 12, 3524. doi: 10.3390/su12093524
- Bilewicz, A., and Spiewak, R. (2015). Enclaves of activism and taste: consumer cooperatives in Poland as alternative food networks. *Socio. hu* 2015, 145–166. doi: 10.18030/socio.hu.2015en.145
- Birtalan, I. L., Neulinger, Á., Rácz, J., and Bárdos, G. (2020). Community supported agriculture membership: the benefits of spousal involvement. *Int. J. Consum. Stud.* 44, 172–180. doi: 10.1111/ijcs.12555
- Blay-Palmer, A., Landman, K., Knezevic, I., and Hayhurst, R. (2013). Constructing resilient, transformative communities through sustainable “food hubs”. *Local Environ.* 18, 521–528. doi: 10.1080/13549839.2013.797156
- Bodnár, K., and Szabó, L. T. (2014). *The Effect of Emigration on the Hungarian Labour Market*. MNB Occasional Papers. Available online at: <https://www.mnb.hu/letoltes/mnb-tanulmany-eng-114-1126.pdf>
- Bogdan, R. C., and Biklen, S. K. (2007). *Qualitative Research for Education: An Introduction to Theories and Methods*, 5th ed. Boston, MA: Allyn and Bacon.
- Born, B., and Purcell, M. (2006). Avoiding the local trap: scale and food systems in planning research. *J. Plan. Educ. Res.* 26, 195–207. doi: 10.1177/0739456X06291389
- Brislen, L. (2018). Meeting in the middle: scaling-up and scaling-over in alternative food networks. *Cult. Agric. Food Environ.* 40, 105–113. doi: 10.1111/cuag.12176
- Brunori, G. (2007). Local food and alternative food networks: a communication perspective. *Anthropol. Food* (S2). doi: 10.4000/aof.430
- Brunori, G., Rossi, A., and Guidi, F. (2012). On the new social relations around and beyond food. Analysing consumers’ role and action in Gruppi di Acquisto Solidale (Solidarity Purchasing Groups). *Sociol. Ruralis* 52, 1–30. doi: 10.1111/j.1467-9523.2011.00552.x
- Byrne, D. (2022). A worked example of Braun and Clarke’s approach to reflexive thematic analysis. *Qual. Quant.* 56, 1391–1412. doi: 10.1007/s11135-021-01182-y
- Callon, M., Méadel, C., and Rabeharisoa, V. (2002). The economy of qualities. *Econ. Soc.* 31, 194–217. doi: 10.1080/03085140220123126
- Cembalo, L., Migliore, G., and Schifani, G. (2013). Sustainability and new models of consumption: the solidarity purchasing groups in Sicily. *J. Agric. Environ. Ethics* 26, 281–303. doi: 10.1007/s10806-011-9360-0
- Chiffolleau, Y., Millet-Amrani, S., Rossi, A., Rivera-Ferre, M. G., and Merino, P. L. (2019). The participatory construction of new economic models in short food supply chains. *J. Rural Stud.* 68, 182–190. doi: 10.1016/j.jrurstud.2019.01.019
- Connelly, S. (2010). *Scaling Up Local Food*. Available online at: <https://auspace.athabascau.ca/bitstream/handle/2149/2897/Connelly%20-%20Scaling%20Up%20Local%20Food.pdf?sequence=1&isAllowed=y>
- Corsi, A., Barbera, F., Dansero, E., Orlando, G., and Peano, C. (2018). “Multidisciplinary approaches to alternative food networks,” in *Alternative Food Networks*, eds A. Corsi, F. Barbera, E. Dansero, and C. Peano (New York, NY: Springer), 9–46. doi: 10.1007/978-3-319-90409-2_2
- Day-Farnsworth, L., McCown, B., Miller, M., and Pfeiffer, A. (2009). *Scaling Up: Meeting the Demand for Local Food*. Madison, WI: University of Wisconsin-Extension Ag Innovation Center and UW-Madison Center.
- De Bernardi, P., and Tirabeni, L. (2018). Alternative food networks: sustainable business models for anti-consumption food cultures. *Br. Food J.* 120, 1776–1791. doi: 10.1108/BFJ-12-2017-0731
- Deller, S., Hoyt, A., Hueth, B., and Sundaram-Stukel, R. (2009). Research on the economic impact of cooperatives. *Univ. Wisconsin Center Coop.* 231, 232–233. Available online at: <https://citeseerx.ist.psu.edu/document?repid=rep1&type=pdf&doi=ac5669b13c17f29ed7544c93bbfb94b7e73d31e0>
- Eriksen, S. N. (2013). Defining local food: constructing a new taxonomy—three domains of proximity. *Acta Agric. Scand. B Soil Plant Sci.* 63, 47–55. doi: 10.1080/09064710.2013.789123
- Fardkhales, S. A., and Lincoln, N. (2021). Food hubs play an essential role in the COVID-19 response in Hawai‘i. *J. Agric. Food Syst. Community Dev.* 10, 11–18. doi: 10.5304/jafscd.2021.102.036
- Feldmann, C., and Hamm, U. (2015). Consumers’ perceptions and preferences for local food: a review. *Food Qual. Prefer.* 40, 152–164. doi: 10.1016/j.foodqual.2014.09.014
- Fonte, M. (2013). Food consumption as social practice: solidarity purchasing groups in Rome, Italy. *J. Rural Stud.* 32, 230–239. doi: 10.1016/j.jrurstud.2013.07.003
- Forsell, S., and Lankoski, L. (2015). The sustainability promise of alternative food networks: an examination through “alternative” characteristics. *Agric. Human Values* 32, 63–75. doi: 10.1007/s10460-014-9516-4
- Fourat, E., Closson, C., Holzemer, L., and Hudon, M. (2020). Social inclusion in an alternative food network: values, practices and tensions. *J. Rural Stud.* 76, 49–57. doi: 10.1016/j.jrurstud.2020.03.009
- Goodman, D., DuPuis, E. M., and Goodman, M. K. (2012). *Alternative Food Networks: Knowledge, Practice, and Politics*. London: Routledge. doi: 10.4324/9780203804520
- Goszczyński, W., and Wróblewski, M. (2020). Beyond rural idyll? Social imaginaries, motivations and relations in Polish alternative food networks. *J. Rural Stud.* 76, 254–263. doi: 10.1016/j.jrurstud.2020.04.031
- Haldy, H.-M. (2004). *Organic Food Subscription Schemes in Germany, Denmark, The Netherlands and The United Kingdom. Definitions and Patterns of Development in an International Context*. Birmingham: ASTON BUSINESS SCHOOL.
- Harris, E. M. (2010). Eat local? Constructions of place in alternative food politics. *Geogr. Compass* 4, 355–369. doi: 10.1111/j.1749-8198.2009.00298.x
- Hungarian Central Statistical Office. (2021). *What characterised the Hungarian Economies? (Based on data from the 2020 Agricultural Census) - In Hungarian*. Available online at: <https://www.ksh.hu/ac2020db/2022/index.html>
- Hupper, A., Chakraborty, S., and Waring, T. M. (2019). Using cooperation science to strengthen maine’s local food economy. *Maine Policy Rev.* 28, 23–33. doi: 10.53558/GOXY7199
- Itri, J. N., Bruno, M. A., Lalwani, N., Munden, R. F., and Tappouni, R. (2019). The incentive dilemma: intrinsic motivation and workplace performance. *J. Am. Coll. Radiol.* 16, 39–44. doi: 10.1016/j.jacr.2018.09.008
- Jarosz, L. (2008). The city in the country: growing alternative food networks in Metropolitan areas. *J. Rural Stud.* 24, 231–244. doi: 10.1016/j.jrurstud.2007.10.002
- Jehlička, P., Ančíč, B., Daněk, P., and Domazet, M. (2021). Beyond hardship and joy: framing home gardening on insights from the European semi-periphery. *Geoforum* 126, 150–158. doi: 10.1016/j.geoforum.2021.05.018
- Jehlička, P., Grivínš, M., Visser, O., and Balázs, B. (2020). Thinking food like an East European: a critical reflection on the framing of food systems. *J. Rural Stud.* 76, 286–295. doi: 10.1016/j.jrurstud.2020.04.015
- Kápolnai, Z., and Molnár, M. (2020). A bevásárló közösség fogalmi megközelítése Magyarországon= Definitions of the Shopping Community in Hungary. *Stud. Mundi-Econ.* 7, 26–36. doi: 10.18531/Studia.Mundi.2020.07.01.26-36
- Katchova, A. L., and Woods, T. A. (2013). “Local foods and food cooperatives: ethics, economics and competition issues,” in *Ethics and Economics of Agrifood Competition*, ed H. James (New York, NY: Springer), 227–242. doi: 10.1007/978-94-007-6274-9_12
- King, R. P., Gómez, M. I., and DiGiacomo, G. (2010). Can local food go mainstream? *Choices* 25. doi: 10.22004/ag.econ.93824
- Kis, B. (2014). Community-supported agriculture from the perspective of health and leisure. *Ann. Leis. Res.* 17, 281–295. doi: 10.1080/11745398.2014.941885
- Kneafsey, M., Venn, L., Schmutz, U., Balázs, B., Trenchard, L., Eyden-Wood, T., et al. (2013). Short food supply chains and local food systems in the EU. A state of play of their socio-economic characteristics. *JRC Sci. Policy Rep.* 123, 129. doi: 10.2791/88784
- Kondo, K. (2015). The alternative food movement in Japan: challenges, limits, and resilience of the teikei system. *Agric. Human Values* 32, 143–153. doi: 10.1007/s10460-014-9539-x
- Kopczyńska, E. (2017). Economies of acquaintances: social relations during shopping at food markets and in consumers’ food cooperatives. *East Eur. Polit. Soc.* 31, 637–658. doi: 10.1177/0888325417710079

- Kopczyńska, E. (2020). Are there local versions of sustainability? Food networks in the semi-periphery. *Sustainability* 12, 2845. doi: 10.3390/su12072845
- Kummer, S., and Milestad, R. (2020). The diversity of organic box schemes in Europe—an exploratory study in four countries. *Sustainability* 12, 2734. doi: 10.3390/su12072734
- Lagane, J. (2015). When students run AMAPs: towards a French model of CSA. *Agric. Human Values* 32, 133–141. doi: 10.1007/s10460-014-9534-2
- Lamine, C., Garçon, L., and Brunori, G. (2019). Territorial agrifood systems: a Franco-Italian contribution to the debates over alternative food networks in rural areas. *J. Rural Stud.* 68, 159–170. doi: 10.1016/j.jrurstud.2018.11.007
- Marsden, T., Banks, J., and Bristow, G. (2000). Food supply chain approaches: exploring their role in rural development. *Sociol. Ruralis* 40, 424–438. doi: 10.1111/1467-9523.00158
- Martinez, S. (2010). *Local Food Systems: Concepts, Impacts, and Issues*. Collingdale, PA: Diane Publishing.
- Maye, D., and Kirwan, J. (2010). *Alternative Food Networks*. Sociopedia. isa.
- Meixner, O., Quehl, H. E., Pöchtrager, S., and Haas, R. (2022). Being a farmer in Austria during COVID-19—a qualitative study on challenges and opportunities. *Agronomy* 12, 1240. doi: 10.3390/agronomy12051240
- Michel-Villarreal, R., Hingley, M., Canavari, M., and Bregoli, I. (2019). Sustainability in alternative food networks: a systematic literature review. *Sustainability* 11, 859. doi: 10.3390/su11030859
- Michel-Villarreal, R., Vilalta-Perdomo, E., and Hingley, M. (2018). “The value of public data for assessing sustainability: the case of Mexican entrepreneurs and the rural census,” in *Sustainable Entrepreneurship* eds A. Lindgreen, C. Vallaster, F. Maon, S. Yousafzai, and B. P. Florencio (London: Routledge), 330–347. doi: 10.4324/9781315611495-19
- Migliore, G., Schifani, G., Romeo, P., Hashem, S., and Cembalo, L. (2015). Are farmers in alternative food networks social entrepreneurs? Evidence from a behavioral approach. *J. Agric. Environ. Ethics* 28, 885–902. doi: 10.1007/s10806-015-9562-y
- Milestad, R., Kummer, S., and Hirner, P. (2017). Does scale matter? Investigating the growth of a local organic box scheme in Austria. *J. Rural Stud.* 54, 304–313. doi: 10.1016/j.jrurstud.2017.06.013
- Möllers, J., Bäuml, T., and Dufhues, T. (2022). Understanding the market potential of products from alternative food networks in a transition economy—a discrete choice experiment. *Br. Food J.* 124, 183–199. doi: 10.1108/BJF-08-2021-0925
- Morley, A. S., Morgan, S. L., and Morgan, K. J. (2008). *Food hubs: The 'Missing Middle' of the Local Food Infrastructure?* Available online at: <https://orca.cardiff.ac.uk/id/eprint/20508/>
- Mount, P., and Smither, J. (2014). The conventionalization of local food: farm reflections on local, alternative beef marketing groups. *J. Agric. Food Syst. Community Dev.* 4, 101–119. doi: 10.5304/jafscd.2014.043.002
- Nemes, G., Benedek, Z., Lajos, V., Orbán, É., and Balogh, P. G. (Eds) (2020). *Local Food in the Times of Corona: The Results of the Covid-19 Pandemics on Local Food Systems*. (In Hungarian). Berlin: Replika.
- Nemes, G., Chiffolleau, Y., Zollet, S., Collison, M., Benedek, Z., Colantuono, F., et al. (2021). The impact of COVID-19 on alternative and local food systems and the potential for the sustainability transition: insights from 13 countries. *Sustain. Prod. Consum.* 28, 591–599. doi: 10.1016/j.spc.2021.06.022
- Nemes, G., Reckinger, R., Lajos, V., and Zollet, S. (2023). *Values-based Territorial Food Networks—Benefits, Challenges and Controversies*. Hoboken, NJ: Wiley Online Library. doi: 10.1111/soru.12419
- Neulinger, A., Bársony, F., Gjorevska, N., Lazányi, O., Pataki, G., Takács, S., et al. (2020). Engagement and subjective well-being in alternative food networks: the case of Hungary. *Int. J. Consum. Stud.* 44, 306–315. doi: 10.1111/ijcs.12566
- Nousiainen, M., Pylkkänen, P., Saunders, F., Seppänen, L., and Vesala, K. M. (2009). Are alternative food systems socially sustainable? A case study from Finland. *J. Sustain. Agric.* 33, 566–594. doi: 10.1080/10440040902997819
- Paech, N., Sperling, C., and Rommel, M. (2021). “Cost effects of local food enterprises: supply chains, transaction costs and social diffusion,” in *Food System Transformations*, eds C. Kropp, I. Antoni-Komar, and C. Sage (New York, NY: Taylor and Francis), 119–138. doi: 10.4324/9781003131304-9
- Pascucci, S., Dentoni, D., Lombardi, A., and Cembalo, L. (2016). Sharing values or sharing costs? Understanding consumer participation in alternative food networks. *NJAS-Wagen. J. Life Sci.* 78, 47–60. doi: 10.1016/j.njas.2016.03.006
- Pearson, D., Henryks, J., Trott, A., Jones, P., Parker, G., Dumaresq, D., et al. (2011). Local food: understanding consumer motivations in innovative retail formats. *Br. Food J.* 113, 886–899. doi: 10.1108/00070701111148414
- Pereira, L. M., Drimie, S., Maciejewski, K., Tonissen, P. B., and Biggs, R. (2020). Food system transformation: integrating a political-economy and social-ecological approach to regime shifts. *Int. J. Environ. Res. Public Health* 17, 1313. doi: 10.3390/ijerph17041313
- Perényi, Z. (2009). Erika Kármán: a portrait [In Hungarian]. *Tudatos Vásárló* 6, 54–55. Available online at: https://tudatosvasarlo.hu/wp-content/uploads/tv16_penzugy_vegso.pdf
- Pinto-Correia, T., Rivera, M., Guarín, A., Grivins, M., Tisenkopfs, T., and Hernández, P. A. (2021). Unseen food: the importance of extra-market small farm's production for rural households in Europe. *Glob. Food Sec.* 30, 100563. doi: 10.1016/j.gfs.2021.100563
- Prigent-Simonin, A.-H., and Hérault-Fournier, C. (2005). The role of trust in the perception of the quality of local food products: with particular reference to direct relationships between producer and consumer. *Anthropol. Food*. doi: 10.4000/aof.204
- Renting, H., Marsden, T. K., and Banks, J. (2003). Understanding alternative food networks: exploring the role of short food supply chains in rural development. *Environ. Plan. A* 35, 393–411. doi: 10.1068/a3510
- Sarabia, N., Peris, J., and Segura, S. (2021). Transition to agri-food sustainability, assessing accelerators and triggers for transformation: case study in Valencia, Spain. *J. Clean. Prod.* 325:12. doi: 10.1016/j.jclepro.2021.129228
- Savarese, M., Chamberlain, K., and Graffigna, G. (2020). Co-creating value in sustainable and alternative food networks: the case of community supported agriculture in New Zealand. *Sustainability* 12, 1252. doi: 10.3390/su12031252
- Seyfang, G. (2006). Ecological citizenship and sustainable consumption: examining local organic food networks. *J. Rural Stud.* 22, 383–395. doi: 10.1016/j.jrurstud.2006.01.003
- Sgaravatti, G., Tagliapietra, S., and Zachmann, G. (2022). *National Policies to Shield Consumers from Rising Energy Prices*. Bruegel Datasets. Available online at: https://fondazioneccerm.it/wp-content/uploads/2022/06/National-policies-to-shield-consumers-from-rising-energy-prices-_Bruegel.pdf
- Skinner, B. F. (1978). *Reflections on Behaviorism and Society*. Hoboken, NJ: Prentice Hall.
- Smith, J., and Jehlička, P. (2013). Quiet sustainability: fertile lessons from Europe's productive gardeners. *J. Rural Stud.* 32, 148–157. doi: 10.1016/j.jrurstud.2013.05.002
- Svensson, S., Balogh, P., and Cartwright, A. (2019). Unexpected counter-movements to nationalism: the hidden potential of local food communities. *East. Eur. Countrys.* 25, 37–61. Available online at: https://cadmus.eui.eu/bitstream/handle/1814/65905/Unexpected_counter_movements.pdf?sequence=1&isAllowed=y
- Szabó, D. (2017). Determining the target groups of Hungarian short food supply chains based on consumer attitude and socio-demographic factors. *Stud. Agric. Econ.* 119, 115–122. doi: 10.7896/j.1705
- Szabó, I., Lehota, J., and Magda, R. (2019). Purchase of fresh fruits and vegetables through box schemes in Hungary—opportunities and hindering factors on the way to sustainability. *Visegrad J. Bioeconomy Sustain. Dev.* 8, 37–41. doi: 10.2478/vjbsd-2019-0007
- Thomas, D. R. (2006). A general inductive approach for analyzing qualitative evaluation data. *Am. J. Eval.* 27, 237–246. doi: 10.1177/1098214005283748
- Thorsøe, M., and Kjeldsen, C. (2016). The constitution of trust: function, configuration and generation of trust in alternative food networks. *Sociol. Ruralis* 56, 157–175. doi: 10.1111/soru.12082
- Tregear, A. (2011). Progressing knowledge in alternative and local food networks: critical reflections and a research agenda. *J. Rural Stud.* 27, 419–430. doi: 10.1016/j.jrurstud.2011.06.003
- UN General Assembly (2015). “*Transforming Our World: The 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development (No. A/RES/70/1)*”. Available online at: <https://sustainabledevelopment.un.org/content/documents/21252030%20Agenda%20for%20Sustainable%20Development%20web.pdf>
- Vávra, J., Smutná, Z., and Hruška, V. (2021). Why i would want to live in the village if i was not interested in cultivating the plot? A study of home gardening in rural Czechia. *Sustainability* 13, 706. doi: 10.3390/su13020706
- Wheeler, A., Dykstra, P., Black, J., and Soares, N. (2020). *COVID-19: UK Veg Box Report*. London: Food Foundation.
- Wittman, H., Beckie, M., and Hergesheimer, C. (2012). Linking local food systems and the social economy? Future roles for farmers' markets in Alberta and British Columbia. *Rural Sociol.* 77, 36–61. doi: 10.1111/j.1549-0831.2011.0068.x