Exploring approaches to equal and effective participation of governance actors in trans-local city food networks

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ABSTRACT

This study examines how trans-local city food networks approach participation within their internal governance arrangements. For this purpose, we investigate eleven trans-local city food networks that work on up- and/or out-scaling of sustainable local food system initiatives. The results show that approaches to participation vary, especially when it comes to inclusion, distributive – and collective agency. The analysis suggests that while non-governmental actors are included in many networks, their opportunities for effective participation are limited in comparison with local policymakers. Additionally an improved cooperation and alignment between trans-local city food networks would avoid duplication of efforts. By reflecting on their own approach trans-local city food networks could actively look for other networks that can reinforce or complement their own work.

1. Introduction

Food systems are by nature multi-scalar. Due to years of increasing globalisation, economic and political decision-making and execution in these systems is spread among various governance levels. As a consequence, transforming these systems can only be done by collaborative efforts made in trans-local alliances (Levkoe, 2014; Morley & Morgan, 2021). Realising this, social and political scientists have developed a renewed attention for inter and trans-local governance arrangements. This attention is exemplified by studies using the notion of scale to study relations in trans-local governance arrangements (Coulson & Sonnino, 2019; Jones & Hills, 2021; Moragues-Faus & Sonnino, 2019; Santo & Moragues-Faus, 2019). Overall, these studies highlight a great inequality in the power relations between on the one hand the local and on the other hand the national and international level, where the majority of food system decision-making is situated. Parsons, Lang, and Barling (2021) found these imbalances actively hinder sustainable food system developments at the local level.

Addressing these inequalities some authors highlight the potential of trans-local city food networks (Jones & Hills, 2021; Pitt & Jones, 2016; Santo & Moragues-Faus, 2019) as an instrument to reorganise power relationships. The term food network is frequently used in articles on local food governance to describe a coalition of actors which promotes sustainable production and/or consumption (Fourat, Closson,

Holzemer, & Hudon, 2020; Renting, Schermer, & Rossi, 2012). A Trans-Local City Food Network (TCFN) also brings together different actors; however, instead of operating within a specific city, they work on up- and/or out-scaling of sustainable local food system initiatives by facilitating exchange and learning processes between cities. Their members can be local policymakers (both elected politicians and civil servants), community members, and/or representatives of both local and international organisations.

While some TCFNs have already existed for almost twenty years, around 2010 their number began to significantly increase. The establishment of the Milan Urban Food Policy Pact (MUFPP) in 2015, in which city mayors commit to the development of sustainable local food systems (MUFPP, 2021), accelerated that trend even more. Over the years, we have seen an evolution from a majority of global networks to more and more regional and local networks. Although it must be said that, with a few exceptions, most of those are situated within Europe. This is partly due to the efforts and allocated resources by the European Commission for this kind of projects.

Despite the relatively long history of TCFNs, the topic remains understudied. To the best of our knowledge, at the time of writing the scientific publications dealing with TCFNs are limited to Blay-Palmer, Sonnino, and Custot (2016), Coulson and Sonnino (2019), Jones and Hills (2021), Levkoe (2014), Martín and de la Fuente (2022), Mooney, Tanaka, and Ciciurkaite (2014), Moragues-Faus (2017, 2021),

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Moragues-Faus and Sonnino (2019), Santo and Moragues-Faus (2019), Sibbing, Candel, and Termeer (2021).

When diving deeper into the content of these papers, they can be categorised into three distinct types. The first type of papers starts from initiatives at the local level and studies how they engage with other governance levels through TCFNs (Coulson & Sonnino, 2019; Levkoe, 2014). The second type, conversely, starts from the TCFNs to study the impact that they have on local (Jones & Hills, 2021; Santo & Moragues-Faus, 2019; Sibbing et al., 2021) and/or global food governance (Blay-Palmer et al., 2016; Martín & de la Fuente, 2022; Moragues-Faus, 2017; Santo & Moragues-Faus, 2019). Finally, the third type of papers focuses on the internal operation of TCFNs, which also is the scope of our own study.

So far only two published papers deal with this topic. Moragues-Faus and Sonnino (2019) study the origins and evolution of Sustainable Food Places focusing specifically on the tools and activities used by the network to assemble local experiences. In this study, they identify agency and contingency of place as key factors in the development and effectiveness of trans-local governance. In the same vain, Moragues-Faus (2021) explores the characteristics, functioning, and metagovernance of TCFNs in the first comparative analysis, using data from thirteen TCFNs.

Building on the work of Moragues-Faus (2021) and Moragues-Faus and Sonnino (2019), we delve deeper into how TCFNs approach the participation of different governance actors. This is a key topic that both authors touch upon in their work but requires further exploration. Moragues-Faus (2021) recommends TCFNs to work closely together with city officials but also to engage various types of other actors, such as academics, regional and national policymakers, civil society and private companies within internal governance arrangements to ensure interventions that go beyond political cycles. When it comes to the network Sustainable Food Places, we know from the study of Moragues-Faus and Sonnino (2019, p. 791) that they are "*actively working to forge an integrated, cross-sectoral and participative governance model*". However, we are left wondering how other TCFNs are doing in this regard.

We address this gap with a comparative analysis of TCFNs' approaches to participation. We focus on how they include different governance actors within their internal governance arrangements and if these arrangements support these actors' capacity to act for change. In the next section, we explore the concept of participation starting from the idea of participative justice, as has been suggested by Moragues-Faus (2019), and the concept of food democracy. The third section details the methodology used for this study. Section four analyses TCFNs' approaches focusing on inclusion, collective and distributive agency. At the end of this section, we bring these concepts together in three continua displaying differences in approaches between TCFNs. We conclude with discussing the study's limitations and providing some suggestions for further research on this topic.

2. Inclusion and agency in trans-local city food networks

The concept of participative justice proves useful when looking at the importance of participation in food governance arrangements such as TCFNs (Moragues-Faus, 2019). In contrast to other conceptualisations of food justice, participative justice focuses less on the unequal distribution of resources and more on participative inequalities, as these are seen as the root cause of the former. Loo (2014) proposes to include an understanding of informed consent in the definition of food justice. This implies that actors have enough information to be aware of risks and benefits associated with decisions in their local food system and understand the implications of those risks and benefits. Additionally, they should be able to approve or decline a decision without coercion.

Highlighting the importance of including participatory elements within food justice approaches is necessary. However, by focusing on informed consent, Loo still assumes a passive role for community members as they have to improve decisions, instead of co-creating them. In this sense, the definition of food democracy by Neva Hassanein (2003,

p. 83) is more promising: "*Food democracy ideally means that all members of an agro-food system have equal and effective opportunities for participation in shaping that system, as well as knowledge about the relevant alternative ways of designing and operating the system*".

In this definition, participation is understood as all actors having both equal and effective opportunities to shape a system. Where the first aspect, equality, refers to the inclusion of actors in a governance arrangement, the second aspect, effectiveness, implies the presence of agency. This agency is crucial since the mere inclusion of actors does not automatically lead to them having a voice in debates and decisions (Neef & Neubert, 2011). This implies that, to investigate participation in TCFNs, a better understanding of inclusion and agency in this context is necessary.

Starting with inclusion, a first observation is that processes of representation are paramount when it comes to the inclusion or exclusion of particular needs (Candel, 2022; Moragues-Faus, 2019). There are three primary reasons why. Firstly, the types of actors that are included, and the relationships between them, will affect the topics that are discussed, the priorities that are set, and ultimately the actions that are executed (Candel, 2022; Keiner & Kim, 2007). Secondly, opening up to a wider diversity of actors would democratise access to knowledge and capacities. This is confirmed by Sibbing et al. (2021), who add a third reason, namely, that the absence of NGAs in TCFNs can lead to groupthink due to a lack of opposition within the group of members.

A second observation is that it is important to look at potential selection mechanisms and membership requirements employed by TCFNs. In his analysis of food democracy initiatives, Candel (2022) distinguishes three possible selection mechanisms. The first is an open system where everyone who is interested is allowed to join. A second option entails a mechanism where designated actor(s) decide on the admission of new members. In this case, it is important to not look only at which actors decide but also at the criteria that underlie the decision. TCFNs can uphold membership requirements such as a specific geographical location, an annual fee, a certain level of commitment, or a certain stage of development of the urban food policy (Moragues-Faus, 2021). A final selection mechanism, although this has not been observed in TCFNs, is a system of sortition.

Agency is challenging to define as it has various meanings across disciplines. However, in the relevant field of food governance, a definition that is often cited is from Clapp, Moseley, Burlingame, and Termine (2021, p. 3): "*the capacity of individuals and groups to exercise a degree of control over their circumstances and to provide meaningful input into governance processes*". When it comes to the specific context of TCFNs, Moragues-Faus and Sonnino (2019) further disentangle the concept of agency, building on the literature about trans-local assemblages. They find that, since networks generate interactions between actors at different levels of governance, they can generate both distributive as collective agency.

A generally accepted definition of collective agency is lacking. However, in the context of TCFNs, it can be understood as the results of connecting the agency of multiple actors across spaces, scales and sectors within a network to advocate for change in the field of food systems (Fernandez-Wulff, 2019; Moragues-Faus & Sonnino, 2019).

A transition from individual to collective agency requires a combination of loose exchanges to generate ideas and tight collaborations to transform those ideas into practises and long-term action (Michel, 2020). To facilitate this transition, TCFNs create spaces for interactional openness, where members feel safe to exchange knowledge about food systems and reflect on individual versus collective choices (Moragues-Faus & Sonnino, 2019). Another requirement, especially when working with a heterogenous group of actors, is the co-construction of common ground. This is not always evident since it is intertwined with other elements such as interactional openness (Michel, 2020). The challenge for TCFNs is to assemble different experiences and needs through open conversation to create a shared understanding (Moragues-Faus & Sonnino, 2019). While this shared understanding often exists at an abstract

level, it can become contested once the TCFN starts working on specific actions (Sibbing et al., 2021).

Through these exchanges and building on their common ground, members generate ideas and concerns. TCFNs also play a potential role in influencing national and international agendas by voicing these ideas and concerns on other platforms (Jones & Hills, 2021; Santo & Moragues-Faus, 2019). By building up expertise and knowledge, a TCFN can establish a reputation at higher levels, which facilitates advocacy work (Pitt & Jones, 2016). However, Santo and Moragues-Faus (2019) also bring up some factors interfering with this process. Especially a lack of time and resources, in combination with the perception that results for the network are often limited, make network members reluctant to engage on other levels. Fostering cross-scalar collaborations often requires long-term commitments and familiarity with political processes, which are difficult for TCFNs to cope with.

Distributive agency, specifically in the context of trans-locality (McFarlane, 2009), can be understood as the discourses and practises within an assemblage that instigate individual action (Moragues-Faus & Sonnino, 2019). For example, TCFNs start from common principles and convictions (e.g., the need for more sustainable food systems) to influence the local governance processes of their member cities (Blay-Palmer et al., 2016; Jones & Hills, 2021; Moragues-Faus, 2021; Sibbing et al., 2021).

McFarlane (2009) states that agency is conceived as distributive socially, spatially and materially. Social distribution can be interpreted as relational aspects that incentivise action. Moragues-Faus and Sonnino (2019) characterise TCFNs as a 'network of networks', by which they mean that most of the members participating in TCFNs are also part of local networks (such as food policy councils) in the city they represent and/or participate in food system activities on higher governance levels. It is through these engagements that narratives, practises and the capacity to act generated in the TCFN can reach actors at other levels.

Spatial distribution refers to generating agency at different sites. In a comparative analysis of the Food Policy Networks (FPN) and the Sustainable Food Cities (now Sustainable Food Places), Santo and Moragues-Faus (2019, p. 82) conclude that these TCFNs are "*instigating new socio-spatial topological relations blurring distinctions between local, regional, national, and global*". By creating vertical relations between governance levels, TCFNs could create opportunities for members to make their voice heard at these levels. Additionally, some TCFNs have representatives from various levels among their members, thus bringing them literally together.

Finally, material distribution refers to generating agency through materials (mission and vision statements, funding, events…). TCFNs offer continuity and coherence in a fragmented field of city initiatives (Jones & Hills, 2021). To do so, they have developed various instruments such as (inter)national campaigns, declarations and policy working groups. Members also share resources and information on policy influencing (Jones & Hills, 2021; Santo & Moragues-Faus, 2019). To conclude, it is important to remark that while we have discussed these three aspects separately, they always stay interdependent.

In this section, we have operationalised the concept of participation in TCFNs by using the literature on inclusion and agency. This has led us to define three aspects of this concept (inclusion, collective – and distributive agency) and to operationalise them for analysis (see Table 1). The section that follows moves on to describe the methods used in this investigation.

3. Research setting and methods

3.1. Data collection and analysis

At the start of the data collection in March 2021, little information existed on the characteristics of TCFNs. This compelled us to get an overview of their most important characteristics, before going into depth about approaches to participation. For this reason, a mixed-

Table 1
Analytical framework (own elaboration).

Participation in food governance arrangements	Inclusion	Which types of actors are included?
		How homo– or heterogeneous are the members?
		How are the members selected?
		What are the criteria for membership?
	Collective agency	How are collaborations between members organised?
		How is the common ground co-constructed?
		Do TCFNs advocate for sustainable food system transitions?
	Distributive agency	How do TCFNs facilitate relations with actors outside the network?
		How do TCFNs create connections between different governance levels?
		Which materials does the network provide to facilitate individual action of members?

method study design was chosen, which allows for an exploratory research setting and triangulation, and verification of information (see Fig. 1).

For the purpose of sampling, a list of existing TCFNs was composed beforehand. A first version was made based on online searches and overviews of case studies in the literature (Keiner & Kim, 2007; Moodley, 2020; Moragues-Faus, 2021; Santo & Moragues-Faus, 2019; Sibbing et al., 2021). This list was shared with 9 field experts, with the request to review it and, if necessary, add missing TCFNs. This review resulted in a list of thirty-two TCFNs (see Appendix A) that were eligible to participate. Twelve of them have a global scope, thirteen operate in a specific region and seven are active on the national level. Of the regional and national TCFNs, sixteen are European networks. This reflects the European predominance already discussed above.

The first round of data collection (March - April 2021) consisted of exploratory interviews with network facilitators, conducted through video calls. These interviews gave a first indication of the internal governance arrangements of those TCFNs and the characteristics that could affect participation. This information was used as input for the next stage, the drafting of an online questionnaire. The questionnaire constitutes of eighty questions eliciting information on general characteristics, activities, internal governance, membership, decision-making processes and network objectives. The questionnaire was sent out to all TCFNs on the list (May 2021). Out of the thirty-two contacted, fifteen eventually responded, of which eleven were suitable for analysis (see Table 1). Compared to the initial list, which contained almost the same number of global and regional networks, the sample only contained two regional networks. As a result, we chose to consider each network individually in our analysis instead of dividing them into groups based on the scale they operate on. The small sample size also made it possible to analyse the data manually using a thematic approach.

Finally, in the third round of data collection (September – October 2021), the fifteen survey respondents were contacted again with the request to participate in an in-depth semi-structured interview. Seven of the participants agreed to this request. Among these participants, there was one respondent whose survey answers had not been suitable for analysis and another one who represented a regional branch of the international network that participated in the survey. This resulted in two interviews with facilitators of global networks, four of regional networks and only one interview with a facilitator of a local network. During these interviews, the researcher reflected on the results of the survey together with the participants. Some additional questions were also posed concerning the engagement and influence of different governance actors and about the impact the TCFN wanted to have on these groups.

Interviews were transcribed verbatim. A descriptive coding technique was used to increase reliability. To guarantee consistency,
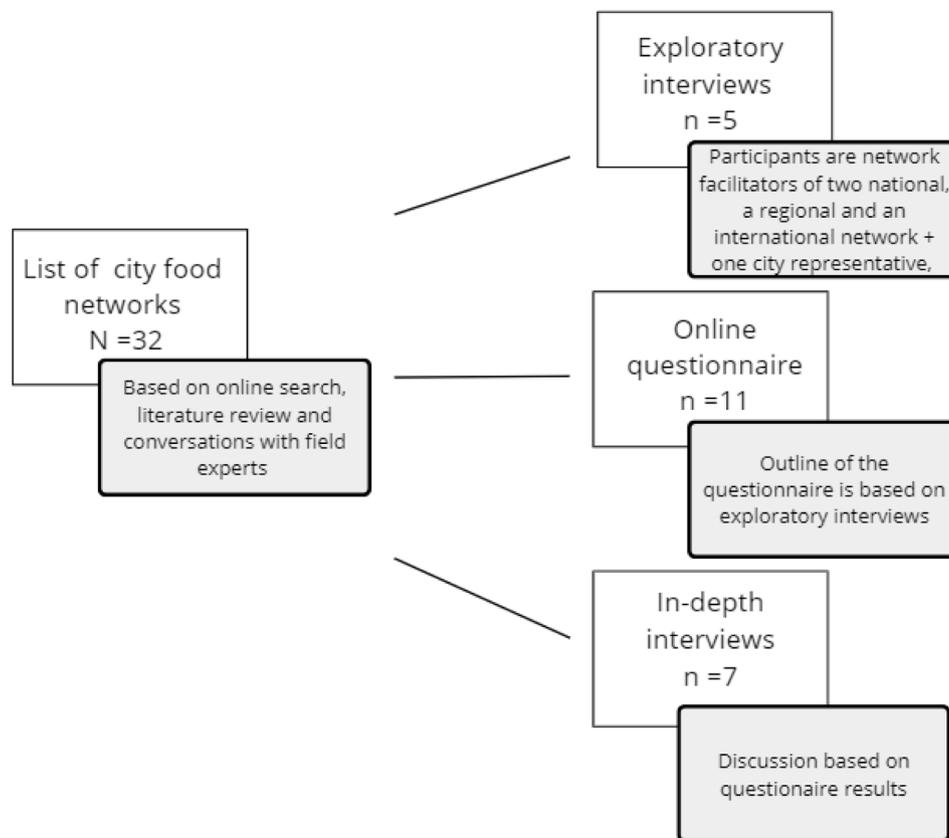
Fig. 1. The research design.

applicability and reliability codes were convened by one researcher and thoroughly discussed with the two other researchers. Initially, transcripts were coded deductively, starting from the existing literature on inclusion and agency. In the next phase, this was combined with an inductive coding approach to iterate on the existing categories. Finally, the analyses included two rounds of searching for themes, reviewing them and naming them. Quotes from the survey and the interviews are printed in italics. Here, and in the rest of this study, we chose to openly share the data that was both provided by the facilitators and publicly available on the TCFN's websites or in documents. All other data is dealt with anonymously.

3.2. Navigating the coherence and diversity of TCFNs

In this section, we give an overview of the cases included in the study and their most important similarities and differences. For a more detailed review of network characteristics, we refer to the paper of Moragues-Faus (2021), which is dedicated to this subject.

The TCFNs included in this study reflect the heterogeneity in TCFNs (also see Table 1). The most defining difference is perhaps the variety in strategies that they apply to reach their objectives. Some TCFNs, like the City Deal, have a strong focus on influencing policy on different governance levels. Others mostly put an effort into highlighting the work of their members, as the MUFPP does with its yearly awards, or on building relationships between peers (e.g., Voedselpioniers and CIT-YFOOD). A final specific case are the so-called project-based TCFNs, like Healthy Food Africa and the Food Smart Cities network. They are closely connected to specific programmes or projects within the member cities. Beside the shared network objectives, these project-based TCFNs have specific objectives to realise at the city level. Despite their difference, all of the cases have the common objective that they want to share, exchange, or transfer practises and experiences between cities.

A second considerable distinction can be made based on the scale

these TCFNs operate on. We distinguish between three categories: international, regional and national TCFNs, according to the geographical proximity of the cities within the TCFNs. The national FPN is a unique case, as it unites food policy councils instead of cities. The scale of the TCFN could play a role in the format of the exchanges, which we then have to consider.

While we can't be oblivious to the differences between TCFNs, what they share is more important than where they differ. Notably, in this case, are the similarities in objectives. Most TCFNs share the ambition to make local food systems more sustainable, and to do so, the majority adopts a food system vision. This means they consider the food system as a whole instead of separating the different parts and the economic, social, and environmental aspects (Van Berkum, Dengerink, & Ruben, 2018). This vision can also be noticed in the topics they work on. Almost all facilitators indicate working on urban agriculture, food governance, urban–rural linkages, and stakeholder involvement. Another analogy can be seen in the engagement with local policymakers. Although there is a sharp contrast between the involvement of members from other food system sectors, all TCFNs engage in some way with local policymakers. This can be either by including them as members or by frequently involving them in network activities.

4. Results

4.1. Approaches to inclusion and agency

In this section we explore how TCFNs approach participation in internal governance arrangements based on three previously defined aspects of this concept: inclusion, collective and distributive agency.

4.1.1. Inclusion of governance actors
The types of governance actors included in TCFNs (see Table 2) reflect the diversity of governance actors that is characteristic of trans-

Table 2
Overview of TCFNs included in this study.

TCFN	Founding Organisation	Type of organisation	Scope	Types of governance actors included	Number of members	Main objective
Milan Urban Food Policy Pact	City of Milan	Local government	International	Elected politicians (Mayors)	215	To disseminate urban food policy best practises between cities and actively engage them in leading urban food system transformation.
Voedselpioniers	Let Us	Business	National (Belgium)	Civil servants (local)	6	To create social connections between peers and the replication of good practises from other cities.
Global Partnership	RUAF	NGO	International	Civil servants (local)/ Researchers/ NGO workers	10	To put urban agriculture on international and city agendas.
Food Smart Cities	Rikolto	NGO	Project-based (International)	NGO workers	7	To share practises, approaches, ideas and methodologies on how to make city region food systems more sustainable, inclusive and resilient.
Red de Municipios por la Agroecología	Fundación Entretantos	NGO + Local governments	National (Spain)	Civil servants (local) / Researchers/ NGO workers	23	To share practises and work on joint solutions related to healthy and sustainable local food systems.
Food Policy Networks	Johns Hopkins Center for a Livable Future	NGO / Research Institution	National (United States)	Members of Food Policy Councils: Civil Servants (local /regional) / Researchers/ NGO workers/ Representatives private foundation	2114	To connect food policy councils and other similar groups seeking to create a more sustainable, healthy and equitable food system through public policy at the local, regional, state, and tribal levels.
City Deal "Healthy and Sustainable food environment"	Dutch government	National government	Project-based (The Netherlands)	Civil servants (local / regional / national) / Researchers	20	To make healthy and sustainable food the easiest choice by 2030 by stimulating innovation on the topic of sustainable and healthy food environments.
RU:RBAN	European Union	International Institution	Project-based (European)	Civil servants (local), representatives international institutions, citizen associations	22	To transfer the good practises related to urban and *peri*-urban agriculture from the city of Rome to six other European cities.
Bio-städte Netzwerk	City of Nuremberg	Local government	National (Germany)	Civil servants (local)	23	To connect cities that want to invest in organic agriculture and organic food and to rise political interest on these topics.
CITYFOOD network	ICLEI-RUAF	NGO	International	Civil servants (local/regional) / Researchers/ Business representatives/ Representatives international institutions/ NGO workers/ representatives private foundation	27	To accelerate local and regional government action on sustainable and resilient city-region food systems by combining networking with training, policy guidance and technical expertise.
Food for Cities	FAO	International Institution	International	Civil servants (local / regional) / Elected politicians/ Researchers / Business representatives/ Representatives international institutions/ NGO workers/ representatives private foundation	3900	To connect people from all over the world with a common interest in urban food system development.
Healthy Food Africa	Natural Resources Institute Finland	Research Institution	Project-based (African)	Researchers/ NGO workers / Business representatives	17	To improve the sustainability and resilience of urban food systems in 10 African cities.

local governance arrangements. Four TCFNs deliberately choose to include only one type of governance actor, while the other TCFNs are open to a more heterogenous group. As illustrated in Table 2 some TCFNs include up to seven different types of actors. Both approaches can be motivated by strategic choices. On the one hand, working with a homogenous group has the benefit that exchanges can be targeted specifically to the responsibilities and needs of that type of actor. For example, Voedselpioniers includes only civil servants of Belgian municipalities because it allows them to operate in a non-hierarchal setting and one where interventions are easier to replicate from one city to another. On the other hand, the choice for a heterogeneous group makes it possible to integrate different perspectives on an issue and give voice to all types of actors that have a stake in the issue.

Nevertheless, when looking at the way these actors are engaged, it stands out that the target audience for the exchange and learning processes is most often policymakers operating at the local level. Compared to government actors at other levels, they are seen by network facilitators as more directed towards change, having more leverage to enhance the sustainability of the food system, and being more accessible for

NGAs. With the exception of the MUFPP, the TCFNs included in this study tend to involve civil servants instead of elected politicians. This is partly due to the differences in time availability of these two groups. Additionally, TCFNs either choose to be more focused on the executive work or the political and invite members accordingly. One of the respondents describes it as follows:

> *"The game is played at different levels, in different layers, and at different times. When you have the big international networks like ICLEI and C40, it is good to have the mayor as an ambassador. At the regional level, the councillor might still be involved if it is an important issue, and on the national level it is more often the civil servants. These different levels are often very complementary. It is not that you only need one or the other. It is, in fact, this interplay that makes it so interesting" (INT3).*

When other types of actors, such as international institutions, research institutions, and NGOs, are involved, it is most often in an organising or advisory role. To illustrate, the African CITYFOOD network reaches out to NGOs and international organisations to support the African local governments that belong to the network in sustainable

transitions.

While many network facilitators indicate the TCFN wants to affect community members' behaviour with their actions, they hardly mention them when discussing who is engaged in and able to influence network practises. The FPN does more directly engage with community members, however, even there it is rare that it engages in their role as member of the public. In most cases, the community members participating are still representatives of an organisation or food policy council.

The majority of the facilitators argue that community members can contribute the most in an operational role, involving them in specific initiatives and ideas. This is well illustrated by an argument that comes up in several interviews: community members are not directly involved, but as TCFNs we act in their best interest.

The central role given to local policymakers also partly explains why community members are seldom involved in the functioning of the TCFN. Some TCFNs see local policymakers as intermediary agents that can reach community members. By influencing them, they hope to achieve policy changes that will push people in the right direction:

'I think ultimately all the projects or programmes that we engage with at local government level are to have a direct impact on citizens because this is almost the closest level to the citizen in terms of implementation of projects and programmes, in terms of engagement with citizens. So ultimately whatever change that we want to make at the local level it should directly affect citizens' (INT10).

At the same time, local policymakers are seen as the spokesperson of their city, they should gather input from the inhabitants and be open to their ideas but make the final decision. Failing to do so would lead to a stagnation of local food system development.

'Everyone has something with food and when you are looking for it, it is possible to find every possible opinion related to food. So, where do we draw the line about what we include as input? I think everyone should be allowed to provide input, however, in the end the municipality has to weigh the options. So, a choice is made' (INT8).

When taking a closer look at the selection mechanisms, it is apparent that inclusion or exclusion criteria for new members are, in most cases, not motivated by involving a representative sample of the city's population. Instead, the selection process is guided by several of the previously mentioned membership requirements, like the willingness to pay an annual fee or a certain level of commitment. However, considerations such as the existence of trust between members and facilitator and the homogeneity or heterogeneity of a group can also be decisive factors. In some cases, TCFNs will also limit the number of members for practical reasons, like limited resources and staff or requirements of their funder. For example, in most of the TCFNs funded by the European Union, such as RU:RBAN, only cities in EU countries can join.

When comparing between TCFNs, it becomes clear that the selection mechanism is often connected to the mission of the network. To give an idea, both Food for Cities and FPN have a very broad mission, stating that their main goal is to create a network of food governance actors at different levels. When this is the case, it makes sense to have an open system where all interested actors can join the TCFN.

4.1.2. Approach to collective agency

A second aspect to consider is the collective agency the TCFNs generate. In order to do so, we look at how TCFNs organise collaborations between members and construct common ground. Additionally, we explore if they actively advocate for sustainable food system transitions.

When it comes to organising collaborations, TCFNs have a surprisingly diverse range of activities to create opportunities for knowledge exchanges between members. The questionnaire shows that, on average, TCFNs organise six kinds of activities, ranging from webinars to the establishment of a living lab. The depth of these exchanges works contrariwise to the number of people allowed to participate. For

instance, Food for Cities mostly relies on webinars to connect with their almost 4000 members since it is an appropriate activity to reach a large and diverse audience. However, the downside of webinars is that they are often limited to one-way communication or superficial exchanges. Voedselpioniers, on the other hand, often combines their meetings with a visit to a local initiative. This is an ideal activity for in-depth exchanges because it allows participants to see how things work in reality and gives them time to discuss how these initiatives would work in their context. However, this activity is much more expensive and complicated to organise and hence often leads to a limited number of participants.

Building collective agency does not only depend on the format but also on the goal of activities. When asked about their most important goals, all facilitators put 'replication of good practises' in the top three, and nine out of eleven TCFNs mention replication as their top priority. Replication means that a good practise from one city is implemented in a very similar way in another city. For this to work, the member cities should operate in rather similar contexts. Some facilitators report that the amount of information to exchange is very limited when cities are too different in terms of local (e.g. available policy tools, issues at stake, food policy coordinator…) or national context (e.g,. tax system, national food policy, the collaboration between local and national level).

On the contrary, others mention that a practise from a different cultural context might be more difficult to implement, but as it is often more disruptive to a city's routines, it might also be more inspiring. However, one of the respondents mentions that for members to benefit from this inspiration and be able to turn it into practises that can generate change in the local food system, the TCFNs have to be small, and the exchanges intensive. As such, actually implementing inspiring practises may be easier within the Global Partnership than in the CIT-YFOOD network. Nevertheless, well-skilled facilitators and determined members also contribute to turning inspiration into action for change.

The respondents confirm the viewpoint that a common ground, based on shared values and understanding, is crucial for the functioning of TCFNs. TCFNs apply several instrument to co-construct such common ground. One of these instruments is a mission and/or vision statement. Making clear what they stand for and how they want to realise this helps members to feel connected to the network. One respondent states that:

'I think it is good because now we have a red thread, we have a common theme that runs across. It also helps to create a stronger identity for the cluster and a stronger sense of belonging. I think for all [of the members] because they clearly see what they contribute to, and it is not just what they are doing in their city, but they also contribute to the knowledge base of the whole cluster' (INT1).

However, creating this sense of belonging is not evident. We identify several factors that hinder this feeling, such as representatives frequently changing, coming from a very diverse background, or speaking different languages. Finally, the use of jargon can also influence this process, especially for newcomers.

Finally, achieving collective agency requires more than connecting the agency of members. The next step would be to advocate for change in the field of food systems. Some TCFNs work actively on this by influencing local, national, regional, or international policies. In the survey, five out of eleven respondents put "members can influence policy at different governance levels" in the top 3 of network goals. Project-based TCFNs, like Healthy Food Africa, also attempt to influence policy by sharing evidence from their project to advocate for certain changes. In their case, they hope to influence national policies by sharing good practises of the various local projects. By doing so, they aim to create an enabling institutional environment for initiatives developed in their project.

However, the results suggest that so far advocacy by TCFNs is still limited. Facilitators give diverse explanations for this, such as a lack of time or resources to compete with other organisations, which often have a professional advocacy team. This is especially the case on the international level and can explain why many TCFNs focus their attention on

the local level. Additionally, some mention that they purposefully focus on the local level because there is more potential to realise changes: the decision-making about the issues they discuss happens at the local level, so it makes no sense to go higher up:

'So, in some cases, you do not even need to go up higher, because if you really focus on expanding permits to allow backyard chickens, which is what a lot of councils work on. Or […] incentivising supermarkets to go into certain neighbourhoods, or work on citizen engagement in certain areas. You do not need to go higher up because the types of issues that they are focused on are already happening at the local level' (INT7).

Since these TCFNs often work with limited resources, the funds and efforts that are put into advocacy on higher levels of governance need to be weighed against realising concrete action at the local level. When marking their most important goals, all but two TCFNs prioritise replication of practises over advocacy, indicating that actions with more tangible results are usually preferred over advocacy work.

4.1.3. Approach to distributive agency

Finally, participation is also about strengthening distributive agency. In section two, this was operationalised into social, spatial and material distribution.

When it comes to social distribution, the facilitation of relations with actors outside the network foremost requires good coordination on the city level, which is far from evident. Many of the respondents report issues with getting knowledge from the TCFN to the relevant actors within a city. Most TCFNs only include one representative per city. However, food is an issue that inherently involves various disciplines, administrations, and policy domains. When the flow of information from members to other urban actors is obstructed, the exchanges within the TCFN risk not having an impact.

The same goes for a lack of institutional backing. TCFNs that only involve civil servants often find that these members encounter reluctance from their superiors to let them spend time on network activities. That is why it is important that the benefits of participating need to be clear to everyone involved at the city level. Some respondents advise involving elected politicians on an occasional basis to keep them engaged and informed about the network's activities and benefits.

TCFNs have definitely proven to be a place to make connections and organise discussions between actors at different governance levels. However, in TCFNs where actors from different levels come together, such as the City Deal "Healthy and Sustainable food environment", facilitators indicate that so far these connections and discussions remain limited, mainly due to the power relations present.

When it comes to spatial distribution, one facilitator argued that for local policymakers to be able to realise change on higher governance levels, they need to formulate explicit demands or requests. TCFNs could assist in this dynamic by helping their members finding out what to ask for, for instance, by showing them how other cities interact with other levels. Like this, the network acts as a catalyst to smoothen the members' demand for change at higher levels rather than formulating these demands themselves.

Some of the studied TCFNs operate in countries where the majority of decisions about food are taken at the national level. This implies that cities get limited responsibilities and/or are essentially implementing regulations made at the national level. For instance, many national governments focus on agriculture when it comes to food, while cities are more concerned with topics like food security, food safety and food waste. This also corresponds more with the food system approach that TCFN use. When there is a mismatch between priorities at the national level and the priorities of the TCFN, they risk losing interest, or their efforts will go to waste when the project stops.

Finally, TCFNs can instigate action in their member cities through material support, which can be both financial and technical. Project-based networks like RU:RBAN, Healthy Food Africa and Food Trails have a part of their budget assigned to supporting innovations within the

city. However, for most TCFNs direct support is not possible. The MUFPP and FPN do also provide funding to a city (MUFPP) or food policy council (FPN) through the extension of awards. While this financial incentive can be significant, the main motivation for extending this award for the MUFPP is to stimulate the exchange of good practises, collaboration between cities, and innovation within specific cities.

The large majority of the TCFNs spend part of their budget on technical support. In section 4.1.2, we already discussed how network activities can serve to create relations between network members. However, these activities are also an important material to facilitate individual action of members. In this regard, respondents seem to value activities concerning peer-to-peer exchanges more than activities involving an external expert. When the facilitators were asked to rate the quality of the activities they organise on a scale from one to five (one meaning not valuable at all and five very valuable), all but one gave the lowest score to the activities that involve an external expert. Overall they confirm that it is more likely that members will act on information if they hear it from peers.

'It is really the idea that it is a bit easier to hear it from someone who has already gone through this and is in the same situation. Someone who is usually experiencing the same struggle, the same challenge, rather than having a consultant or researcher coming from this high cloud and say 'okay, this is the way you are supposed to do this'. This is not to say that the research work is not fundamental. It is fundamental, but it is a little bit easier to hear it from peers rather than from researchers or consultants' (INT2).

4.2. Synopsis: A variety of approaches to participation

This study set out with the aim to explore how different TCFNs approach participation. Starting from the definition of food democracy (Hassanein, 2003), we formulated three dimensions of analysis: inclusion, collective- and distributive agency. By applying these dimensions to the information provided by facilitators from eleven TCFNs, we discovered a variety of approaches among TCFNs for each of these dimensions, which can be displayed by three continua (see Fig. 2). These findings suggest several courses of action to increase participation in TCFNs.

While almost all TCFNS engage several types of governance actors, the intensity of these engagements differs. TCFNs like the MUFPP, Bio-städte network and Voedselpioniers put local policymakers at the hearth of their activities, while other actors are placed in an operational role. The analysis revealed that this prioritisation of local policymakers is rooted in the logic that, if you convince them of the need for more sustainable food systems and provide them with the right tools to do so, the policy changes that they realise will make that other actors follow. We label this side of the continuum cockpit-ism in correspondence with Hajer et al. (2015), who introduced the concept to describe the idea that governmental actors (GA's) can steer sustainable development processes top-down by making decisions for the greater good.

Hajer (2011) contrasts this idea with the concept of energetic society, where the potential for transition lies in collaborations between a variety of actors (both GA's and NGA's). Hence, to realise this transition, all these actors need to be actively involved. This idea is also central to the participative justice and food democracy literature.

There are not many TCFNs who find themselves on this side of the continuum. While all TCFNs advocate for an energetic society on a city level, in the large majority active representation of NGA's, especially community organisations, within their internal governance arrangements is missing. In the rare case that they are involved, they have a mainly operational role. Two notable exceptions are RU:RBAN and the FPN who do succeed in meaningfully engaging those groups. In case of the FPN the focus lies on food policy councils instead of cities which could explain why more people feel empowered to engage. Additionally, the (relatively) open membership and lack of selection criteria lowers

Fig. 2. The three continua.

the threshold for governance actors.

However, the large majority of TCFNs finds themselves somewhere in the middle of this continuum. During the interviews with facilitators, we felt many of them aspired to increase the involvement of community organisations but did not know where to start. A reasonable approach to tackle this issue could be to actively invest in exchanges between TCFNs with this aspiration and networks like FPN that have more experience in working with these actors. A good occasion to initiate this could be the yearly meeting of the MUFPP, which most of these facilitators attend anyway. However, to come to in-depth knowledge, exchanges would need to happen more frequently.

Additionally, foundations and funding programmes like Horizon Europe could encourage TCFNs to provide in opportunities for NGAs to become involved by actively investing resources in this, as membership requirements often constrain more participative governance.

Confirming the results of Moragues-Faus (2021), we find that all TCFNs provide different forms of agency. When it comes to connecting agency of multiple actors across spaces, some TCFNs approach this by working on replication of actionable ideas in different cities. A good example is the Food Smart City network. This network is facilitated by an NGO which deliberately chooses to work on five flagship initiatives (GoodFood@School, Food Citizenship, Generation Food, Food Markets 4 all and Circular Food Economy) that can be implemented in most of the member cities. They also indicate that by working on similar initiatives they are capable of building up a large pool of evidence of these actions in different context, that will help them in out-scaling these initiatives. The chance of successful replication is higher when there is much common ground and members can relate to each other in terms of city context and local food system development. In most cases this means replication works best within a specific country or region. Food Smart Cities is an exception to this rule as it is a global network. In this case they create common ground by mainly exchanging between staff members.

Other TCFNs approach collective agency more from an inspiration logic. In that case agencies are connected by exploring a variety of initiatives and ideas from different scales and sectors and selecting the things that work for a specific city. For this to work, members need to engage with a manifold of other cities and actors, preferably those whose reality is very different from theirs. This often makes intercultural exchanges more relevant. This also shows when looking at the TCFNs that find themselves on this side of the continuum, which are the MUFPP, Global Partnership and Food for Cities. Important to mention here is that currently, most TCFNs engage in both inspirational and replicational exchanges. The choice of who to include and which exchange activities to organise is not only based on learning efficiency but also depends on available resources and staff.

When positioning all TCFNs on these two axes, it stands out that in the large majority of the cases a cockpit-ism logic coincides with a replication logic and an energetic society with an inspiration logic (see the dotted lines in Fig. 2). This makes sense, since the idea behind the energetic society and the inspiration logic is very similar, namely that bringing together a variety of perspectives is crucial for learning and

development. On the other hand, it could also be that when the focus lies on local policymakers, the group of members will automatically be more homogenous, making it easier to work on replication.

Finally, when it comes to distributive agency, TCFNs create opportunities for their members to advocate on the national and international level as stated by other authors (Jones & Hills, 2021; Santo & Moragues-Faus, 2019), while also working on sustainable transitions on the city level. However, few TCFNs put equal effort into both. The third continuum focuses on how facilitators, together with other network agents, choose to situate these efforts.

On the one hand, there are TCFNs that have an upward focus, assisting their members to advocate for change on the national or international level. In most cases, these are the larger, more established TCFNs such as the MUFPP and the RUAF Global Partnership. An exception to this rule is the City Deal network, which is relatively small but has a very important advocacy component.

On the other hand, there are the TCFNs that adopt a downward focus, employing the agency of their members to realise concrete projects on the city level. The large majority of the TCFNs finds themselves on this side of the continuum. This is also very clear in project-based TCFNs such as RU:RBAN and Healthy Food Africa. This also confirms the finding of Moragues-Faus (2021) that these networks are working on alignment rather than coordination.

5. Conclusion

This study aimed to gain a better understanding of how TCFNs approach participation of governance actors. For this purpose, we built on the concepts of participative justice and food democracy to define participation as a combination of inclusion, collective and distributive agency. We found a large variety in TCFNs' approaches to participation. In general, TCFNs include a large variety of actors, such as local policymakers, NGO workers, researchers and representatives of international institution, in different intensities. TCFNS facilitate collective agency by combining replication and inspiration strategies in order to bring together different local realities and create common ground. At the same time they work on distributive agency by enabling their members' individual capacities to act through building relations with actors outside the network, creating cross-spatial connections and providing (limited) financial and non-financial materials.

The strength of this diversity in approaches is that it provides the TCFNs flexibility to quickly adapt to the rapidly evolving local food systems and provide a tailored approach to divergent local situations. On the other hand, this diversity makes joint, structural action between TCFNs more difficult. Other scholars have suggested that, while TCFNs are a useful instrument to stimulate the growth of sustainable food system initiatives at the local level, their capacity to realise structural food system transitions is limited (Santo & Moragues-Faus, 2019). When it comes to collective and distributive agencies, the large majority of the individual and group's capacity to act generated in TCFNs is directed towards realising change at the local level. This raises important questions about if and how TCFNs could contribute to more structural

change.

A first step could be a better alignment between TCFNs in order to avoid duplication of work and save essential time and resources. We believe the three continua model could assist this alignment. By reflecting on where they position themselves on these continua, facilitators could look more actively into engaging with other, complementary TCFNs. For example, TCFNs that work with a homogenous group of cities and representatives in order to achieve replicational learning could organise occasional exchanges with more diverse TCFNs. In this way they would bring in practises that are more disruptive to the context of a city and could trigger inspirational learning. In the same way, facilitators could use this model to look for TCFNs that have a similar approach. To illustrate, TCFNs that have an upward focus could unite forces to create a stronger collective agency. Additionally, making their viewpoints on these issues publicly available can also help governance actors to decide which TCFNs to join.

Looking at TCFNs through the lens of food democracy, a second recommendation is to provide more opportunities for effective participation of NGAs in learning exchanges with other cities instead of keeping them in an operational role. Following the example of the FPN, this could be done by shifting from focusing on local governments to focusing on the broader governance structures around the local food system. This will be easier for TCFNs focusing on inspiration, which mostly organise online activities. TCFNs with limited resources that want to organise more in-depth activities could alternate between activities involving civil servants and activities involving an energetic society.

It has to be said that apart from the linkages between cockpit-ism and replication, and energetic society and inspiration there is not a logic to be found in the way TCFNs are positioned on the different continuums. This partly confirms the large diversity among them as already indicated by Moragues-Faus (2021). However, there might be also an analytical factor at play here. The three continua are a simplification of factors determining participation, mostly focusing on the relational aspects. While in reality there are also many non-relational aspects affecting participatory processes. For instance, Keiner and Kim (2007) found that the availability of financial resources and use of digital technology are highly influential factors.

A limitation of the study is that, except for the section on relations between local and national governments, our data did not allow to shed light on the power relationships at play between governance actors and how this affects the intensity of their engagement.

The scope of this study is constrained to the viewpoint of TCFNs' facilitators. What is now needed is a follow-up study that focuses on the members of TCFNs, as these were not included in this study or other studies on this topic. It would be highly relevant to understand why governance actors become part of a TCFN, how they experience different activities and how members use what they learn to realise change at the city level. Related to this last aspect it would be especially important to investigate how network information is shared with the different actors on a city level. Facilitators in this study suggested that the appointment of a central focal point for food within the city is crucial to guarantee a good circulation of information. Ideally, this person is part of an umbrella department, so it can coordinate all the other departments when it comes to food issues. They also suspected that it helps if the city's goals related to food are embedded within the overall city's goals. These assumptions need to be verified ideally with a comparative case study of cities involved in a TCFN.

Finally, we recommend further research on this topic to be co-created with all governance actors involved. By bringing both governmental and non-governmental actors into the research process food democracy becomes not only an analytical lens but also a way of doing research.

Appendix A. List of TCFNs initially contacted for the survey

Global TCFNs

- Milan Urban Food Policy Pact
- CITYFOOD network
- C40 – Food Systems network
- Global Partnership
- Urbal
- Food for Cities
- Cities and Circular Economy for Food
- One planet network
- Let's Food Cities
- Food Smart Cities
- Healthy Cities Network
- United Cities and Local Governments

Regional TCFNs

- African CITYFOOD network (Africa)
- African Food Security Urban Network (Africa)
- Healthy Food Africa (Africa)
- Eurocities – working group food (Europe)
- FoodShift (Europe)
- Fit4Food 2030 (Europe)
- Urbact Food Program (Europe)
- Urbact Food Corridors (Europe)
- Urbact BioCanteens (Europe)
- Urbact RU:Urban (Europe)
- Cities 2030 (Europe)
- Sustainable Cities Platform (Europe)
- Food Policy Networks (North-America)

National TCFNs

- Red de Ciudades por la agroecología (Spain)
- BioStädte Netzwerk (Germany)
- Lerend netwerk Lokaal Voedselbeleid (Belgium)
- Voedselpioniers (Belgium)

- City Deal: "Healthy and Sustainable food environment" (The Netherlands)
- Sustainable Food Places (United Kingdom)
- Assises de l'agroécologie et alimentation durable (France)

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