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Reducing the Risk of Co-Optation in Alternative Food Networks: Multi-Stakeholder Cooperatives, Social Capital, and Third Spaces of Cooperation

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Abstract: Farming cooperatives are organisations fundamentally based on social capital. However, the neoliberal and globalisation turn in the food system have led to the economisation of agricultural cooperatives as their main objective and criteria for evaluating their performance, and to a retreat from their participation in the wider cooperative movement. Nevertheless, new models of cooperation may provide a method to divert from this neoliberalisation trend by promoting social capital and mutual learning amongst different actors committed to a transition to sustainable food systems. This paper applies the anthropological concept of third spaces to examine the case of multistakeholder cooperatives. This type of food and farming cooperatives are composed of a diverse membership groups (e.g., producers, consumers, coordinators, buyers, etc). A nuanced analysis of these cooperatives' capacity to generate social capital, and more specifically to blur the boundaries between bonding, bridging, and linking social capital, is presented. Evidence from five case studies suggests that multistakeholder cooperatives that remain at the border of their game, operating in both real and symbolic third spaces, are more likely to be based on and reproduce different types of social capital as well as social and environmental sustainability, while in turn reducing the risk of co-optation of their transformative practices.

Keywords: third spaces; social capital; multi-stakeholder cooperatives; agricultural cooperatives; co-optation; alternative food networks; sustainable food systems; Spain; U.K.; consumer identity



Citation: Ajates, R. Reducing the Risk of Co-Optation in Alternative Food Networks: Multi-Stakeholder Cooperatives, Social Capital, and Third Spaces of Cooperation. *Sustainability* **2021**, *13*, 11219. <https://doi.org/10.3390/su132011219>

Academic Editors: Julien Vanhulst, Stefano Micheletti and Elena Pisani

Received: 17 September 2021

Accepted: 7 October 2021

Published: 12 October 2021

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1. Introduction: Social Capital and Farming Cooperatives

Social capital concerns social ties between humans and within groups of people, including organisations and society. As the concept of social capital may be applied at different levels of the social hierarchy, various definitions have been proposed in the literature [1–3]. Since this research focuses on social capital at the organisational level, more specifically on the case of agricultural cooperatives, this paper uses Hong and Sporleder's definition of the concept, which was specifically developed for the context of these membership-based farming organisations: "the set of resources, tangible or intangible, that build over time to cooperative constituents through their social relationships, facilitating the attainment of goals. Here, cooperative constituents refer to the cooperative, its members, employees, and management" [4] (p. 3).

Access to and the ability to generate social capital are characteristics of both cooperatives and family farms. Whereas in family farms, social capital is ensured by kinship-based relationships, cooperatives draw social capital from cooperative ideology, embodied in particular by cooperative values and principles [5]. Furthermore, cooperative members, especially in the inception stages of operation of their cooperatives, often personally know and trust each other. The literature indicates how the performance of farming cooperatives is strongly affected by their ability to establish and maintain trust, confidence, and commitment among members [6]. For this reason, many authors agree that, since by design, agricultural cooperatives are network organisations formed with the motivation of mutual

benefit and the expectation of collective actions among members, they are highly dependent on social capital [7–11]. In turn, lack of trust, reciprocal relationships, transparency, and other elements of social capital can lead to failure of the cooperative [11].

Social capital in farmers' cooperatives has been examined in several academic articles over the last couple of decades (see [11] for a literature review of the topic). However, it is important to acknowledge that even earlier, authors applying a social perspective to the study of cooperatives, while not necessarily using the term social capital, still covered many issues related to the notion of social capital, such as ideology, culture, value, trust, identity, norms, loyalty, and commitment [12]. For example, the term cooperative spirit, has been widely used in the literature, and accepted as the main force of agricultural cooperatives. This spirit can be interpreted as a cooperative's social capital. Although cooperating farmers might have not been aware either of the concept of social capital, studies show they used similar concepts over time, such as spirit, trust, etc. [13]

A question that emerges from this variety of terms, is whether the concept of social capital contains anything new in comparison to the more general concepts of cooperative trust and solidarity. The general novelty (and relevance) of the concept of social capital seems to lie in the consideration of the quality of interagent relations as a factor of productive activity, just as physical, natural, and human capital [9]. However, agricultural cooperatives have been mainly researched from a traditional economic perspective (see [14,15] for a critique of the application of narrow economic lenses to the study of agricultural cooperatives). A common shortcoming of economic studies is that they often ignore the embeddedness of the cooperative's and members' economic activities in the social and political context of the cooperative's community. Thus, the explanatory relevance of the social relationships among cooperative members was often not taken into consideration; this analytical overlook contributed to conclusions claiming that cooperatives are less efficient and effective than private-owned firms due to the burden of higher transaction costs [12]. The renewed acknowledgement of and interest in the role that social capital plays in the formation, performance, and purpose of cooperatives are welcome developments in the study not only of agricultural cooperatives, but also of socially and sustainably driven food system relations.

Several country case studies on the relationship between farming cooperatives and social capital can be found in the literature. For example, Chloupkova et al. [16] compared the level of social capital in Denmark and Poland at the turn of the century against the background of these countries' cooperative movements. The authors found that Denmark had a significantly higher level of social capital in the 1990s. In those years, the communist system and centrally planned economy in Poland hindered the development of entrepreneurship and various social organisations, which led to the destruction of social capital. These reduction in social capital in former communist countries resulted in long-lasting mistrust and the reduced interest in cooperative initiatives [17]. In Spain, Tapia found links between early agricultural cooperatives and the notions of social capital, food democracy, and peasant rights [18].

Other cases from outside Europe also indicate a positive relation between levels of social capital and a good performance of agricultural cooperatives. Evidence from Kenya and China shows that the observed differences in the performance of producer cooperatives can be explained by the differences in the organisations' social capital levels [19,20]. Liang et al. [20] researched 147 farmer cooperatives in China's Zhejiang province and found a positive relationship between certain dimensions of social capital and members' participation in training and general meetings.

Elder et al. [21], in their study of the effects of fair trade certification in agricultural cooperatives in Rwanda, found a negative association between fair trade and farmer trust in cooperative leadership and a positive association with a perceived higher level of participation of women. Another finding was that social capital linked most significantly to farmers' interaction with their neighbours.

Overall, across countries, some correlations seem to appear from social capital, and specific features and attributes of farming cooperatives. Size seems to be a critical factor. Small cooperatives with simple business operations seem to have more social capital in their membership than large, complex cooperatives. Evidence indicates that the smaller the cooperative, the higher the social capital, expressed in terms of members' involvement, trust, satisfaction, and loyalty [22]. Some researchers attribute the failure of some large cooperatives to the decline in social capital in the organisation [23]. When a cooperative grows in size, members are more likely to become detached and their ability to influence collective decisions is reduced. While cooperatives with far-reaching horizontal and vertical integration may be more efficient due to economies of scale, this model does not seem to result in higher social capital within the membership [23]. When cooperatives begin to replicate the strategies of investor-owned firms, their members no longer feel as associated with them [10,22,24]. In turn, the geographical and social proximity among members, and between members and leadership appears to foster social capital [22].

Another determining factor is the organisational development stage of the cooperative. Cooperatives in different stages of their lifecycle are likely to display different levels of social capital, usually enjoying a high level of social capital in the early stages, and a declining trend along the development of the organisation. This decrease in social capital results in an imbalance in the social and economic attributes of cooperatives [12]. Heterogeneity can become an important impediment for cooperation [6]. Whereas bonding social capital is found to be higher in remotely located cooperatives, bridging capital is better guaranteed in the cooperatives in more connected locations as contact with external actors is more accessible.

Some scholars have stated that if organisations are to perform various production activities, they need both financial and social capital. These activities can be performed with different combinations of financial and social capital. Thus, an organisation that is based on one form of capital has to convert this into another form of capital in order to obtain an appropriate mix of the two forms of capital. When an actor converts social capital into financial capital, it does not necessarily mean that this actor will end up with a smaller stock of social capital. If the conversion is deemed successful, the amount of social capital may, in contrast, increase [10]. However, social capital was shown to be more difficult to build than economic capital [9].

Despite the intrinsic theoretical link between social capital and agricultural cooperatives, the neoliberal and globalisation turn in the food system have led to the economisation of these membership organisations, prioritising economic criteria for evaluating their performance and pushing their retreat from the wider cooperative movement [24–28].

On one hand, cooperatives are commonly presented as mechanisms that allow farmers to have a stronger bargaining position in industrial food systems deeply embedded in long supply chains. Building on the “conventionalisation thesis” of the organic and fair trade movement, having been co-opted by industrial longfood supply chains, some scholars have argued that cooperatives also rely in market dynamics and are thus deeply embedded in capital relations that weaken their transformative power too. Large agricultural cooperatives are adding to the neoliberalisation of cooperation by aligning farmers and their production with the requirements of long supply chains and international suppliers, i.e., year-round deliveries of large amounts of homogenous monoculture fruits and vegetables that can endure long distances to their place of purchase and consumption [24].

Nevertheless, new models of cooperation are exploring methods to divert from this neoliberalisation trend by promoting forms of societal capital and mutual learning, which may lead to more social cohesion across different groups of food system actors.

There are tens of thousands of agricultural cooperatives around the world, most of which have only one type of members: farmers. In the case of the less well-known multistakeholder cooperative model, different types of membership groups exist, normally farmers, workers (coordinators), consumers, and buyers [14,15]. This paper applies the anthropological concept of third spaces as an analytical lens to examine social capital dynamics in multistakeholder cooperatives in relation to their social and environmental sustainability objectives and practices. First, the differences between bonding, bridging, and linking social capital are presented. Second, the origin and relevance of the concept of third space are discussed. The methodology then summarises the case studies selected and the types of data analysed. The paper concludes with a discussion of the implications of the findings and some final remarks including future research topics in this area.

2. Bonding, Bridging, and Linking Social Capital

As discussed in the previous section, many definitions of social capital can be found in the literature [29]. Alongside this variety of definitions, several typologies of social capital have also been developed. One of the earlier and more common typologies categorises social capital into bonding and bridging [4]. Gittel and Vidal [30] originally suggested this distinction, and later other authors added a third category to this typology: linking social capital [31]. In practice, these categories are interrelated and not mutually exclusive. Nevertheless, these distinctions not only help clarify the concept of social capital but also allow its operationalisation and the proposal of relevant metrics to measure it.

Bonding social capital refers to the value assigned to social networks between homogeneous groups of people that share a similar social identity, whereas bridging social capital relates to social networks between socially heterogeneous groups [6,32]. Bonding ties provide links between individuals or groups with similar goals, which may result in tight internal relationships, reinforcing identities, and strengthening links. They pertain to trust and reciprocity in dense, closed, and homogeneous networks. Often, people in bonding networks are alike in key personal characteristics (e.g., class, race, ethnicity, education, age, religion, gender, and political affiliation). They are more inward-looking, protective, and with close membership, thus more likely to generate reciprocity and mobilise informal solidarity [33].

Conversely, bridging ties create links with others outside the organisation, enable access to external resources, and provide linkages with people across diverse social divisions [6]. Bridging social capital refers to more distant ties, such as loose friendships and workmates. Often, people in bridging networks differ in key personal characteristics. Bridging is more outward-looking, civically engaged, narrows the gap between different communities and exercising open membership, and is, therefore, crucial to organising solidarity and pursuing common goals [33]. Bridging is crucial for solving community problems through helping people to know each other, building relationships, sharing information, and mobilising community resources to achieve common objectives [4]. The heterogeneity or diversity of network members seems to enhance the bridging capabilities of social capital.

Woolcock [31] extended the bonding and bridging binary, introducing the concept of linking social capital. Linking social capital may involve networks and ties of a particular community with states or other agencies. Bhandari and Yasunobu [29] described it as the ability of groups to engage vertically with external agencies such as governments, regulatory agencies and higher-level organisations, and networks in very different social positions and power. This may be achieved to influence their policies or to draw on their resources. It involves social relations with those in authority, which might be used to garner resources or power [4]. Linking social capital reaches out to unlike people in dissimilar situations, such as those who are entirely outside of the community. Being organisations based on solidarity and commitment to the environment and aligned with the needs of society, cooperatives are thought to generate linking social capital by default [11].

As discussed in the previous section, cooperatives with higher levels of social capital are better able to build a communitarian response to critical external constraints, present stronger resistance against adversities, and are more capable of recovering access to resources. This response depends, however, on the type of social capital that is available: if bonding social capital is stronger than bridging social capital, collective action becomes more feasible, but when bridging social capital prevails, people tend to rely more on individual solutions dependent on outside networks and alternative solutions.

Communities with more bridging than bonding social capital are more outward-oriented, but provide less collective resources for responding to collective threats [34]. On the contrary, communities with a higher level of solidarity and horizontal collective action situated in rural areas are potentially more capable of facing group constraints [6,35].

Saz-Gil et al. introduced the concept of regional social capital to refer to a resource that reflects the nature of social relations in a region, expressed in the levels of widespread trust and norms of civic behaviour of its residents [11]. Saz-Gil et al. [11] also analysed how cooperatives, through their internal social capital based on local resources rooted in the community and less dependent on external factors, can provide their territories with greater resilience and a significant competitive advantage. Other authors have discussed how, despite being locally embedded at some levels, the growth of cooperative international exports can diminish cooperatives' independence from global market dynamics and influences [15].

These findings from the literature indicate how the distinction between different types of social capital proves to be useful to understand differentiated pathways of cooperative development [6,11]. However, this dependent nature of cooperatives on social capital has limitations as well as benefits [20]. Critics of the social capital concept point out that there is no consensus on whether it manifests at an individual or collective level [36], that it is easy to confuse the ability to secure resources through networks with the resources themselves, and that there is a tendency to understate the negative aspects of social capital [21,37].

In terms of limitations, Zhao [38] specified that the presence of social capital may restrain the entry of outsiders, limit members' business motivation and innovation, and delay the promotion of some talented individuals. The cohesiveness of a cooperative society may be harmful for the cooperative development in some respects too, for example, with regards to the maintenance costs associated with social capital. Excessive social capital may also result in an overly closed network, limiting access to external resources and impeding the cooperative's ability to adapt to changing environments, common in global food markets.

In its most negative expression, social capital in closed networks can lead to discrimination, exploitation, corruption, and domination, both within an organisation and a region. In cases of excess of trust and inadequate control, undetected opportunistic behaviours might arise. Nevertheless, in terms of organisational performance, while it is important to acknowledge the harmful effects social capital can have, this should not obscure its beneficial effects (mutual support, cooperation, institutional trust, and effectiveness) that apply at both the organisational and regional levels [11].

3. Third Spaces and Valuing the Marginal

This paper draws on the anthropological notion of third spaces to illustrate how this concept can help identify, unravel, and frame empirical evidence of social capital emerging from shared food spaces, both physical and ideological, and in between rural and urban spaces and people involved in alternative food dynamics [39]. The concept of third spaces was developed in anthropological studies by post-colonial writer Homi Bhabha [39]. Bhabha's concern with colonisation made him aware of the overlapping spaces that some native people found themselves in, new spaces that combined features of their old culture and that imposed by the colonisers. These hybrid or third spaces were contested territories in which new identities, languages, and hybrid cultures emerged,

characterised by an “unpredictable and changing combination of attributes of each of the two bordering spaces” [40] (p. 53).

Bhabha’s concept has become highly influential and has transcended disciplinary boundaries: Bachmann-Medick applied the concept to translation theory [41]; Soja proposed a theory of third space to reconceptualise space and spatiality [42]. The term has also been used in planning, education, and linguistic studies [43–45]. When applied to information technology participatory design, the benefits of fostering third spaces (in between the user’s domain and the technology developer’s domain) have been described as:

creating the conditions for challenging assumptions, learning reciprocally, creating new ideas, which emerge through negotiation and co-creation of identities, working languages, understandings, and relationships, and polyvocal (many-voiced) discussions across and through differences [40] (p. 166).

In retail, the idea of third spaces has been increasingly appropriated by outlets, especially clothes shop chains, in an attempt to fight digital commerce by focusing on providing “experiences” to customers and creating spaces that encourage shoppers to visit retail spaces [46].

In food retail, venues such as the Third Space café in Dublin emerged in the shape of a social business venture that describes third spaces on its website as “neighbourhood places where people can gather regularly, easily, informally and inexpensively” [47]. Bigger players have also entered the third space territory; Starbucks has been positioning itself for nearly two decades as a third space in between home and the office, a place to relax, but also work and hold meetings [48].

However, despite the explicit reference to the term third space in the above academic and industry examples, their conception of third spaces is quite narrow, both spatially (with a clear focus on urban areas) and demographically (organised by fairly homogeneous groups of people); these initiatives do not attempt to question and transform the wider systems in which they exist.

At the other end of the supply chain, third spaces around food production have also emerged with the rise in urban agriculture, creating new asks and new challenges for urban planning and municipal regulations. Front gardens and public areas become symbolic spaces, often creating conflict between conceptions of “culturally appropriate” and “legitimate” use of space that stir debate [49]. In this context, efforts by municipalities to separate agriculture from residential uses are interrogated, and the question of is land is for arises.

The actual label of third space has been rarely applied to describe people. An exception is the case of the media using the term to refer to the growers of Los Angeles’ South Central Farm. This farm was considered to be, at the beginning of the current century, the largest urban farm in the U.S., cultivated by urban dwellers, mostly from Latin American descent. During their long struggle to remain on the land, which resulted in eviction, they received much media attention (including the documentary film *The Garden*) and were described as “third space farmers” as their activities were compatible with the needs of the community and had a combination of “human and natural capital” [50]. The farm had a large number of plant species and varieties that were considered and used by their growers not only as food—as considered by conventional commercial farmers—but also as medicine, for spiritual purposes, infrastructure (for example, using cactus patches as natural fencing and food), and companion plants [51]. By bringing plants and a variety of uses from their cultural traditions, these farmers were making place and making a home away from home.

Bhabha's theory of cultural hybridity can open up a window to these fertile environments for innovation in food and farming, for in-between" spaces that "provide the terrain for elaborating strategies of selfhood—singular or communal—that initiate new signs of identity, and innovative sites of collaboration, and contestation, in the act of defining the idea of society itself" [39] (p. 2). It is argued that because of the contestation, questioning, and arising challenging situations in third spaces, a space for reinterpretation and renegotiation emerges. Being in this in-between space, reality and temporality can foster creativity, since "cultural production is always more productive where it is most ambivalent and transgressive" [39] (p. 2). This concept is used in this paper to help analyse the dynamics of innovative cooperative initiatives emerging at the interstices of well-established food cultures and regimes [52,53]. The third space lens helps us unravel the new identities with which farmers, activists, and consumers experiment in multistakeholder cooperative models, and the new sets of practices, language, and values that are created during these interactions.

Similar to the permaculture principle of using the edge and valuing the margins—based on the idea that productivity levels and number of species are higher in shared edges or boundaries where two ecosystems come together, as the resources from both sides are available to support life [54,55], the concept of third space serves as a useful metaphor in food and farming studies research by emphasising the value of often unheard voices, such as those of small farmers, women farmers, consumers with low income, and those moving between dichotomies often used to divide the current food system and its actors: the rural and the urban, consumer and producer, legal and, in some cases, illegal ways of producing and distributing food (e.g., raw milk) and even saving seeds. When applied to the multistakeholder cooperative ecosystem, which will be analysed next, the edge and third spaces created between cities and rural areas, between urbanites and ruralites, and people, places, and animals at the margins of the dominant food system—from people at risk of social and financial exclusion to disappearing breeds and varieties—become active and useful parts of the whole.

4. Materials and Methods

This section describes the steps followed in this research and the datasets used. Case study methodology was selected as it is considered to be most appropriate when the focus of the study is to answer how and why questions, when the behaviour that wants to be observed cannot be manipulated, and the boundaries are not clear between the phenomenon and the context [56]. Interview and document data from case studies collected by the author between 2014 and 2016 as part of a previous project on agricultural cooperatives were included in the analysis [57]. To complement and update those data, desktop research was carried out from February to June 2021 in order to perform a follow up investigation of the most recent developments in the case studies presented.

The data analysed for each case included reports, websites, constitutions, and newsletters to learn more about the culture and practices of multistakeholder cooperatives. Multistakeholder cooperatives are cooperatives with two or more types of member categories, e.g., in food, multistakeholder cooperatives can have a membership comprising consumers, producers, buyers, and workers [57], but they exist in other economic sectors as well, such as in health, credit cooperatives, etc. [58,59]. Governance becomes more complex, but it acknowledges the interdependence of different actors in the food system. They challenge the often held assumption that consumers and producers have irreconcilable aims (e.g., regarding fair prices). The transforming potential of the model has been recognised by many civil society actors including anticapitalist networks and organisations working for food sovereignty [60,61]. The cases selected are meant to be representative of the multistakeholder phenomenon. The cooperatives analysed are:

- Manchester Veg People (MVP; Manchester, U.K.) [60]: a multi-stakeholder cooperative of growers, workers, and buyers from restaurants, cafes, and the University of Manchester who are growing, trading, and educating about local organic food. MVP is the result of an ongoing collaboration that started in 2009 between the Kindling Trust and a small group of organic local producers and two buyers that were exploring how to best coordinate their demand.
- OrganicLea (London, U.K.) [62]: a workers' cooperative growing food following permaculture methods and direct selling. This project started in 2001 on one acre of once-derelict allotment land in the Lea River's valley. In 2007, the Waltham Forest Council closed its plant nursery, sited around the corner from OrganicLea's allotment site, providing significant extra space outdoors and under glass to increase their own local production and develop a community plant nursery.
- Catasol (Aviles, Spain) [63]: a multi-stakeholder cooperative formed at the beginning of 2013 in land previously owned by a building contractor. All members share the ownership of the land. Consumer members can purchase food and other household staples from the cooperative.
- Central de Abastecimiento Catalana (Catalonian Supply Centre or CAC) [64]: the food branch of the Cooperative Integral Catalana (Catalonia, Spain), founded in 2010 with the vision of covering members' health, food, energy, and financial needs.
- Esnetik Milk coop [65] (Bilbao, Spain): a multi-stakeholder cooperative of sheep shepherds, workers, organisations, buying groups, and individual consumers that started selling its products in 2012.

Out of the five, four are registered as multistakeholder cooperatives; OrganicLea is a workers' cooperative with an interesting model of production based on permaculture and high worker, stakeholder, and political engagement. OrganicLea's workers' cooperative status is a rare legal form in U.K. farming, being one of only a few of its kind in the country. For the purpose of this paper, OrganicLea is also referred to as a multistakeholder cooperative given their direct selling practices and close engagement with consumers.

Following a review of the literature on third spaces, a list of attributes characteristic of third spaces was produced (Table 1). The next step of the data analysis involved identifying any alignments between multistakeholder cooperatives' practices and the list of attributes produced in the previous step in order to assess the extent to which they can be considered as promoters and re-creators of third spaces. Finally, the alignment with definitions of bonding, bridging, and linking social capital was analysed. This exercise was based on whether these practices in third spaces were creating or reinforcing ties with like or unlike actors and at what geographical level, e.g., from locally to internationally.

Table 1. Social capital in third spaces of cooperation (the Author).

Characteristics of Third Spaces (Adapted from Muller, 2007)	Examples of Practices and Characteristics from Case Studies that Adhere to Characteristics of Third Spaces
Overlap between 2 (or more) different fields (in-betweeness)	Spatially: urban and rural spaces Food sectors: linking production and catering
Marginal to reference fields	Niche, not perceived as a threat to dominant system, allowing them more flexibility for innovation.
Novel to reference fields	Introducing novel multi-stakeholder cooperative models, innovative double labeling practices, new inter/national networks being developed, etc.
Not “owned” by any reference field in dominant system	Reducing dependency from agri-business by aiming for closed farming systems. Some were dependent on funding from external actors for the first years but are in a period of transition towards being commercially viable.
Partaking of selected attributes of reference fields	Knowledge of actors from different fields (where they still operate, both consumer and producers): e.g. experience around navigating the issues of logistics; knowledge of local and export markets; previous experience working in cooperative enterprises.
Potential site of conflicts between/among reference fields	Difficulties with the administration regarding non-for-profit status Taking share of local market for local organic produce Raising expectations from consumers, e.g. expecting local food in their supermarkets. Raising expectations from buyers: e.g. expecting local organic food from providers but also to have a say on what’s grown and how.
Questioning and challenging of assumptions	Giving space to debate and question assumptions such as: What can be labelled as local? What does expensive mean? Is price related to unit or related to overall usable amount? What is land for? What is agriculture for? Speculating or making a living from food production? Maintaining cultural traditions? How does the typical farmer look and sound like (relating to gender, ethnic and class dimensions)? Challenging assumptions such as 1) farmers and consumers have irreconcilable objectives; 2) People at risk of social or financial exclusion are of no value to capitalist societies.
Mutual learning	Between growers, between urbanites and ruralities, Events with workshops for members educating about traditional varieties, crafts, recipes, educational events in schools.
Synthesis of new ideas	Weighted voting, co-defining what local means, quality, terms and conditions, development of faircoin initiative, etc. Working with local authorities to promote local food and in some cases (e.g. MVP) to produce a Food Strategy.
Negotiation and co-creation of ...	
Identities	Fostering identity changes and questions: “prosumers”, “urbanites in transition”; multi-stakeholderism; integral cooperative member; what am I cooperating for?; identity of the cooperative Offering volunteering activities to allow people to wear different hats and experience different roles
Working language	Creating and using novel terms such as “multi-stakeholder”, “neo-rurals”, “prosumers”, etc. Changing words to aspire to a non-gendered discourse (in Spanish)
Working assumption and dynamics	Frequent discussion and meetings: “Freedom is an endless meeting” Participation, social media platforms
Understandings	Food as a right; farmers should make a decent living Acknowledging interdependence amongst humans and nature
Relationships	Based on principles of social justice, mutual aid, solidarity Trade relationships change, e.g. alternative currencies Activism and dynamic relationships with other organisations and movements working to change the food system (own farmers’ unions (e.g. LWA), being representatives of Via Campesina, participating in the Oxford Real Farming Conference and maintaining links with conventional trade unions). Hosting events to bring members together and celebrate the conviviality of food

Table 1. Cont.

Characteristics of Third Spaces (Adapted from Muller, 2007)	Examples of Practices and Characteristics from Case Studies that Adhere to Characteristics of Third Spaces
Collective actions	Frequent, celebratory, education and training, open days, Multilevel – to influence policy makers (e.g. MVP—leading on Manchester’s food strategy) Agreeing what a fair price is through discussion.
Dialogues across and within differences	
Polyvocality	Diverse multi-stakeholder membership from different backgrounds and with different objectives
What is considered to be knowledge?	Stretching the meaning of data, valuing all types of knowledge, reviving the value of producers’ knowledge How is knowledge shared between producers, other members and other organisations?
What are the rules of evidence?	Evidence comes from all directions, top down from trusted sources and bottom up through members. E.g. Esnetik’s member sharing IP of cheese. Performance of varieties
How are decisions made?	Consensus, weighted voting; informal and then formal discussion
Reduced emphasis on authority—increased emphasis on interpretation	Adopting cosmovision and worldmaking perspectives to challenge dominant interpretations of food system objectives and norms.
Reduced emphasis on individualism—increased emphasis on collectivism	Some of the cooperatives offer the same salary rate to all workers Cooperative working, realisation of each other’s needs and strengths
Heterogeneity as the norm	Diverse multi-stakeholder membership, diverse crops/species, growers of different backgrounds, financial strategies to survive, valuing the marginal.

5. Findings and Discussion: Opening Spaces of Possibilities and Closing Gaps to Maintain Alterity

The findings from the case studies are discussed in the next four subsections. The first three sections expand upon the content in Table 1 (adapted from Muller [40]), which reviews attributes of third spaces in relation to the practices of the cases presented, namely: (i) operating in third spaces, (ii) negotiation and co-creation of new social capital dynamics in third spaces, and (iii) dialogues within and across differences. The four subsections link back these third spaces practices with the concept and reproduction of social capital, and the implications for agricultural cooperatives and the transition toward sustainable food systems.

5.1. Operating in Third Spaces

Cooperatives have always operated in the space in between the private and public sectors [66]. In the particular case of multistakeholder cooperatives, their characteristics overlap, are marginal to, and sometimes novel to their reference fields, i.e., dominant food actors such as large agricultural cooperatives and retailers. The key difference with the reference field of conventional agricultural cooperatives is that, while maintaining a membership model, the novel multistakeholder approach incorporates different types of food actor categories into the legal structure and day-to-day running of the cooperative [58]. This inclusion in different combinations across all the cases brings with it an expansion of social capital dimensions. Suddenly, bonding social capital, which in standard agricultural cooperatives emerges mainly amongst farmer members, now involves a wider range of actors, such as consumers, workers, and restaurateurs. These cooperatives' active involvement in social movements working for sustainable and cooperative economies and, in some cases, the development of local food policies, extends their bridging and linking social capital to local authorities, NGOs, other movement actors, trade unions, etc.

The cases also show attributes novel to their reference field. For example, an innovative approach difficult to replicate by large retailers is Esnetik's introduction of double labeling, which consists of labelling all produce with a breakdown of the price and percentages that are provided to producers, packaging, processing, and commercialising. The cooperative has reported its pride on the supermarket-proof resistance offered by this strategy. Aware of how the dominant model has absorbed many of the initiatives and language of alternative food networks, such as organic and local [67], Esnetik is quite confident supermarkets will not be able to incorporate double labelling as it would reveal their own bad practices.

Some of the case studies have emerged to cover existing gaps in dominant systems, for example, a lack of local organic producers such as the case of Manchester Veg People, or of distributors and retailers for small-scale local dairy products such as in the case of Esnetik. The Esnetik initiative emerged out of the need for the product distribution of sheep shepherds that did not fit the logistic requirements of big industry players. As such, all the producers in Esnetik were at the margins of the dominant milk sector: they were either not based along the right milk collecting routes, which meant they were offered low prices for their milk, or their production was too traditional (e.g., milking by hand), not fitting the rewarded model of more litres at lower prices. These producers at the edge were able to be "rescued" by Esnetik, with their marginal practices being relabelled from "disadvantaging" to becoming a unique selling point and asset in a cooperative with a different set of criteria from the ones they were previously assessed against.

In some cases, the case studies conflict with dominant actors and legal systems. Alternative initiatives can sometimes be labelled as too radical, often presented as practices far removed from the average consumer. Sullivan et al. unravelled this claim in their study of social movements [68]. They analysed how practices or organisations gaining significance in contesting and escaping the structuring enclosures of dominant regimes become labelled as uncivil, when, in fact, many would argue the uncivil are the enablers of the status quo [68], in this case, of malnutrition and environmental crises perpetuated by the dominant food system. Practices in third spaces might move from the civil to the "uncivil",

and in some cases, from the legal to the illegal. This is the case of the Cooperativa Integral Catalana (CIC), the overarching network of the Catalan food cooperative (CAC), a network working to transform, rather than to adapt, to the capitalist system [69]. The CIC was founded with money swindled from banks by activist Enric Duran [70]. From 2006–2008, Duran borrowed around half a million euros from banks with no intention to pay the money back; instead, he gave the money away to fund and strengthen community-led initiatives at the margin of capitalism, as “capitalism won’t allow us to create alternatives” [71]. The aim of the networks of which Duran is part is to create better parallel financial, health, food, and education models that can “make capitalism become the marginal option” [71]. In 2009, Duran was arrested, and after an anonymous supporter paid his bail and facing eight years in jail, he became a fugitive and has been hiding since. He has continued to develop his international networks and work. The CIC has been working closely with the P2P Foundation developing FairCoop, a global coalition of open cooperatives and a decentralised “eco-friendly” cryptocurrency for “a fair economy” called FairCoin [72]. This contrasts with the CIC’s strict localised view, which operates only in Catalonia, balancing in a third space between local and global action, creating bridging and linking capital with international actors within and beyond food movements, and entering the digital commons realm. At the local level, the CIC used to accept a local alternative currency, again, a strategy hard to copy by large actors and able to create bridging social capital amongst the consumer members, producers, and local businesses involved in the initiative.

While working for global transformation, these multistakeholder cooperatives have to create economic microclimates in the short term in which to start testing alternatives while protecting themselves partially from the wider market. CIC’s acceptance and promotion of alternative currencies is an example of these microclimates. This multistakeholder cooperative also used to have intermember trading and partnerships with buying groups as strategies that allowed them to create new spaces to exchange their produce in more controlled conditions. Other cases, such as OrganicLea, offers the same salary rate to all worker members.

5.2. Negotiation and Co-Creation of New Social Capital Dynamics in Third Spaces

Spaces that foster flexible identities for members who can, at the same time, be producers and consumers, embodies the difference between what Bobel calls “doing activism” and “being activist” [73]. Many of these members are doing activism without self-identifying as activists, which increases the potential impact of these initiatives and their potential to engage less committed consumers [74]. The impact on attitudes of these wider interconnections can trigger consumer behaviour and system transformations.

In line with the theoretical features of third spaces, new terms and identities emerge in these cooperatives. Example of new terms are “prosumers”—a combination of people who wear both the producer and consumer hats—and “neo-rurals, used to refer to urbanites moving to the countryside to start a new life in farming and as such, embodying a new identity [75]. Some of Esnetik shepherds regularly buy produce from the cooperative, reinforcing their dual role as producers and consumers.

Consumer members’ food attitudes as well as buying and consumption routines seem to evolve when participating in these initiatives. These cooperatives are facilitating the passage from individual reflexivity to the collective action needed to resolve contradictions between personal values and patterns of daily life in conventional food systems that move the action from individuals to collectives [14,76], facilitating a shift from assumptions to reflections about food. Bringing together different groups of stakeholders under the same umbrella for a common benefit threatens what Ulrich Beck observed as the basis of the neoliberal project: a conception of divided citizenship [77]. In these multistakeholder cooperatives, consumption dynamics emerge as a new political space where “the political possibilities of consumption (are) less than the revolutionary overthrow of capitalism but more than merely a niche marketing opportunity” [78] (p. 18).

Informal cooperative behaviours are part of the rural culture in which these initiatives exist and emerge from shared dynamics, shared time, past, present, and the expectation of a future together, which modulates their relationships and information-sharing and decision-making processes [79]. In terms of collective actions, all of these cooperatives follow multilevel crosscutting collaborations at different levels, inspired by the “act local, think global” motto. They believe that social transition comes from social movements and the social base. They have horizontal and vertical links with other cooperatives, movements, and civil society groups both national (e.g., Campaign for Real Farming in the U.K., and GRAIN in Spain) and international such as Via Campesina. In the U.K., both case studies are active members of the Land Workers’ Alliance, a relatively new trade union for small- and medium-scale farmers, challenging the current system that favours large monoculture farms [80].

From a legal perspective, apart from OrganicLea, which is registered as a workers’ cooperative, one of the only ones operating in the farming sector in the U.K., the rest of the case studies are registered as multistakeholder cooperatives [58]. Having a formalised legal structure can be seen as a potential risk of co-optation and corporatisation [81], but at the same time, it can act as a protective tool that more informal food initiatives cannot use when conflict arises [57].

5.3. Dialogues within and across Differences

When researching diverse membership models (with producers, workers, and consumer member groups), the question of how multistakeholder cooperatives can deal with high levels of governance complexity arises, since their structure requires taking into account different stakeholders’ views and objectives. A solution to this complexity is the adoption of more reflexive network governance approaches [82]. A way to manage different opinions and bring consumers and buyers in to the decision-making process is through weighted voting (e.g., in Manchester Veg People) or weighted representation in the board (e.g., Catasol or Esnetik); these weighted mechanisms help multistakeholder cooperatives to avoid power concentration in a single type of membership, which is exactly the problem they see in the dominant food system and wish to avoid. According to their constitutions, all the case studies are set to have decision making by voting, however, in practice, all of them aim for consensus as their preferred option. The dispersion of power offered by this type of distributed governance is an innovation not common in their reference field (Table 1).

In all of these cooperatives, people from very different backgrounds—many not from farming backgrounds previously—come together, creating diverse and unlikely groups with a wide range of skills and experiences difficult to replicate in more conventional food circles. Esnetik offers an interesting case, as its membership counts with individual members, buying groups, but also six legal entities, including a local council, an NGO, and a rural development organisation. Initially, those organisational members were supposed to be there only to offer support for the governance and business model, but they ended up placing orders with the co-op and thus becoming consumer members too [57].

It is interesting that some of the producers interviewed had been employed in workers’ cooperatives not related to farming before becoming growers; others had shared experiences in trade unions or the green political party, bringing a new cooperative perspective and experience to agriculture, very difficult to find in conventional farming cooperatives.

As Chatterton and Pickerill discussed, it is through these everyday interactions, challenges, and contradictions that “activists are constantly border crossing between the familiar and unfamiliar, the world they are stuck in and cope with, the world they are against and resist, and the world they dream of and work towards” [74] (p.487). Esnetik and the *mercados éticos* (ethical markets) they used to organise before the pandemic are an example of this border crossing. At these markets, consisting of stalls at which they tried to gain passers-by attention, they aimed to raise awareness of problems in their sector, and change purchasing and consumption habits. This initiative links to other innovations that

try to reduce co-optation by aiming to create new commons and markets embedded in negotiated normative frameworks shared by producers and consumers. Van der Ploeg has discussed how these new markets mostly emerge at the interstices, places where the functioning of large commodity markets is failing and not covering needs [53] (p. 84).

Another characteristic of third spaces is polyvocality, an attribute common in multi-stakeholder cooperatives by default. The diverse backgrounds of their members, some new to farming, encourage them to question and challenge stereotypes of how farmers look and sound. Perhaps for this reason, these cooperatives are becoming centres of convergence for different issues around land, crop varieties and breeds seed varieties and control, and gender (and the gendered Spanish language). An example of their efforts to preserve local breeds comes from Esnetik's requirements for producers is to use the local lacha breed of sheep.

These multistakeholder cooperatives also aim for diversity in their offer of services and products to members beyond food items, especially the Spanish ones, e.g., Catasol and CAC. The English cases focus more on offering training and facilitating new entries into farming, as is the case with the FarmStart programme run by the Kindling Trust, the organisation instrumental in setting up Manchester Veg People (now transformed into Veg Box People [83]). FarmStart courses are run to help other people set up similar projects in other regions. OrganicLea was the first to follow the lead by setting up a sister FarmStart Project in the Lea Valley in London. The CIC also used to coordinate a network for education and banking, amongst others. The heterogeneity of growers, member types, crops, breeds, routes to market, coalitions, etc., becomes the norm. Their work to support people in making a living in rural and semirural areas contradicts the current demographic challenges of the so-called hollowed-out Spain (*la España vaciada*) [84].

Ien Ang's claim on "fortresses of ethnic exclusivity", when reflecting on the usefulness of the concept of hybridity for undoing and blurring traditional boundaries and challenging cultural imaginaries, offers us a strong rationale for the value of the effort (or transaction costs in economics terminology) that takes to set up and maintain a cooperative with different types of stakeholder member groups: "[...] hold onto this hybrid in-betweenness not because it is a comfortable position to be in, but because its very ambivalence is a source of cultural permeability and vulnerability which is a necessary condition for living together-in-difference" [85] (p. 194).

Multistakeholder cooperatives are set up to be disruptive of dominant food discourses, and to unsettle those seemingly uncomplicated profiles of "mainstream" stakeholder groups in the food system, often presented as opposed, unmovable categories constituted through the history of supply chains and farmers cooperation. The study of multistakeholder cooperatives reveals the need to develop more complicated narratives for challenging traditional consumer and producer labels, and unravel other dimensions of difference, such as class, gender, and rural vs. urban divides. A focus on such entanglements can help us experience and test how to achieve fairer and more sustainable food relations, and question the limits of cooperation and best practices.

5.4. Social Capital in Multistakeholder Cooperatives

Researchers have found social capital can encourage cooperative behaviour, thereby facilitating the development of new forms of association and innovative organisation models [3,86]. Evidence from the case studies seems to indicate multistakeholder cooperatives are an example of innovative organisations that are both based in and can generate social capital.

The agricultural cooperative system is designed to be a network structure. In conventional cooperatives, member farmers running their farms independently for their own benefit are banded together voluntarily as one entity: a cooperative for mutual benefits, participating in cooperative business as customers and owners and acting collectively. Without trust and reciprocity among members, these commitments are futile. Based on these arguments, scholars claim that the agricultural cooperative is the most social-capital-dependent

organisation [9]. In the case of multistakeholder cooperatives, both the initial wish and later requirement to act collectively are significantly expanded by bringing together a combination of stakeholder groups such as producers, workers, buyer, and consumers under the same cooperative umbrella. As external actors become members, the integration of different stakeholder groups seems to align with indicators of bonding, bridging, and linking social capital.

Group morale and a shared vision are normally strengthened by the homogeneity of economic interests of group members and inhibited by their heterogeneity [5]. As the size and/or member heterogeneity of a group expands, maintaining and growing social capital become increasingly difficult [87]. However, the recognition and integration of stakeholder groups within the cooperative structure, legal governance and practice seems to overcome the negative impact of heterogeneity of actors who normally find themselves as contraries.

Like physical capital and human capital, the creation of social capital requires a sustainable investment of time and effort [20,88]. Social capital is produced through long-term interactions between individuals, organisations, and systems. Its creation is even more difficult than that of physical or human capital due to the commitment required to develop long-term interpersonal relations and the collective participation of all members. At the same time, social capital, in contrast to financial capital, is a resource that grows the more it is used. The structure and composition of multistakeholder cooperatives, being quite complicated to start with, require a certain level of prior social capital from members-to-be, who must be willing to explore, learn, and legally set up these innovative cooperatives, and be willing to cooperate with different types of actors.

Once the cooperatives have been set up, the primary mechanisms by which social capital can be maintained and increased reside in the different dimensions of social capital. First, as the structural dimension serves as the basic resource for the creation of social capital, the most obvious way for a cooperative to build social capital is to foster the social relationships amongst its members [22], which multi-stakeholder cooperatives achieve through regular meetings and events. Second, cooperatives should direct efforts into keeping the membership stable to avoid ties disappearing when members leave. Listening to members' concerns and ideas and paying every worker the same salary are examples of mechanisms to keep members engaged and make them feel valued. Third, fostering the development of shared language and understanding among group members is important. Frequent communication between the members and management is thought to enhance trust and loyalty [22]. Meetings with buyers to agree which varieties and what quantities to plant are common in these multi-stakeholder cooperatives, providing examples of conscious mechanisms to achieve a shared understanding of needs and collective objectives. Finally, cooperatives should develop measures to encourage members to participate in cooperative governance, which multi-stakeholder cooperatives achieve with weighted voting and involving different stakeholder groups. Social capital is essential in informal institutions that compensate the limited presence of laws and bylaws regarding farmer cooperatives [20]; this function is relevant in the case of multi-stakeholder cooperatives as their legal form is fairly new and relatively unknown in theory and practice.

In traditional cooperatives, the relationship between members and the cooperatives are often characterised by information asymmetry, since members usually have a small amount of equity investment and are not obliged to use any or all of the cooperative's business. This information asymmetry may result in members' opportunistic behaviours, increase the transaction costs, and consequently harm the cooperative's business [4]. The more horizontal structure of relations amongst different groups of actors, in contrast to the vertical relations in the supply chain in which conventional agricultural cooperatives operate, seem to reduce the risk of opportunistic behaviour. However, the time required to achieve and maintain an effective communication and shared objectives in multi-stakeholder cooperatives can increase transaction costs. These transactions costs can often be even higher when trying to maintain the economic efficiency of the cooperative enterprise while observing the social values of cooperation, such as democracy, equity,

etc. [57]. Although the observation of these values can sometimes positively affect the economic performance of cooperatives, their effect is not always seen as beneficial. In some cases, the necessity to act in accordance with the values represents an additional strain on the economic performance of cooperatives and causes the well-known tendencies of their economisation [5].

At the time of writing, some of the case studies had changed their models to adapt to the pandemic-related closures and restrictions in the catering sector. For example, Manchester Veg People seems to have paused their wholesale catering focus and started a direct vegetable box to households instead as Veg Box People [83]. OrganicLea, Esnetik, and Catasol have continued their normal activities of supplying consumer members. The CAC does not seem to have been publicly active since 2018 [64].

In summary, the evidence from the case studies suggests that the multi-stakeholder legal form is a means to operate in the food economy while still being flexible and accommodating enough to allow them to operate in line with the groups' founding principles, philosophy, and objectives. The complex structure of multi-stakeholder cooperatives indicates that bonding, bridging, and linking social capital are needed to set them up and to maintain them, due to the different needs, timetables, and ways of working of stakeholder groups involved in the running of these shared endeavours.

The governance structure and practices associated with their multi-stakeholderism and worker democracy mean that the legal form is also being used at the same time as a tool or mechanism for the reduction in co-optation from dominant food system dynamics and for the creation of economic microclimates.

From these cases, the need arises to acknowledge that sense of in-between spaces of complicated allegiances, tensions to reproduce economically and in members, and to expand spaces of everyday cooperation, imagining, and exchanging food. These cultural landscapes are mediated by a myriad of encounters with their local environments, traditions, varieties, administrations as well as by discourses and images of cooperation and rurality.

6. Conclusions

This paper has drawn on Homi Bhabha's anthropological notion of third spaces to illustrate how this concept can help identify, unravel, and frame empirical evidence from multi-stakeholder cooperatives that, due to their legal structure, are both based on and precursors of social capital. This research analysed the practices of five multi-stakeholder cooperatives based in Spain and the U.K. that are attempting novel models to differentiate themselves from conventional agricultural cooperatives and the mainstream globalised dynamics of agricultural relations. Data from the case studies showed how multi-stakeholder cooperatives are creating both real and symbolic spaces that disrupt and reframe the professional agricultural cooperative imaginary.

The third space concept has proved to be a valuable theoretical proposition to conceptualise the liminality that characterises these cooperatives with different types of membership categories (e.g., producers, workers, caterers, and consumers) and decentralised governance structures. Third spaces offer a lens to identify cooperative practices that are in a domain in between conventional agricultural cooperatives and large food actors on one side, and informal alternative food initiatives on the other side. As operating in third spaces is a strategy hard to copy by dominant players, it appears to reduce the risk of co-optation of these initiatives and increase their social and environmental sustainability.

This research showed how multi-stakeholder cooperatives can generate and blur the boundaries between different types of social capital: bonding, bridging, and linking. The multi-stakeholder model also blurs the borders between producer, worker, and consumer identities. Many of the members contribute in different ways: produce, labour, purchases and services to the cooperative. In these spaces, there is a more holistic representation of members and a better understanding of their needs and ways of working. These cooperatives are organising both internally and externally in line with more place-based,

reflexive, and network governance approaches that focus on processes and social relations rather than on standards that are more likely to be co-opted, as has been the case, to some extent, with the organic and fair trade movements [89,90].

Similar to processes of food policy stretching [91], these cooperatives are stretching both their mission (moving beyond a single-group membership and becoming actors of transformation) and the spaces they represent: they exist as work spaces, learning spaces, but more noticeably, generating third spaces for cooperation where consumers, workers, buyers, and producers can re-think, produce, and reproduce alternative ways of covering their needs. They are relational, open, internally diverse, and externally stretched. In some instances, they are stretching to spaces outside their comfort zone, for example, having to negotiate their relation with local administrations and agreeing amongst members on the formula for a fair price for their produce.

In addition, these multi-stakeholder cooperatives are trying to be part of and grow a new economy beyond the private/public and centralised/decentralised dichotomies toward a more distributed model. They are recreating cooperatives as historic places for education, innovation, transformation, and communication flows. On one hand, they bet on a re-localised model of cooperation; on the other hand, they link it to efforts addressed at bringing about wider transformations beyond regional and national borders by being active in wider movements such as FairCoin and Via Campesina.

The findings showed that this new wave of emerging niche cooperatives are opening up spaces of possibility in opposition to the dominant agrifood regime [67]. The evidence shows how the degeneration of agricultural cooperatives is not a contingent fate, but not an easy one to circumvent. These multi-stakeholder cooperatives exist on a tightrope between adhering to their principles, surviving as enterprises, and being able to forward and realise their visions of alternative food systems, the economy, and society.

Both a limitation of this study and a suggestion for future research is the need to delve deeper into social capital indicators and explore other dimensions of social capital typologies such as structural, cognitive, and relational [86]. Follow-up studies could include surveys to cooperative members to measure their perceived level of different types of social capitals in their cooperatives. Previous studies have used this typology to measure social capital in standard cooperatives, but not in multi-stakeholder ones (see [12] for a summary of the literature on this topic). Other knowledge gaps include to what extent social capital is a prerequisite for the formation of multi-stakeholder cooperatives, and what aspects of the structure of the multi-stakeholder model are dependent on social capital or a source of it. Studies concerning the negative influence of social capital in multi-stakeholder cooperatives as these organisations age would also be a novel contribution to the literature.

Multi-stakeholder cooperatives reflect the usefulness of hybridity in food relations for undoing traditional boundaries between actor groups in food systems and for enhancing the social capital potential of each stakeholder group, both individually and collectively. By encouraging and experimenting with the porousness of cooperatives and the porousness of all cultural and socioeconomic boundaries in an irrevocably globalised, interconnected, and interdependent world, they create third spaces of cooperation in which to test and conceive food system relations in terms of a complex entanglement, not in terms of insurmountable differences between producers, retailers, and consumers.

Funding: This research was funded by City, University of London.

Institutional Review Board Statement: The phase of this research that involved human subjects was approved and conducted according to the Ethics Board of City, University of London.

Informed Consent Statement: Informed consent was obtained from all subjects involved in the study.

Data Availability Statement: Not applicable.

Conflicts of Interest: The author declares no conflict of interest.

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