Social Innovation for Sustainability and the Common Good in Ecosystems of the Fourth Sector: The Case of Distribution Through Alternative Food Networks in Valencia (Spain)

Sergio Belda-Miquel, Eugenia Ruiz-Molina, and Irene Gil-Saura

Abstract There is increasing attention regarding the contribution of alternative food networks (AFN) for creating more sustainable communities. AFN are initiatives, which try to relocalize and democratize food systems, promoting local and organic agriculture, and reducing the distance between producers and consumers. They take different forms from cooperatives and farmers' markets to on-line platforms, veg boxes and social enterprises. They propose socially innovative schemes and models for food distribution, which combine an orientation towards public and common good with economic self-sufficiency. In this sense, these initiatives frequently take the form of fourth sector or hybrid organizations.

The chapter tries to address the diversity and complexity of these initiatives. For this aim, it goes beyond the usual focus on one kind on AFN initiatives and tries to explore how *ecosystems* of AFN work. From this standpoint, it proposes an original framework based on concepts from the literature on the fourth sector and on social innovation. The framework is used to explore the ecosystem of AFN fourth sector initiatives in the city of Valencia (Spain). The study explores six different types of initiatives by using a purely qualitative strategy, which combines nine interviews with members of initiatives, with experts and with local policymakers; participatory observation; and documentary analysis. Results show that initiatives share common features but also a diversity of strategies and approaches, which may be complementary. It also illustrates the key importance of some contextual elements that both limit (e.g. regulations) and enhance (e.g. networking) these ecosystems. They also

S. Belda-Miquel (✉)
Departamento de Trabajo Social y Servicios Sociales, Facultad de Ciencias Sociales, Universitat de València, València, Spain
e-mail: sergio.belda@uv.es

E. Ruiz-Molina · I. Gil-Saura
Departamento de Comercialización e Investigación de Mercados, Facultad de Economia, Universitat de València, València, Spain
e-mail: m.eugenia.ruiz@uv.es; irene.gil@uv.es

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face questions and contradictions regarding issues as their limits to growth or the class bias of members.

Keywords Fourth sector · Sustainable consumption · Alternative food networks · Social innovation

1 Introduction: Fourth Sector and Social Innovation

The fourth sector has gained increasing importance in recent years, in both academic and practical debates. It has been considered as an emerging space in which organizations and initiatives may be experimenting with and developing new models for addressing pressing social challenges (Archer 2011). This kind of new schemes may adequately address problems of social justice and of environmental sustainability from innovative alternative perspectives.

The fourth sector can be defined as the group of organizations, models and practices that are crossing traditional sector boundaries. They combine elements from the private sector (for-profit or business sector), public sector (government) and third sector (civil society or social sector) in order to create new schemes, relations and models, as well as innovative activities to meet economic, social and environmental needs (Escobar and Gutiérrez 2011). Academics have recognized (McNeill and Line 2015) how these organizations, models and practices have the potential of developing progressive alternatives for producing transformative change towards more socially just, and economic and environmental sustainable societies. These organizations are committed to their own economic survival, but their key focus is the generation of benefits for society and for the planet (Rubio-Mozos et al. 2019). That is, fourth sector initiatives are essentially committed to the common good.

The emergence of this new sector has evidenced different trends in the last two decades (Fourth Sector Network 2009). On the one hand, organizations from the three sectors have converged towards a new landscape: in the private sector of for-profit companies, some initiatives have moved to new missions focused on the public good—for example, the emergence of initiatives in existing enterprises focused on the integration of certain social groups. In the third sector or not-for-profit civil society sector, some organizations are trying to move towards economic self-sufficiency—for example, some NGO and non-profit organizations now providing services in order to be economically independent of governments but keeping the focus on their societal goals. In the public sector, some government organizations are also moving towards new models of social and economic sustainability—for example, the new wave of public entities for managing public goods, from energy and water to environmental protected spaces. On the other hand, there are other organizations and schemes, which are fully new and which present new models that blend attributes and strategies from different sectors, and which have transcended the usual sectorial boundaries from its birth and which resist the classification within the traditional three sectors—for example, the new generation of cooperatives or social

enterprises focused in community and local development (Fourth Sector Network 2009). All these organizations and models, some coming from the converging evolution of other sectors and some which are fully new, can be considered part of the fourth sector. As will be illustrated, they can present very different forms, from social enterprises and cooperatives to economically self-sufficient social organizations and community projects. In any case, they all share their primary focus in the public good and the fact that their economic self-sufficiency is based on earnings through some kind of commercial activity, usually outside mainstream channels.

The concept of the fourth sector has been developed and explored in connection with the idea of social innovation. For Escobar and Gutiérrez (2011: 33), fourth sector organizations and models are 'being called upon to lead the new processes of social innovation'. A number of authors from the literature of social innovation also consider that a lot of innovative solutions are now produced 'in the fourth sector [...], in the cut across the boundaries that traditionally separated the not-for-profit, public, and business sectors' (Edwards-Schachter et al. 2012: 677). This includes 'a lot of entities emerging from the social economy, such as integration enterprises, foundations, or cooperatives' (Escobar and Gutiérrez 2011: 35).

Fourth sector organizations combine social innovative practices with social innovative models, reinforcing both aspects: 'They give rise to original hybrid organizational models that are themselves a social innovation. This new organizational architecture (in terms of objectives, structure, processes and organizational culture) makes them especially suitable to offer creative and innovative solutions for social problems' (Escobar and Gutiérrez 2011:44). Regarding their practices and strategies, literature mentions the orientation to the community and the participatory and collaborative approach of the fourth sector (Escobar and Gutiérrez 2011; Edwards-Schachter et al. 2012).

It can be said that interest in the fourth sector has raised partially thanks to the enormous importance that social innovation has received at least in the last years. Fourth sector debates can in fact provide new insights to explore, understand and promote social innovations based on alternative models promoted by hybrid organizations. Of particular relevance is the interest that fourth sector debates can have in order to understand grassroots social innovations. These particular kinds of social innovations have been defined as networks of activists generating novel bottom-up solutions for sustainable development, which present very diverse and frequently hybrid forms of organizations, from cooperatives and associations to informal neighbourhood and community groups (Seyfang and Smith 2007). They are created on the basis of citizen participation and draw on local aspirations, needs and visions (Hossain 2016).

Literature has widely explored how grassroots innovations are building alternative and hybrid models of production, distribution and consumption in very different sectors (e.g. energy, mobility, social care or financial services) and in very different territories (Hossain 2016). These initiatives are dynamic and very diverse: they share common key features and similar visions but they develop different strategies and practices. Moreover, they interact among them and configure dynamic ecosystems of

innovation, which are in permanent evolution and in which resources, people, ideas and actions are shared.

The literature on the fourth sector has explored different aspects of this kind of innovations: e.g. definitions and typologies of organizations and models (Escobar and Gutiérrez 2011; Haigh and Hoffman 2012; Costa Pires 2017); the overall potential, opportunities and challenges that these organizations and models face (Rubio-Mozos et al. 2019; McNeill and Line 2015; Escobar and Gutiérrez 2011); or their impact regarding well-being (Edwards-Schachter et al. 2012).

However, there is still the need for more theoretical and empirical work to address the diversity of cases and how they interact between them. That is, there is a gap in the research on the dynamics that occur within ecosystems of practices of the fourth sector. There is a need to go beyond overall reflections and individual cases in order to understand how ecosystems of fourth sector practices are working and how they can be promoted.

The overall aim of this chapter is to contribute to filling this gap. For this reason, it proposes a theoretical framework and explores a particular ecosystem of fourth sector organizations. This should provide us with reflections and recommendations for organizations and policymakers.

The chapter proposes an original framework connecting ideas from the debates on the fourth sector with ideas frequently used in the literature of grassroots innovation. Assuming this framework, it explores empirical cases in the sector of food, which is of particular importance for social, economic and environmental sustainability. A particular kind of practice will be explored: Alternative Food Networks (AFN). They have, as the fourth sector and social innovation initiatives more in general, received increasing attention for its potential for creating more sustainable, resilient and socially inclusive communities, cities and regions. These initiatives aim at managing food systems in an alternative and more sustainable way. AFN can take very different forms, as the big diversity of existing initiatives suggest, from farmers' markets and urban agriculture to food cooperatives, online food communities and community-supported agriculture (Michel-Villarreal et al. 2019).

AFN initiatives frequently present the form of fourth sector organizations: their primary focus is social well-being and sustainability, but they depend on benefits in order to guarantee their self-sufficiency and economic sustainability. They combine approaches and practices from public, private and third sectors, and they assume various organizational models, which can be found in the fourth sector: social enterprises, cooperatives, community organizations, online platforms etc. (Fourth Sector Network 2009; Escobar and Gutiérrez 2011). These initiatives also present relevant differences in their strategies, practices and impacts, as it happens in the fourth sector and social innovation initiatives more in general (Seyfang and Smith 2007).

Despite its diversity, initiatives of AFN share common features: citizen engagement plays a key role in them, as the motivation of customers to build more sustainable food systems are in the origins of these initiatives; they operate at the margins of mainstream industrial food production; they share a deep commitment to sustainability; and they try to re-localize and democratize food systems, promoting

local and organic agriculture and reducing the distance between producers and consumers. Broadly speaking, they all create new forms of market governance and explore new ways to coordinate production, distribution and purchasing, redistributing power in the food network and sharing economic risks. By doing so, they build social embeddedness and stronger relationships between stakeholders (Forssell and Lankoski 2015).

These initiatives do not work alone but interact among them and configure dynamic ecosystems of innovation, which are in permanent evolution and in which resources, people, ideas and actions are shared. Academic literature has widely explored initiatives of AFN of different nature and in different territories. Nevertheless, most academic production in this regard focuses on one type of AFN. In fact, recent contributions highlight that empirical works with a more holistic perspective, and addressing several alternatives are still very scarce (Michel-Villarreal et al. 2019). That is, there is a lack of research focusing on ecosystems and not just on particular initiatives. As it happens with other fourth sector and social innovation initiatives, there is a need for theoretical and empirical work to address the complex dynamics of interaction and change that occur within ecosystems of innovation.

The chapter explores the ecosystem of AFN initiatives of the fourth sector in the city of Valencia (Spain) and its metropolitan area. This is a relevant place for the aim of our study, for several reasons: the city has a very rich agricultural area in its metropolitan space, which is of high environmental, social and economic importance; it has experienced the growth of a number of bottom-up initiatives of the fourth sector regarding food networks in the last decade, which have achieved a certain level of maturity; these initiatives are diverse in the governance schemes they propose; local policies have been paying attention to these initiatives and tried to create a supportive environment. The study will try to cover the diversity of cases addressing different types of fourth sector organizations and practices in AFN: cooperative supermarkets; farmers' markets; online food-communities; veg box schemes and local organic shops.

The general objective of our chapter—contributing to the discussion on the dynamics ecosystems of fourth sector organizations—will be developed by addressing two specific objectives: First, the chapter proposes a framework from which to explore ecosystems of fourth sector practices. Second, it explores the empirical case of organizations and models of AFN in Valencia, so relevant reflections for understanding and creating supporting ecosystems for fourth sector organizations can be obtained.

The chapter is structured as follows: next section proposes the conceptual elements to be used. In sect. 3, the methods used for addressing the case study are presented. The initiatives subject of study will be described in sect. 4 and analysed in sect. 5 using the proposed framework. Section 6 presents some final reflections.

2 Concepts and Framework: Addressing Cases of AFN Initiatives of the Fourth Sector

For the elaboration of the framework, elements from the literature are combined in order to build a heuristic but comprehensive frame. The frame draws first on the proposal of Haigh and Hoffman (2012), who depict a three-dimensional model that includes the key elements to understand the *activities* driving fourth sector organizations. Second, and in order to put these elements in a broader picture, ideas of Fourth Sector Network (2009), who identify the key elements that can support or limit the development of ecosystems, are considered. By combining these elements, a framework to understand the actions of organizations in an ecosystem in a given context is proposed. For each of these elements, the chapter also identifies some possible aspects to be considered in our specific analysis of AFN by drawing in the specific literature (Forssell and Lankoski 2015; Michel-Villarreal et al. 2019).

Regarding the elements to understand the activity of hybrid or fourth sector organizations, Haigh and Hoffman (2012) identified three key elements. Firstly, fourth sector organizations have social and environmental change as organizational objective. Hybrid organizations aim at supplying quality goods that are in demand, but they have a 'socially and environmentally embedded mission' (Haigh and Hoffman 2012: 218). These initiatives try to be economically sustainable and self-sufficient, but this is considered as a means in order to achieve broader environmental, social and economic impacts—which are their real final aims. This mission implies working with 'longer time horizons for more autonomous development' (Haigh and Hoffman 2012: 218). That is, fourth sector initiatives often renounce scaling up and quick developments. On the contrary, they frequently focus on slower, stable and self-limited growth. This is more consistent with their ideas on sustainable development and with a strategy of being autonomous from other stakeholders than a traditional business. For Haigh and Hoffman (2012), these objectives and ways of operation imply that these organizations usually are referents in their sectors in terms of ethical and participatory management and operation.

This aspect, which characterizes four sector organizations in general, is also present in practices of AFN initiatives in particular. Regarding the embeddedness of their mission and the positive impacts pursued, Forssell and Lankoski (2015) mention that, in environmental terms, AFN focus on organic, environmentally benign and territorially embedded products, produced in a small-scale, trying also to minimize 'food miles' (i.e. the distance a product is travelling from its production to its consumption). In social terms, these networks support small producers' livelihoods; provide a source of healthy and accessible food for consumers; increases consumer awareness of food production; preserves cultural diversity; strengthens food security and resilience and supports community life. In economic terms, AFN support local economics and local resilience (Forssell and Lankoski 2015). As fourth sector organizations, their scale is usually reduced—they are connected only to local systems (Michel-Villarreal et al. 2019). Moreover, they act as a referent inspiring

practices and changes in mainstream food production, distribution and consumption schemes.

Secondly, in the fourth sector, organisations 'relationships with suppliers and customers are based on mutual benefit and sustainability outcomes'. Costs are considered but only after social and environmental outcomes are met. For Haigh and Hoffman (2012: 128) 'these relationships are based on trust, positive regard, compassion and vitality, which have been shown as foundational to organizational resilience, learning, and innovation'. These values are present in relations with different stakeholders, from workers and members of the initiatives to clients, suppliers, other organizations and the broader public. These principles of fourth sector organizations when building relationships are present in AFN. Forssell and Lankoski (2015) underline the focus of AFN in the creation of strong, consistent and trust relationships between stakeholders. Particularly, AFN practices support food producers, allowing them to capture more value, giving more negotiation power and sharing their risks. For consumers, the relation is focused on their awareness and empowerment through consumption.

Thirdly, hybrid organizations are characterized by their interactions with markets, the industry and institutions. Even if they want to conserve their autonomy, 'they seek to diffuse acceptance of their business model throughout the institutions and markets in which they operate' (Haigh and Hoffman 2012: 128). They challenge the rules of the game of the industries they operate and try to introduce different and more sustainable and empowering models and schemes of managerial and marketing operations. In the case of AFN, the literature assumes that, although these networks are a form of resistance to conventional food networks, the boundary between the two is far from clear (Forssell and Lankoski 2015). AFN may be purchasing recognition and visibility in the broader public, sometimes using and trying to transform conventional systems. Different alternative networks may include alternative or conventional characteristics in different combinations, as conventional food networks can exhibit some 'alternative' characteristics (Forssell and Lankoski 2015).

As mentioned earlier, the literature lacks a theoretical framework from which to approach the fourth sector from the perspective of ecosystems. However, Fourth Sector Network (2009) provides an identification of key elements in ecosystems that drive the development of fourth sector initiatives. They refer to the relations, instruments, institutions and understandings that are required to face the powerful structural impediments that fourth sector organizations face (Fourth Sector Network 2009) and that can accelerate the growth and development of initiatives. Some of these key elements which may be relevant for the aims of our study are as follows.

Firstly, the *connections*. For Fourth Sector Network (2009), networking structures, affinity groups, and spaces and moments of meeting between initiatives and organizations are of key importance in order to create a supportive environment, as they generate knowledge exchange, connection and mutual support.

Secondly, the *representation*. Beyond networking and connections between initiatives, supporting ecosystems need representation and visibility in the public arena in order to consolidate.

Thirdly, the importance of *regulation*. Many fourth sector organizations are structured as hybrid organisations, and most are between the non-profit and the for-profit approach. This creates difficulties regarding legal procedures and legal recognition, as well as the need for regulatory changes in order to build supportive environments that recognize the unique peculiarities of the fourth sector.

Fourthly, the specific relevance of *certification*. There is a need for adapted certification procedures for fourth sector practices. These have to be connected with the particular values, processes and schemes of these initiatives. Fourth sector organizations need to evidence their social contribution, but they can also contribute to the common good through the creation of alternative and more empowering processes of certification.

Fifthly, the issue of *communication*. As fourth sector organizations, models and practices are still in the periphery of the public awareness and debates, the development of communication and of public relations becomes crucial. In this regard, the existence of greenwashing initiatives and the illegitimate use of some terms and discourses by part of for-profit dominant organizations and practices are particularly problematic for fourth sector organizations, which find consumers confused.

Sixthly, *technical support*. Fourth sector organizations still need legal, accounting, strategy, marketing, technology and other kinds of technical support. This support can be provided by organisations of other sectors and by other fourth sector organizations. In any case, it has to be adapted to their particular realities and to the unique requirements of hybrid organizations.

All these aspects, which are crucial for the development of fourth sector ecosystems, have also been identified as very relevant in the discussions on AFN. This is the case of connections and relations, as the literature highlights how these are crucial in AFN in order to transform power imbalances in food systems (Goodman et al. 2012). Authors also frequently underline the importance of public policies and of new regulations in order to develop and eventually scale alternative food schemes (Mount 2012). Literature also mentions the need for alternative food certification schemes, which have to be more participatory and territorially embedded in order to be coherent, alternative and empowering (Higgins et al. 2008). Finally, academics also recognize the need of providing specialized training, education, information, research and technical support to AFN initiatives to make them flourish (Beckie et al. 2012).

By combining all the aforementioned concepts, it is possible to propose a heuristic theoretical framework from which to explore ecosystems of fourth sector organizations in AFN. As seen in Fig. 1, the framework connects elements that characterize fourth sector organizations and elements that characterize the context. Like this, it is possible to understand differences, similarities and trends in the different initiatives, as well as contextual aspects that shape the development of these initiatives.

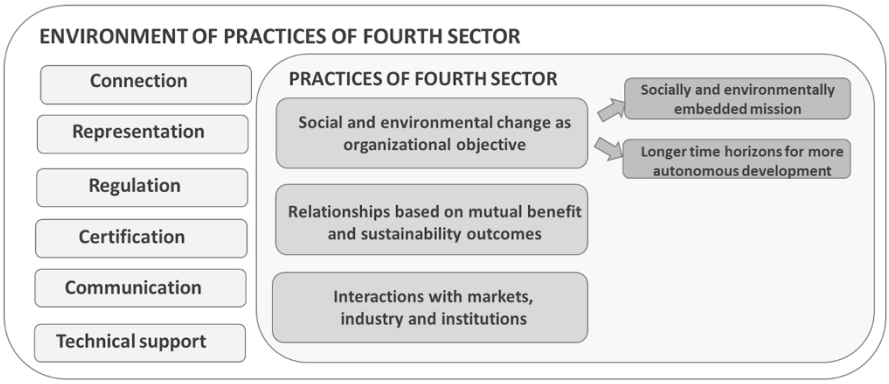

Fig. 1 Framework for addressing ecosystems of practices of the fourth sector. Source: Authors' elaboration

3 Methods

The empirical work is based on the analysis of case studies. To this end, a purposive selection has been made of cases that were accessible by researchers and which met two relevant criteria for the research. First, the cases had to be illustrative (not necessarily representative) of the diversity of initiatives of AFN: an initiative of a veg box scheme, a farmers' market, a supermarket cooperative, a food community based on an online platform and a local organic food shop.

Second, the cases had to present common key features but also key differences that make the joint study relevant to the aims of our research. On the one hand, the cases present key common characteristics, which enable the comparison: they operate in the sector food in the city of Valencia and its metropolitan area, where a number of socially innovative initiatives of AFN have been developed in the last two decades; all cases have achieved a certain level of consolidation (they have existed for at least 4 years); they all present key characteristics of fourth sector initiatives, such as combining approaches and practices of different sectors, the focus on objectives of sustainability and the common good, the fact of being not-for-benefit but of relying on economic self-sufficiency. On the other hand, the cases present differences that make the joint analysis relevant for the aims of our study: they assume different business and marketing models, as well as different strategies in order to develop and consolidate.

The cases in this study are not representative of the enormous variety of fourth sector initiatives, nor of AFN initiatives. Instead, the study draws on the strengths of the analysis of critical case studies (Flyvbjerg 2006) to acquire relevant empirical elements that can be used to discuss the proposed framework and propositions, to illustrate its potential and its limitations of fourth sector organizations, as well as to open up new avenues of research.

The epistemological and ontological assumptions of this research take elements from both interpretative and critical paradigms (Lincoln et al. 2011). Knowledge is considered to be mediated by people's perspectives and interactions. However, knowledge is also considered to be mediated by the positions of people in social systems, and reality to be modelled by power relations and struggles within these systems. The aim of the study is essentially exploratory, as it is proposing and empirically testing new theoretical propositions, and addressing an under-studied topic - ecosystems of fourth sector organizations.

The research adopts a purely qualitative methodological strategy aimed at capturing and understanding meanings, views, and frames (Corbetta 2003). Different methods have been used for gathering information (see Table 1). First, it uses secondary information: on one hand, documentary evidence from material produced by the cases themselves (such as websites and public statements). On the other hand, reports and public policy documents which offered elements to understand the context (as the local food strategy and other policy actions). Second, it uses information gathered from direct purchasing using the different AFN and from participant observation for at least 2 years. One of the researchers attended networks, meetings, and workshops in which the initiatives subject of study and other of AFN participated. Field notes containing both descriptive and reflective information were taken in these moments. Third, the study draws on individual interviews of three types: first, five interviews with members of the initiatives[1] (one per initiative). Second, two interviews with local policymakers.[2] Third, two interviews with local experts.[3] The aspects addressed in each kind of interview can be found in Table 1.

The information was processed by means of a qualitative content analysis of documents, notes from observation, and interviews. In order to structure the findings, the research drew on the predefined categories and subcategories derived from

[1]The script of the interview included questions addressing the aspects mentioned in Table 1, covering topics on the overall visions of the organization, its activities and its environment. On the overall vision: Can you tell the origins and the initial motivations of your organization? Which are your principles and objectives? Which agro-food model do you want to build?. On activities: How your organization works (plans and activities, daily operation, decision-making processes)? How your relations with consumers and producers are? And with other organizations and stakeholders? On the environment: How public policies and regulations affect you? How are you taking part in policy-making? Which allies do you have in your operation and how they support you? Which other opportunities and limits do you find in your environment (for example, regarding certification schemes, communication, and technical capacity)?

[2]The script of the interview included questions addressing the aspects mentioned in Table 1: Which agro-food model do you think the city needs in order to be sustainable? How local public policies have tried to advance towards this model? How do you see the role of AFN in Valencia for building this model? How are your relations with AFN?

[3]The script of the interview included questions addressing the aspects mentioned in Table 1: Which agro-food model do you think the city needs in order to be sustainable? How do you see the role of public policies for this aim? How do you consider the actions developed by AFN in Valencia for this aim? How do you see the relations between them and with other stakeholders for this aim? How do you the limitations and opportunities provided by other elements of the context (as representation, regulations, certification schemes, relations or technical capacity of AFN)?

Table 1 Methods, data, and aspects addressed

Methods	Data collected	Aspects addressed
Secondary sources	Websites, statements as appearing in media or social networks, dissemination material	General information. Stated values, aims, objectives and perspectives
Participatory observation	Experience in purchasing in all cases Attendance to networking spaces, workshops, debates and governance spaces	Mechanisms of operation and networking of initiatives. Values and perspectives
Individual interviews	5 semi-structured interviews with members of 5 fourth sector AFN initiatives	Origins, motivations, principles, mission and vision, perspectives on sustainability, strategies, plans and activities developed, relationships, decision-making processes and ways of functioning, resources, legal aspects, perspectives on the context
	2 semi-structured interviews with local policymakers	Perspectives on sustainability, policies and actions developed, relationships, perspectives on AFN initiatives
	2 semi-structured interviews with local experts	Perspectives on sustainability of the different stakeholders, perspectives on policies and on AFN initiatives, opportunities and limitations of the local ecosystems of AFN

Source: Authors' elaboration

the analytical framework presented in Sect. 2. During the analysis, some subcategories inductively emerged from the data (e.g. on the types of relations). For each of the categories and subcategories, both common trends in all cases and differences between them were identified. This organization in categories, subcategories and trends organize the discussion as presented in sections 5.1 and 5.2. This analysis provided the insights for the discussion on opportunities and challenges in fourth sector AFN ecosystems developed in 5.3, as well as for the final considerations and recommendations in section 6.

4 Description of Cases

This section briefly describes key aspects of the initiatives to be studied, as the origins, stated objectives, activities and ways of operation.

Som Alimentació. It is-self-defined as a 'cooperative and participatory supermarket' (Som Alimentació 2012) under the form of a consumer's cooperative, which was formed in 2017. It runs a physical store in which members and the general public can access to a big diversity of local, organic, and ecological products. It has more than 600 members, who are owners of the cooperative, and around 4 paid workers. Members have access to special prices and can have different levels of commitment:

from just buying and voting in the general assemblies to more active participation (as the cooperative tries to encourage), i.e. supporting the daily work of the supermarket, being part of working groups or of the board, participating in the online and offline spaces of discussion and decision, etc. It is the only initiative of this kind in Valencia.

Waycolmena. It is a business model based on an online platform that facilitates the creation of communities of food consumption. Members of the 'colmena' (hive) periodically use the online platform to order food from local organic farmers (but also for exchanging other information and discussions). They go to a meeting point weekly in which they can collect the food and meet some of the farmers when they bring it. Like this, they can 'experience a new way of consuming, more responsible and just with the environment and with local farmers' and can 'support short distribution circuits, reduce CO2 emissions and support the local economy' (La Colmena que dice Sí 2020). Waycolmena offers fresh and season fruits and vegetables and elaborated craft products, 'more than 150 local producing varieties of local producers which are on average 60 kilometres from Valencia' (La Colmena que dice Sí 2020). It is run and facilitated by the promoter of the initiative, a person who supervises the whole process and collects a reduced percentage of sales. Around 10–20 families order food each week through Waycolmena, with big differences throughout the year. There is around a hundred groups using this model all around Europe, three of them in Valencia and its metropolitan area.

Mercat agroecològic de la Universitat Politècnica de València (UPV Market). This is a stable farmers' market run on the main campus of the Technical University of Valencia. This was promoted by University-based associations in 2012, but it has been working in the present form since 2016. It is now organized by the Vice-Chancellor of Social Responsibility, with the support of the funder associations and of a farmer's cooperative. Around 10 farmers sell their products weekly, from vegetables and fruit to bakery products. The declared objective of the market is to 'create awareness about responsible consumption', to 'offer the chance to the University community to directly purchase products from producers', to 'support agroecological initiatives and food sovereignty' and to 'connect the teaching and research potential of the University to the agricultural community near Valencia' (Mercat Agroecològic UPV 2020). It is the only experience of this kind in the city.

Mastika l'Horta. It is an initiative of a farmer who directly sells its products to customers. He sells veg and fruit boxes (as well as some processed food) directly to families, taking the products to some meeting points or to families' homes. Consumers can order food weekly by using an online application. Its main declared objective is to take care of nature and of society using agricultural farming: 'if we take care of nature, we take care of ourselves' (Mastika l'Horta 2020). It is part of the growing number of initiatives in Valencia of this kind, promoted by highly motivated and value-driven young farmers that consider agriculture a form of activism and social transformation, as well as a coherent way for earning their lives.

Biosofia. It is a local shop born in 2016. It is inspired by the idea of the traditional neighbourhood shop based on proximity and trust, but it presents some differences compared to conventional local shops: It only sells ecological products which are,

when possible, locally produced; it tries to work directly with farmers and to respect their prices and conditions; and it tries to go beyond the idea of a shop in order to be a social centre, in which workshops and talks take place, as well as a continuous contact online and offline with customers. It is also a meeting point in which consumers can pick veg boxes or other products directly ordered to farmers (without any charge from the shop's side). For the owner and promoter, the shop is a way of being consistent and a way of contributing to the good of farmers and neighbours. Even if the owner would like to create a cooperative in order to run the shop, for the moment the owner is the only person in charge.

As it will be explored in more depth, all organizations pursue the same social and environmental impacts, even if the quantitative importance of these impacts varies between organizations, essentially due to the different size (from the big size of *Som Alimentació* to the more limited size of *Biosofia*).

Table 2 summarizes the basic information on the different cases.

As it is shown in Fig. 2, the initiatives are distributed in different parts of the city of Valencia. They are all in areas characterized by their student, commercial, and/or cultural life. The exception is Mastika l'Horta, which is in a peri-urban area.

As it will be detailed in the next section, people running these initiatives know each under and have relations of different kind, mostly based on mutual support. They often meet in formal and informal spaces in which they exchange information and ideas. In the relations they share, for example, information on existing and potential suppliers (local organic farmers usually supply their products to more than one of the initiatives); other kinds of relevant information (e.g. about meetings or public actions that may be interesting for AFN); and ideas and inspiration (e.g. Som Alimentació is a referent in managerial aspects of interest for other initiatives as Biosofia or Waycolmena). As it will be explained in more depth, these relations and exchanges are relevant for these AFN initiatives to develop.

Table 2 Case studies

Case	Type of initiative	Consumer commitment Consumer–producer relation
Som Alimentació	Cooperative supermarket	Consumer may be members, so they might be owners and participate actively in operation and decisions
Waycolmena	Food community based on an online platform	Consumers are part of an online community and meet to pick products up
UPV market	Farmers' market run by institutions and organizations	Consumers just buy and meet farmers' in place
Mastika l'Horta	Veg box and direct sales	Consumers usually commit to the farmer and buy frequently
Biosofia	Local organic shop	Consumers just buy and can participate in some activities of the shop

Source: Author's elaboration

Fig. 2 Location of initiatives in the city of Valencia. Source: Authors' elaboration

It can also be said that these organizations are part of a growing scenario of fourth sector organizations in different domains. For example, Som Alimentació is part of an emerging wave of new consumer cooperatives in fields as energy (Som Energia), communications (Som Connexió) and mobility (Som Mobilitat). Initiatives as Mastika l'Horta are part of a movement of self-help organizations and worker's cooperatives who have sustainability and justice at the centre, and which are growing in different fields in Valencia, from crafts to urban planning and legal advice consultants.

5 Results and Discussion

This section presents and discusses the findings of the empirical study. It is structured as follows: first, it addresses the aspects considered in the theoretical framework regarding the *activities* of the fourth sector ecosystem under study (sect. 5.1). Second, it addresses the different relevant elements regarding the *environment* of these practices, considering the items identified in the framework (sect. 5.2). Findings are summarized in Table 3 and discussed in sect. 5.3.

Table 3 Main findings

	Concept	Findings
Practices of AFN fourth sector organization	Social and environmental change as organizational objective	– In all cases, there is a focus on social and environmental impacts. Economic self-sufficiency is a condition. Focus on benefiting small organic farmers, consumers and local communities – In all cases priority is not to scale-up, but to be stable, keep on learning, refine models and be loyal to values. Differences in the strategies for (limited) scaling up: Growing; replicating; or not to scale at all
	Relationships based in mutual benefit and sustainable outcomes	– All organizations focus on creating long-lasting and trustful relations with farmers. Different strategies to give them more power and share risks – Relations with customers also based in trust, proximity and affinity. Different levels of participation and engagement of customers in organizations (from members to pure consumers)
	Interactions with the markets, the sector and the institutions	– Organizations do not feel to compete between them, but feel part of the same movement. They focus on different areas and slightly different segments – Do not feel to compete with mainstream channels, as they point to a different audience, but are affected by low prices. – Increasing good connections with policymaking.
Environment of practices	Connections	– Connections with other AFN beyond the fourth sector: Associations, NGOs – Several formal and informal spaces for meetings
	Representation	– Non-existence of a formal network representing these organizations – Some take part in new governance spaces promoted by the city council
	Regulations	– Some organizations experiencing problems because of their particularities
	Communication	– Limited communition capacity – Importance of word-of-mouth – Importance of support of public institutions for visibility.
	Certification	– Very relevant. The official label is considered expensive and inadequate – [1] All organizations participate or accept the alternative local participatory label
	Technical support	– Mutual support and support from some NGOs from some specific technical aspects

Source: Authors' elaboration

5.1 Drivers and Activities of AFN Fourth Sector Organizations

5.1.1 Social and Environmental Change as Organizational Objective

Socially and Environmentally Embedded Mission

Interviewees and sources from all initiatives under study put the main focus on the environmental and social impact of their initiatives, that is, on their socially and environmentally embedded missions. Environmental and social dimensions seem to be tightly connected in all cases, although ideas on both dimensions can be separately identified. Regarding the environmental dimension of their mission, all organizations emphasize that they sell products that are 'respectful' and 'sustainable'. They all detail several requirements they have in order to guarantee this. Websites mention some criteria met by the food they sell: products are organic, artisanal and locally produced by small farmers in small scale projects, seasonal or from local varieties. All initiatives also mention in different ways that they try to guarantee the minimization of the distance travelled by the products.

Interviewees and written sources emphasize that the fulfilment of these criteria has a direct impact in the conservation of the environment surrounding the city of Valencia, l'Horta—the farmland surrounding the city of Valencia, which has an enormous environmental, historical and cultural value. They insist that their initiative protects l'Horta from environmental degradation by reactivating its productive use while respecting the natural ecosystems.

All initiatives also put their social mission at the forefront. In all cases, they refer to the positive impacts they produce in several social groups, especially small organic farmers, consumers and the local community as a whole. First, regarding farmers, all interviewees consider that they support agroecological farming and small producers' livelihoods by creating new distribution channels, allowing them to capture more value and to minimize their risks by creating stable relations. Second, regarding consumers, all initiatives mention that they try to provide a source of healthy and accessible food for people, but they also try not only to sell healthy food but also to raise awareness in consumers. In some cases (as in the food cooperative), they mention that they open spaces for participation and empowerment for people. Third, regarding the community, all initiatives consider as part to its mission to support local economies. Most interviewees and some webs refer to the enhancement of the 'food sovereignty' of communities, that is, to the increasing of the capacity of territories and communities to control the process of food production, distribution and consumption. Their sovereignty operates this in opposition to conventional food models, in which these processes are mostly controlled by a few big companies.

Regarding social objectives, some organizations also refer to several objectives, which are more specific to their context: for example, Mercat UPV strongly highlights its importance for educating students and showing that other consumption models are possible; Som Alimentació highlights its objective of promoting a bigger

engagement of people in the organizations and the collective transformation of the food system; Biosofia underlines its objective of contributing to the strengthening of communities and to the recreation of direct social relations in the neighbourhoods.

Regarding economic objectives, all organizations refer to the fact that they have to be self-sufficient and that they have to be profitable enough for farmers to commercialize their products through these channels. As identified by Haigh and Hoffman (2012) for fourth sector organizations in general, the organizations under study consider these economic objectives as a means in order to achieve the environmental and social impacts mentioned—what they call their 'real objectives', as protecting local farming and local environment or providing consumers with the opportunity to consume in a more responsible way. These are all objectives linked to the redistribution of power in food systems, as it is the overall objective of AFN (Forssell and Lankoski 2015).

Longer Time Horizons for More Autonomous Development

All cases recall the importance of considering longer time horizons for more autonomous development. Organizations estate that they operate in the market not as an end in itself, but just as a mere strategy to exist and develop in an autonomous and independent way (e.g. independent from public financial support or from distributors). Except for small grants received by Som Alimentació and Biosofia, the only income that the organizations analysed receive come from their commercial activity. Moreover, they do not seem to have any dependency on any distributor or other stakeholder in the food chain, as they all have very diversified relations.

Interviewees from all organizations consider that growing or scaling-up is not necessarily the best way for increasing their impact. Moreover, they consider that this can even be counter-productive for their objectives. Instead, their priority is to keep on learning and experimenting, to refine their business models and to be loyal to their values. All this is something that, as some interviewees refer, is much more difficult to attain if you grow too much or too quickly. This autonomy and stability is considered crucial to keep on with the quality of the relations created.

This illustrates the idea that as Haigh and Hoffman (2012) mention, fourth sector organizations essentially focus on slower, stable and self-limited growth. Nevertheless, although all organizations emphasize the importance of autonomy and stability, they present differences in terms of how they would like to develop and consolidate. In the case Som Alimentació, they consider that some limited and controlled growth can be relevant in order to increase their positive impacts and that this can be done either by opening new cooperative stores or by opening new channels (as an online store, which they plan to open soon). Beyond this, they consider that, for scaling their impact, new cooperatives should be born and replicate their experience, so they are willing to provide legal, technical and any other kind of support on this regard. Nevertheless, they alert about the fact that growing too much cannot be at the price of losing the participatory nature of the cooperative. Some considerations offered by Waycolmena are similar: its promoter states that growing is possible and desirable, and that it is important for economic stability and for increasing the impacts, but he also mentions that 'colmenas' should replicate throughout the city in order to reach

more people and increase the impact of the model. For the UPV farmers' market, the interest is not focused in growing—although it is a small market—but stabilizing and in replicating the model in other institutions or in other parts of the city. For Biosofia, in order to deepen into its positive impacts, the idea is not to grow, but eventually to change the organizational model to one which is more cooperative and participatory, so it can be more open, engaging and democratic. As it is mentioned by Seyfang and Smith (2007) when referring to grassroots innovation in general, the organizations under study present different strategies (and thus different impacts) for developing the same overall idea (of limited growth).

5.1.2 Relationships Based in Mutual Benefit and Sustainable Outcomes

Relationships with Producers

As previously mentioned, all initiatives strongly highlight the importance of supporting local farmers. As it was mentioned, Haigh and Hoffman (2012: 128) highlight that fourth sector organizations try to build relations 'based on trust, positive regard, compassion and vitality'. The fourth sector organizations under study refer to these values. They point at the importance of building 'long-lasting', 'strong', 'close' or 'trustful' relations with farmers. For this to happen, the organizations analysed deploy different strategies in order to give farmers more power. Again, the priority of redistributing power and economic risks that characterize AFN (Forssell and Lankoski 2015) is present, as well as a diversity of different practices for this aim (Seyfang and Smith 2007). In some initiatives, producers directly sell their products to final consumers and fix their prices, as it is the case of Mastika l'Horta or Mercat UPV. In other cases (Som Alimentació, Biosofia, Waycolmena), producers do not sell directly but are free to fix their prices (even if organizations may provide suggestions). Organizations and producers discuss and eventually change prices depending on the sales after some time. For example, Biosofia explains that when a particular product has some problems in sales, they ask the producer whether s/he prefers to reduce the price or to keep it like it is. Moreover, in all cases, initiatives try to work just with one producer for each particular product and to keep on with the relation, in order to limit competition between producers. They also try to guarantee some stability in product demand, mostly through informal agreements based on trust. Most interviewees affirm that in any case, they try to make the producer capture more value. For this aim, they limit their margins to a minimum and they also try to be as transparent as possible in their relationships with farmers. In any case, as it will be mentioned later, organic local farmers also have a mechanism of horizontal coordination—as Ecollaures, a small cooperative of small local organic farmers. They coordinate in order to sell their products through the different alternative channels.

The relation of trust between the initiatives and the farmers is also considered of greater importance, assuming the requirements that the initiatives demand to products and producers. As mentioned, the criteria are very demanding, as products have

to be organic, seasonal, produced in small-scale... Moreover, initiatives demand that all farmers and employees have to be in good working conditions. As it is not always easy to officially certify all these aspects, trust becomes very important, together with alternative certification procedures—as it will be discussed later.

Relationships with Consumers

The initiatives analysed show a whole range of models of relations with the members-customers—in some cases membership is necessary to participate in the organization (as in Waycolmena) or to have special conditions and access to decision spaces (as in Som Alimentació). In all cases, interviewees and websites mention that relations with consumers are also based on trust, proximity and affinity. As it is a feature of AFN more in general (Forssell and Lankoski 2015), all these models try to create citizen engagement and mobilization for a more sustainable agro-food model. Nevertheless, there are differences in terms of the level of participation and engagement of consumers in different initiatives. In some cases, organizations try to create high-quality relations and loyalty, but consumers still have an essentially passive role: this is the case of Biosofia, Mastika l'Horta or the UPV Market. In some other cases, as Som Alimentació and, to some extent, Waycolmena, they try to promote more active participation of consumers (that are in fact members). For example, in the case of Som Alimentació, cooperative members take an active part in the discussions and final decisions of the cooperative, can contribute with their time in the running of the supermarket and can be part of working groups or of the board.

In all cases, the direct connection between producers and consumers thanks to the initiative is considered of key importance, as it is a central feature of a different kind of AFN (Michel-Villarreal et al. 2019). This connection is produced differently depending on the case: e.g. in the case of the UPV Market this connection is direct in the moment of selling. This is also the case of Waycolmena, as consumers and producers meet weekly in the moment of receiving the food ordered. In the case of Som Alimentació, they organize visits to producers so members of the cooperative can directly meet the producer and the place. This is also the case of Mastika l'Horta, who organizes visits for its customers.

5.1.3 Interactions with Markets, the Sector and the Institutions

All initiatives under study know each other, most of them have strong connections and share people, knowledge and resources. This reinforces the idea mentioned by some authors, but underexplored in practice (see Michel-Villarreal et al. 2019) that initiatives of AFN do not work alone but constitute ecosystems of initiatives, which can be considered as ecosystems of innovation. The case under study shows an ecosystem characterized by relations of collaboration. None of the initiatives under study consider the others as 'competitors'. On the contrary, they feel part of the same movement aiming at the same objectives. In this regard, some interviewees coincide in that cooperation makes much more sense than the competition even if they just consider their purely individual interests and their economic sustainability. They

consider that competing for capturing existing demand makes no sense, and that it makes much more sense for all alternatives to work together in order to induce new demand for local, organic and responsibly produced food purchased through short channels. A couple of interviewees insist that the potential demand is huge, so they all need to raise awareness in the public in order to use alternative networks. Raising awareness of the existence of this responsible and sustainable way of purchasing food should be the common goal of all initiatives.

Coordination is needed in other aspects, for example, regarding the relationships with suppliers: they share information and, in some cases, they coordinate in order to support different producers, in coordination with farmers.

Moreover, drawing on the observation and on the considerations of interviewees regarding the profile of their customers, the initiatives under study target slightly different segments, so they are not directly competing. For example, differences in the characteristics of the public can be found: geographical, as most initiatives target people in their neighbourhood or close areas; psychographic characteristics, as it seems that initiatives target people with different motivations (e.g. members of Som Alimentació may be more driven by political motives than those of the UPV Market); or behavioural, as there are differences in the level of engagement and participation consumers want to have when they buy food (e.g. members of Som Alimentació look for more commitment than those of Biosofia or Mastika l'Horta).

Regarding conventional food channels, initiatives under study do not consider to be in competition with them, as long as they consider to target people who are more reflective and aware about what they buy and how they buy. In this sense, the cases under study are worried about the acceptance of their business model, as it happens with fourth sector organizations (Haigh and Hoffman mention 2012). Nevertheless, their interest is to gain the acceptance of the specific segment of conscious consumers.

The interest of the cases is not to transform conventional channels (as supermarkets, for example), as Forssell and Lankoski (2015) mention, but to create alternative channels for this specific target. Nevertheless, the dramatic reductions in the prices of conventional products that some retailers of mainstream channels are forcing can be reinforcing the commonly accepted idea that organic products are unjustifiable expensive, thus creating difficulties for thhich can be more purely situated in oth

ese new channels. Moreover, some interviewees regret the fact that although some changes introduced by big retailers in order to promote a more sustainable food system could be considered positive in principle (e.g., they are increasing the supply of local and organic products), these can be considered as mere greenwashing actions and far away from the changes that the food system needs. An expert interviewed provided the case of organic products sold in supermarkets that are still using a lot of plastic, which may have travelled hundreds of kilometres or which may be produced by farmers for unfair prices. Moreover, experts insist that changes adopted by big retailers are not changing the big concentration of power nor changing the dramatic situation of farmers. Some interviewees suggest that these

changes introduced by big retailers may be counter-productive for sustainability and very confusing for consumers.

5.2 *The Context of Practices: Elements of a Supporting Ecosystem*

5.2.1 Connections

As mentioned, the relations between the different initiatives under study are frequent and fluid. In these relations, several aspects are exchanged. Interviewees refer to issues such as exchange of information—for example, on farmers who can provide particular products; exchange on technical knowledge—for example, legal issues or management tools; and exchange of people and ideas—some people are engaged in more than one of the experiences subjected to study, as it is the case of the promoters of the UPV Market and the members of Som Alimentació.

These initiatives also maintain close relations with other AFN initiatives beyond the fourth sector. This is the case of several of the initiatives subjected to study with food purchasing groups. These are groups that are fully participatory, managed by their members and solely based in volunteer work (so they can be considered as fully part of the third sector, not fourth sector initiatives). In these groups, families from the same neighbourhood meet and self-organize in order to buy and distribute food from local farmers. There are around 10 of these groups in Valencia, and they have inspired some of the experiences subjected to study: Som Alimentació and the UPV Market were in fact created by members of two food groups who wanted to reach a wider audience. This is an example of how civic sector initiatives inspire fourth sector ones and of how networks of activists play a key role in grassroots innovations (Seyfang and Smith 2007), including fourth sector organizations.

There are different formal and non-formal spaces in which these different AFN initiatives in Valencia meet. Some spaces are periodical and structured: the *Fira Alternativa de València*, an annual festival in which different initiatives from the social economy in Valencia meet; and the *Trobada per la Terra,* an annual meeting organized by the *Plataforma per la Sobirania Alimentària del País Valencià* (Valencian Land Platform for Food Sovereignty), an informal network composed by different initiatives in the field of food sovereignty, from producers' and consumers' organizations to NGOs. Beyond these spaces, a number of intermittent spaces exist, such as workshops, meetings and conferences on issues as sustainable food or social economy, organized by local NGOs, universities of public institutions.

The activist and voluntary groups mentioned and the spaces for meeting have created a supportive environment in which, as Fourth Sector Network (2009) mentions, generation and exchange of knowledge and mutual support can emerge.

5.2.2 Representation

There is not a specific network or association gathering and representing the different AFN in Valencia. Nevertheless, their perspectives and interests are present in the Plataforma per la Sobirania Alimentària del País Valencià, in which some of the initiatives under study have participated, such as Mastika l'Horta and Som Alimentació.

In spite of the existence of these connections and the increasing importance of AFN in Valencia, it was not until recently that these initiatives received official and clear recognition by the local government. In this regard, the local government created the Municipal Food Council in 2017, a new governance space in which different stakeholders related to the field of sustainable food have a voice. Some of the initiatives subjected to study (such as Mastika l'Horta, Som Alimentación or the UPV Market) have attended the Council meetings, workshops and working groups. More specifically, they have participated in the elaboration of the existing Valencian Local Sustainable Food Strategy. In any case, all the initiatives under study underline the importance of these new participatory spaces in order to recognize the importance of AFN and to give them social legitimacy. As Fourth Sector Network (2009) points, these spaces of representation contribute to the consolidation of organizations providing visibility in the public arena.

5.2.3 Regulations

All the initiatives consider that there are no specific regulations in order to recognize their particularities or to protect their activity. They operate considering those applicable to small businesses and to conventional food channels. Some initiatives, such as the UPV Market or Som Alimentació, also mention that the problem goes beyond the lack of adequate regulations, as they have also met problems regarding the interpretation and application of the existing laws. The particular nature of their activities may create confusion and uncertainty in civil servants. For example, the UPV Market found some problems regarding University officials when they began operating until they 'convinced' them about the fact that their operations could be perfectly legal considering existing regulations. In the case of Som Alimentació, the interviewee mentioned the problems they faced in order to register their statutes in the official Valencian register of cooperatives, as there are very few consumers' cooperatives in this region, and none of them with their features. Some of the aspects in the statutes created some doubts in civil servants of the register. This implied some negotiation and external legal support before they could register the cooperative. This illustrates a difficulty that fourth sector organizations frequently face (Fourth Sector Network 2009), given their hybrid, complex and usually original nature.

5.2.4 Communication

All initiatives mention that they have very limited communication capacity, as it is common in fourth sector organizations, which are usually in the periphery of the public awareness and debates (Fourth Sector Network 2009). In some cases, word-of-mouth is the primary tool they have in order to be known. This is the case of Biosofia or Mastika l'Horta. In some other cases, they have specific support from an organization, as it is the case of the UPV Market (which is supported by the University media). In any case, they mention that it is always difficult to reach groups of people who are not familiar with sustainable food alternatives yet.

Given this limited capacity, most interviewees strongly value the effort done by the local council from 2015 in order to recognize the importance of sustainable food and alternative food channels and to make them more visible. As an example, the council is organizing festivals and workshops, in which most of these initiatives have participated. For example, Som Alimentació presented itself publicly in a festival organized by the Valencia city council on sustainable and local food. Some interviewees also recognize the importance of the awareness raising actions that some Valencian ONGs regarding sustainable food and food sovereignty are undertaking since a long time ago.

5.2.5 Certification

Certification of farmers' products is a very relevant issue for all AFN initiatives studied. They all know that farmers find the official ecological certification label (the label of the Ecological Agriculture Committee of the Valencian Community, the official local control authority certifying ecological agro-food products following European regulations) inadequate. They consider that obtaining this certification is complex and expensive (thus difficult to get by small farmers), that it just 'became a pure business for auditors and consultants', and that in fact, it does not really measure if farmers' products and processes are really sustainable.

For these reasons, several local alternative participatory agro-food labels have been born in the last years in the Valencian Community. In the area of the city of Valencia, it operates the *Sello Participativo de Garantía—Ecollaures*, *SPG-Ecollaures* (Participatory Guarantee Label Eco-farmers). In line with other bottom-up, participatory and community-embedded organic certifications who have emerged all around the world in the last decades, it creates a mechanism of certification based in the high-quality relations between local stakeholders. In SPG-Ecollaures label, farmers and consumers certify other farmers in an on-going process of learning and exchange. In fact, these certification schemes go beyond labelling in order to build high-quality relations and mutual trust. Considering the aforementioned, all the initiatives subjected to study accept and encourage the participatory certification SPG-Ecollaures as a valid and good alternative to the official seal. This label, as other participatory local labels all around the world, is a

good example of how certification procedures can be adapted to be coherent with the particular values, processes and schemes of fourth sector organizations (Fourth Sector Network 2009). These labels are also coherent with the principles of AFN, which put at the centre participation and local embeddedness (Forssell and Lankoski 2015).

5.2.6 Technical Support

As mentioned, the initiative hereby analysed have received mutual support in several aspects. Moreover, for some specific ones, they have also received the support of some local NGOs—for example, local university-based NGOs promoted the creation of the UPV Market. Nevertheless, there is still a lack of specific support from public institutions or from specialized organizations regarding technical aspects of interest for fourth sector organizations.

Table 3 summarizes the main empirical findings concerning the different elements of the theoretical framework proposed.

5.3 Discussion: Opportunities and Challenges in the Fourth Sector AFN Ecosystems

Our analysis shows a scenario of diversity in the fourth sector AFN initiatives under study. They share common principles, connected with the principles of fourth sector organizations in general (Haigh and Hoffman 2012) and with AFN (Forssell and Lankoski 2015), as their environmental, social and economic goals and their commitment with local farmers, with awareness raising and mobilization of consumers, and with the construction of stronger, more autonomous, fair and resilient communities.

Nevertheless, these initiatives show different strategies and pathways to attain these objectives while they are self-sufficient economically: they deploy different schemes of relation with producers—from direct selling to visits to their projects; they require different levels of engagement from consumers—passive vs. active role; they have different strategies for consolidation—from scaling slowly to replicating or supporting new initiatives; and they can whether revitalize old schemes—as local shops or farmers' markets—or create new ones—as online platforms or consumers' cooperatives. In this sense, they are illustrative of the diversity of practices of grassroots innovations (Seyfang and Smith 2007).

This diversity shows a great complementarity between initiatives. This has allowed the ecosystem to reach different targets in terms of their location, values, expectations and desired level of commitment. Moreover, this diversity has allowed the emergence of rich processes of exchange and learning. It has also led to increasing legitimacy, visibility and recognition of AFN initiatives. In this process,

word-of-mouth and the recognition of public institutions seem crucial. This diversity and complementarity highlights the importance of addressing fourth sector organizations (and specifically AFN) as ecosystems and not only as individual practices, as it is the most frequent approach (see Michel-Villarreal et al. 2019).

The ecosystem of AFN fourth sector initiatives has benefited from the existence of other initiatives, organizations and processes, which can be more purely situated in other sectors—as the support of the Valencia city council, in the first sector, or the connections with food purchasing groups, the local participatory certification schemes, or the NGOs, in the third sector. Inversely, these initiatives, organizations and processes have strongly benefited from the fourth sector initiatives under study. This illustrates the close connections, complementarities and synergies between sectors regarding social innovation different authors mention (Fourth Sector Network 2009).

However, our study also reveals important limitations, tensions and threats. Regarding the limitations, fourth sector initiatives still face problems of legal recognition, protection and coverage of their activities, as well as problems with conservative interpretations of existing regulations. They also face difficulties regarding communication or the lack of technical support. As Fourth Sector Network (2009) mentions, these problems are still very frequent for fourth sector organizations. But, as seen in the cases, some other contextual problems which are frequently faced by fourth sector organizations have been addressed thanks to the support of other bottom-up initiatives, as it is the case of participatory certification.

Regarding the tensions, the analysis reveals situations that are also present in fourth sector organizations beyond AFN. On the one hand, regarding the balance between scale and impact, some key questions emerge: How to gain more impact in the mid-term, when these initiatives self-limit their growth? How to scale up without losing autonomy and loyalty to their own values? On the other hand, regarding inclusion, other questions emerge: consumers and members of these initiatives are mostly mid-class, so how to include the most excluded groups in projects, which demand previous awareness and a certain degree of commitment and resources?

Finally, these organizations cope with several threats. A key one relates to the problem of mainstreaming: conventional big and powerful companies are already incorporating some elements and discourses from AFN. This could be considered good news for the alternatives under study and for the experts interviewed, but their analyses consider that this is mostly greenwashing, that may be misleading for consumers, and thus, it may be reinforcing the existing unsustainable food system. This can be considered an intrinsic contradiction of fourth sector organizations (Haigh and Hoffman 2012).

6 Final Considerations

The study offers relevant contributions by proposing theoretically and illustrating empirically how, if we want to keep on understanding the dynamics of fourth sector organizations when facing social challenges (Archer 2011; Escobar and Gutiérrez

2011), it is necessary to understand both the dynamics of *ecosystems* of organizations, and the elements of its *environment*.

The proposed framework has been relevant for addressing these questions. For the particular case of ecosystems of organizations of AFN in Valencia, the application of the framework has been able to explore its complexity and diversity. Initiatives in the ecosystem analysed present common features but a diversity of strategies and approaches. The empirical analysis also illustrates the key importance of contextual elements proposed in the literature (Fourth Sector Network 2009), from regulations to networking.

The study also offers practical implications. It highlights the importance of articulating policies and regulations to support fourth sector initiatives, which may include providing technical and legal support, giving visibility and legitimacy, enabling officials to adequately interpret and apply norms or to include these initiatives in decision-making processes. For organizations and initiatives, it highlights the importance of issues as networking and mutual support.

Limitations of the study are both theoretical and empirical. Regarding the theory, and considering that literature dealing with ecosystems and environments of fourth sector organizations is very limited, relevant elements may not be present in our framework nor identified in our empirical exploration. Regarding the empirical case, it is to mention that the dynamics of the organizations under study show collaboration and that they operate in an increasingly enabling policy context, so some of the ideas and results may not be useful in contexts with more conflicts and constraints.

Future research may address these limitations. It could theoretically propose and empirically identify other key elements of the environment that can facilitate or limit the development of fourth sector organizations. It will particularly relevant to explore different geographies and domains, maybe trying to find cases in which competition, conflict and tension are more present. This may allow comparing findings and find common trends in order to build a more robust theory and evidence regarding the underexplored debates on fourth sector organizations and ecosystems.

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