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Staging value creation processes in short food supply chains of Italy

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Abstract

Farmers' markets, as a short food supply chain system, are considered schemes that can contribute to local development, producing economic, environmental, and social value. These three facets of value can set the stage for building up the farmers' market value proposition. In the present study, we use the theoretical concept of the territorial staging system to identify farmers' markets as sociotechnical contexts where producers and consumers interact to provide experiential resources and experiential engagement. This paper focused on the supply side of the proposed framework: by interviewing farmers markets' directors and producers, an empirical analysis has been carried out with the purpose of identifying how these actors evaluate the three facets of value (economic, social, and environmental). The results show that, while directors emphasize economic value, farmers attribute higher importance to the environmental and, especially, social facet of value. These findings, which represent a primary research step that includes the consumers' contribution to the stage setting, highlight the diverging views of the actors involved. Results suggest that developing a stage that enhances consumer experience is a complex process and requires understanding different viewpoints.

Keywords: Territorial staging system, Short food supply chains, Farmers markets, Business model, Perceptions

Introduction

Transitioning towards sustainable food systems is a crucial challenge for European agriculture, boosted by recent policy initiatives, like the European Green Deal and the last reform of the Common Agricultural Policy. These policy trends call for implementing adaptation strategies at either the farm or territorial level that can open up new routes for localized and alternative food systems. The alternativeness of such food systems, which aims to support local productions and related relational configurations, has been gaining increasing attention in recent decades as a response to the challenge of transitioning towards more sustainable food systems (Török et al. 2024; Mengoni et al. 2024). Different paths of rural development and localized agri-food systems have been identified as the outcome of a "territory game" (De Rosa et al. 2017; Lardon et al. 2020) based on a different capability to promote collective action and alternative business models grounded on localized modes of food provisioning. It is within this characterization that

farmer markets (FMs) are recognized. Therefore, FMs are frequently analysed through the lens of the localized agri-food systems (LASs), which are defined as “*production and service organizations (agricultural and agri-food production units, marketing, services, and gastronomic enterprises) linked by their characteristics and operational ways to a specific territory. The environment, products, people and their institutions, know-how, feeding behaviour, and relationships networks combine within a territory to produce a type of agricultural and food organization in a given spatial scale*” (Muchnik 1996). As a matter of fact, FMs are embedded in territorial contexts, and local products represent the variety and uniqueness of the local natural and human resources.

Schoolman et al. (2022, p.137) pointed out that “*local food systems are networks of food supply chains structured to minimize physical and relational distance between farmers, who grow food and people who eat it*”. Set against the background of the LAS, four dimensions typify FMs: the first one concerns the need for a collective action involving producers adhering to a new business model based on a reconnection perspective. As widely recognized in literature, collective action cannot be taken for granted, considering the difficulties in getting things done collectively (Tisenkopfs et al. 2008). The second dimension deals with voluntary qualification schemes aimed to grant the authenticity of products through a quality turn (Goodman 2003), which identifies new institutional arrangements among participants in the FMs. The third dimension is related to the type of knowledge, identified as significant knowledge whose valorization is realized via diffusion and sharing through human interactions (Crevoisier 2016; Jeannerat 2013) and fostered through a domestic convention based on direct relationships between consumers and producers boosting the exchange of local food cultures (Belletti, Maressotti, 2009). Finally, the fourth dimension concerns the management of local natural resources: FMs provide consumers with unique products drawn on agronomically sound and sustainable farming practices. Accordingly, FMs are expressions of new business models grounded on biodiversity and agroecological transition (Scaramuzzi et al. 2019; Begiristain et al. 2013). Moreover, thanks to the food miles, the reduced environmental impact of transport offers an additional contribution to building up a multifunctional and sustainable food system (Corsi et al. 2018; Schnell, 2013).

As widely emphasized in the literature, the localized mode of food provisioning is illustrative of the alternative to a placeless economy organized around a reconnection perspective. As underlined by Fonte (2008, p.202), “*the reconnection perspective takes into account grass roots initiatives for relocalizing the food system that aims at rebuilding the link among producers and consumers in an interpersonal world of production*”. Furthermore, alternative food networks reveal a high attitude towards addressing health-related social problems, for instance, through securing healthy food for local citizens (Schoolman et al., 2022). Also, recent studies have emphasized that alternative food networks are boosted by the growing demand for goods and services with symbolic attributes, which contributes to preserving the biocultural heritage (Scaramuzzi et al. 2023).

In this paper, we point out that short food supply chains (SFSCs), especially FMs, may represent winning localized modes of food provisioning where access to food is identified as an “experiential journey”. Accordingly, this paper aims to provide an original contribution by analysing farmers’ markets as a new type of territorial agri-food system, identified as a territorial staging system (TSS). More precisely, by following Jeannerat

(2013), we conceptualize FMs not as market points, in the conventional sense attributed to the term, but as a stage in which sellers (farmers) and consumers interact reciprocally, interpreting products into value. In this vein, FMs represent social contexts based on direct (through communication between producers and consumers) and indirect interactions (through exchanging foods and money). This engagement is possible because specific attributes define product value in the short supply chain. The value proposition of such food distribution schemes involves three facets: economic, environmental, and social (Charatsari et al. 2023; Belletti et al., 2020).

Focusing on Italian FMs, the present study aims to answer the following research question: To what extent do the actors involved in designing and operating FMs believe that these marketing channels can produce these types of value?

The article is articulated as follows: first, the authors offer a synthetic literature review focused on the dynamic processes characterizing a staging system, where producers and consumers contribute to the relational architecture of the stage setting. Then, the proposed methodology and empirical analysis aim to stress the stage-setting process, with a specific focus on the perspective of the production side. In the final section, discussion and policy implications are reported.

Theoretical background: farmers' markets as territorial staging systems

Localized modes of food provisioning represent a place-based answer to the globalized agri-food supply chains, depicting placeless foodscapes in the last decades (Morgan et al. 2008). These are characterized by disconnection between consumers and producers and a progressive displacement of production (Fonte 2008; Wiskerke 2009), leading to a reterritorializing agri-food system. Relocalization processes are boosted by territorial anchoring, which fosters embedding mechanisms (Hess 2004; Methorst et al. 2017). The embedding process relies not only on the “simple” anchoring of a product to its territory (through both natural and human linkages) but also involves social and networking mechanisms.

Territorial anchoring has been characterizing many rural areas and agri-food systems in recent years, thanks to an effective action carried out by the so-called *anchoring milieus*, which are identified as “*a set of local players (firms, individuals, public authorities, research and training organizations, local entrepreneurs, media, cultural institutions, NGO,...) who interact locally and with distant and/or mobile players in order to develop ever more advanced (efficient or meaningful) knowledge on the basis of competition/cooperation rules*” (Crevoisier, 2011, p.13). Drawn on this definition, various actors are involved in the anchoring process, with the purpose of boosting not a simple “mooring” but a real embedding process (De Propriis, Crevoisier, 2011): single farmers, farmers' associations, innovation advisors and actors from the agricultural knowledge and innovation system whose purpose is to address the relocalized modes of food provisioning, policy makers, etc. As pointed out by Mulder (2022), this contributes to building up proximity mechanisms centred around two main logics: the logics of belonging, through strengthening local networks, relationships and relational capital; and, the logics of similitude, through sharing similar values, expectations, social, and economic resources. Moreover, the anchoring process triggered by territorial proximity encourages stronger

levels of local embeddedness, which includes social and cultural values (Torre, Gallaud, 2022; Methorst et al. 2017).

A significant result of these territorialization processes is a growing reconnection of the production-consumption networks through shortening the food supply chains. SFSCs consist of a limited number of actors, usually two, a farmer and a consumer, for instance in the direct selling typology (Charatsari et al. 2018), or three when a third actor mediates between consumers and producers, for instance in the FMs typology (Chiffolleau 2008). Such systems include FMs, on-farm sales, box delivery schemes, or direct selling to local schools (Kneafsey et al. 2013). As said before, distinctive characteristics of FMs rely on linking consumers and producers and on the idea of building up shared territorial proximity (Rallet, Torre, 2004; Torre, Wallet, 2014; Torre, Gallaud, 2022), grounded on geographical and organizational contexts. Geographical proximity is not to be considered as a simple metric perspective of space but a place-based approach aiming to shorten distances between places of production and consumption. Through geographical proximity, consumers are provided with fresh and local products. Beyond geographical proximity, organizational proximity is fundamental in boosting territorial proximity as it refers to the variety of ways actors are close to each other through the two logics of belonging and similarity. The logic of belonging is evident when actors participate in the same relational network, where direct or intermediate relationships may emerge (for instance, between consumers and producers). The logic of similarity involves sharing the same values, the same system of representation, and the same objectives (Torre, Gallaud, 2022; Filippi et al. 2011).

Set against this perspective, consumers play an active role in addressing a reconfiguration of rural resources and an innovation aiming to reposition the farming activity within the root of strong multifunctionality (Wilson 2008), in account of the three economic, social and environmental functions (van Huylbroek et al., 2007; Masi et al. 2021), targeted towards the production of both commodity and non-commodity outputs (Belletti et al. 2002). Consequently, new business models and value creation strategies are implemented through alternative marketing channels supported by untraded interdependencies (Storper 1997). In such a reconnection perspective, converging interests among different actors emerge, and value creation is drawn on the contribution of various stakeholders involving communication, shared knowledge, and experience staging (Crevoisier 2016; Pine, Gilmore, 1999; 2013). Therefore, within a constituent perspective of rural embeddedness (Uzzi 1996), the rural context and development are reconfigured through innovms of "stage se mechanisms, which involve the agri-food system's actorssystem. More precisely, *"territorial innovation could be comprehended as a localized ability to stage valuable activities and artefacts rather than as a localized capacity to produce competitive goods and services"* (Jeannerat 2015, p.27).

Valorization processes through the stage setting have been explored in the literature on the new frontiers in territorial development, such as the research on the Swiss watch-making industry (Guex, Crevoisier, 2015; Crevoisier 2016). These studies have looked beyond the production side and technology-driven perspective adopted by traditional territorial innovation models (Moulaert, Sekia, 2003). Scholars are emphasizing that the mechanisms of "stage setting" complement territorial innovation models, which continue to serve as a foundational pillar for policy approaches and applied theories by

picking up new influences. New frontiers on territorial innovation linked to the stage-setting approach (Cooke, Lazzeretti, 2008; Kebir and Crevoisier 2008; Jeannerat 2015) highlight the role of non-technological innovation, cultural resources, creativity, and knowledge dynamics for territorial development. Finally, the experience economy strand lays the foundation for rethinking territorial value creation processes, conceptualizing the importance of consumer engagement (Pine, Gilmore, 1999). The aforementioned dynamics bring about rethinking cognitive profiles involved in value creation, with a growing replacement of substantial knowledge with significant knowledge (Crevoisier 2016). The significant knowledge becomes embedded in personal interdependencies activated in the stage-setting process, where symbolic meanings gain ground in the relationships between consumers and producers (Crevoisier 2016).

By conceptualizing FMs as TSS (Fig. 1), where the experiences of production and consumption converge, it becomes clearer how value arises from the interactions of actors inside the short supply chain (Guex, Crevoisier, 2015). From the production side, the stage setting entails the provision of a composite basket of territorial goods and services; as far as the consumption side is concerned, consumers are involved in the stage setting through an experiential engagement which provides them access to local food cultures.

As pointed out by Jeannerat (2015, p.27): “an experiential stage could economically be defined as a sociotechnical context where specific production resources are turned into experiential resources through a particular stage setting, and where particular consumption resources are turned into economic resources through experiential engagement”. The building process of a TSS is drawn on two steps (Guex, Crevoisier, 2015): the first one concerns the setting of a symbolic stage, drawn on a symbolic capital which consumers perceive through notoriety, reputation, and trust (Brunori 2006); the second step is a physical stage where products are exchanged through presential transactions named territorial economic transactions. The TSS definition is different from the “classic approach”

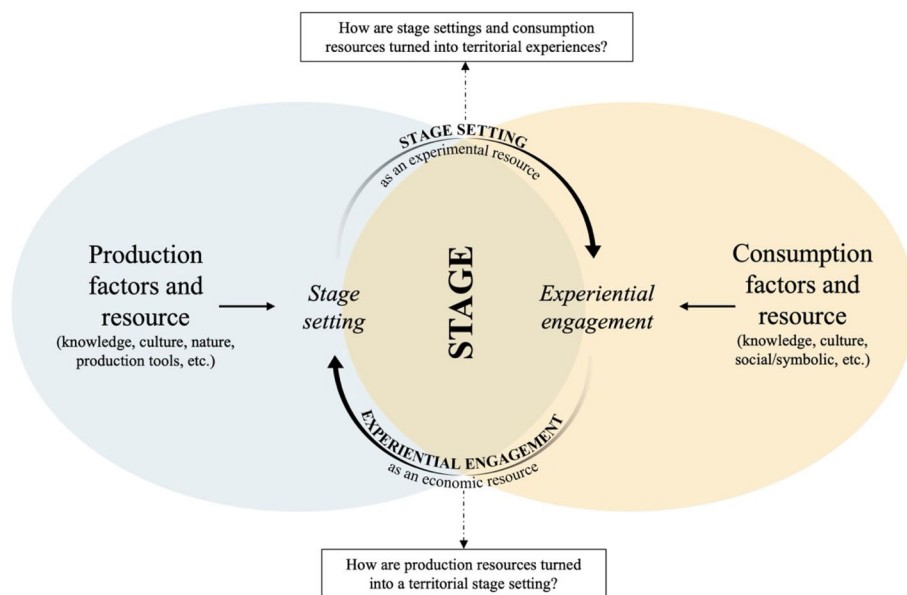


Fig.1 Farmers’ markets as territorial staging systems. *Source:* Adapted from the framework proposed by Jeannerat (2013)

to the territorial agri-food system in that it foresees the active role of consumers in setting up the stage. Hence, a staging system deals with how the production process meets the praxis of consumption, generating a stage in which producers and consumers interpret products into value-releasing goods. By adapting Jeannerat and Crevoisier's (2011) proposal to FMs, four interactive dimensions contribute to the identification of a staging system:

- a) stage setting, through valorizing local rural resources, like typical local food, artisan, and cultural resources. Valorizing local rural resources, meant as both natural and human resources, is the outcome of an entrepreneurial process identified in the literature as rural entrepreneurship, as an activity "embedded" in rural contexts, which is different from entrepreneurship in the rural area, where a mobile logic of the rural space emerges (Korsgaard et al. 2015). Local resources set on the stage synthesize either the physical (natural resources, such as climate, quality of the soil, biodiversity, etc.) or the human (indigenous local knowledge, cultural traditions, etc.) dimensions of the territorial anchoring, by providing products with specific quality depicting the "identity card" of the rural context. As a consequence, an "*intimate relation between the entrepreneurial activity and the place where it occurs*" (Korsgaard et al. 2015, p.7) emerges.
- b) market resources, where consumers' preferences for local products bring about a recombination of rural resources organized to comply with cultural, health, environmental, and social instances addressed through experiential consumer engagement;
- c) stage identity, based on community resources, like natural resources and rural landscape, which may be identified, specified and valorized by empowering social capital and collective action;
- d) stage governance through the mediation of farmers' organizations, which set up the rules of engagement and quality criteria to be part of the network.

By looking at the FMs through the lens of a stage setting, one can argue that farmers and the markets as social units, offer products that are evaluated by consumers not only based on their physical attributes (like taste, appearance, maturity, and so on), but also based on their symbolic representations arising from the economic, environmental, and social facets of value attributed to these products. Accordingly, farmers and the organizers of FMs are "stagers" (Jeannerat 2013), who dedicate and leverage resources to create not only products but social contexts within which they interact with consumers through the distinctive attributes of their products.

The theoretical approach shapes new models of value creation at the farmer/consumption level, jointly with renewed territorial rural development through the spatial organization of production and the contextual spatialization of consumption. The analysis of stage-setting processes sheds light on how farmers-entrepreneurs anchor themselves into rural spaces and contribute to boosting community and local development processes (Redhead, Bika, 2022).

Nonetheless, how actors involved in the SFSC contribute to designing and setting the stage must be explored through in-depth analyses considering various stakeholders' perceptions when addressing economic, environmental, and social aspects. To the best of

our knowledge, this issue has yet to be investigated in the literature and deserves attention to avoid misalignment when setting up the TSS.

Despite the recent references to the TSS as a conceptual framework for explaining proximity relations in rural development (Marotta, Nazzaro, 2023), empirical analysis still needs to be conducted. This paper focuses on the food provision side of the proposed conceptual framework, where FMs are conceptualized as TSS. An empirical analysis is proposed, aimed at verifying eventually different perceptions in the stage setting design between farmers and managers of FMs, beginning with considering the three essential functions (economic, social, and environmental) of a sustainable business model. The specific research questions are: to what extent do the actors of the supply side involved in the design and operation of FMs believe that these marketing channels can produce these types of value? Which values should be staged first concerning the three main pillars: economic, environmental, and social?

Methodology

The empirical analysis here carried out provides a first step which is concentrated on the food provision side. To determine how a TSS creates value from the supply side, we developed a framework dealing with three facets of value (economic, environmental, and social), referring to a recent study by Charatsari et al. (2023). Table 1 reports the statements considered in our survey per each domain (economic, environmental, and social).

- Concerning the economic facet, we conceived value proposition as offering high-quality food, cultivated and directly sold by local farmers through short and efficient distribution channels. In this process, tangible and intangible resources are involved, particularly contextual farmers' knowledge and relational assets to set up rooted relationships with final consumers (Charatsari et al. 2020).
- The environmental dimension considers the positive externalities provided by the farmers' markets, such as reducing food miles and food waste (Warsaw et al. 2021). Moreover, products sold at the farmer's markets are usually produced according to sustainable farming practices and, in many cases, through organic production methods.
- Finally, the social dimension considers the activation of relational assets through promoting social capital, a positive impact on local communities, and the preservation of local cultural traditions (Renting et al. 2003).

The three dimensions have been excavated using a questionnaire submitted to the regional directors of the FMs adhering to the Campagna Amica Foundation of Coldiretti in Italy and associated producers. Therefore, 21 questionnaires have been submitted to all directors of the Italian regions. Out of 21 requests, 17 directors have correctly provided feedback. The answering producers are homogeneously distributed across Italy.

Moreover, a restricted sample of farmers adhering to Campagna Amica was invited to participate in a focus group. They were first asked to answer the same questionnaire to identify eventual differences in stage setting and then discuss possible developments of the model in the Italian context.

Table 1 – The variables considered for each dimension. *Source:* Own elaboration

Economic dimension	Environmental dimension	Social dimension
Are able to offer high-quality agri-food products, produced by local farmers	Reduce the food miles (the distance between producers and consumers), with positive environmental effects	Promote local consumption
Have low transportation costs for the products' delivery to farmers' markets	Have a low environmental footprint per unit of product sold in farmers' markets	Help preserve local traditions and cultures
Exploit authentic farmers' knowledge	Contribute to the reduction of food waste	Enhance intra-community relationships
Use effective selling strategies	Reduce food waste through better production planning	Strengthen the sense of community in farmers and consumers
Offer high revenues to producers	Are based on small-scale (local) transportation that does not harm the environment	Provide consumers with information on the production methods
Distribute products effectively through food boxes	Have a low environmental burden due to the farm machinery used	Create social capital
Effectively distribute products through local stores	Are based on efficient energy use at the farm level	Offer significant benefits to local communities
Effectively distribute products through online direct sales		Facilitate the development of trust between community members
Effectively target schools/old age homes		Promote a culture of belongingness
Effectively distribute products through farmers' markets		Contribute to the development of sustainable communities
Attract consumer interest		Offer farmers independence from mainstream market channels
Offer customers the opportunity to visit the farm		Offer extra services to consumers
		Promote intra-community collaboration

Items endorse the statement "short food supply chains in my region ..."

These farmers have been characterized by choosing farmer's markets as a marketing channel for almost 10 years. This constraint has limited the answer rate by reducing the sample to 10 farmers available to participate in the survey. The decision to conduct this experiment with a focus group limited the possible number of respondents (Stewart, Shamdasani, 2014), who were in any case chosen to represent different areas of Italy.

Table 1 reports the statements considered in our survey per each domain (economic, environmental, and social). Interviewees were invited to answer the following question: "*farmers markets in my region...*", followed by items concerning economic, environmental, and social aspects. We used a one (strongly disagree) to five (strongly agree) Likert scale to measure items. Seventeen directors from different regions and the 10 selected farms participated in the study. To analyse data, we used descriptive statistics.

Results

The descriptive analysis's results show how the social, environmental, and economic spheres play distinct roles in stage setting and value creation through experiential engagement.

The comparison between directors of FMs and local producers revealed different perceptions of the three facets of value, especially for the environmental and economic

dimensions. Regarding the economic aspect (Table 2), the directors of Campagna Amica attribute higher scores to the dimensions associated with the economic value of FMs. Among the benefits emerging through the operation of these markets, they highlight the direct sale of high-quality fresh products. Furthermore, they qualify these marketing schemes as attractive for consumers, as they directly express culture, local knowledge, and social and relational capital. Nevertheless, directors are sceptical of the effectiveness of online/box scheme sales. Another interesting observation relates to the low mean score of the item “have low transportation costs for the products’ delivery to farmers’ markets”, suggesting that the stage setting may also entail prohibitive costs that negatively impact farmers’ revenues.

On the other hand, the producers of Campagna Amica perceive a lower value offered by the economic resource in experiential staging than directors. Although with lower scores, producers highlight the possibility of producing high-quality products, a more effective distribution in farmers’ markets, the ability of such supply chain schemes to link consumers with farmers (for instance, by visiting farms), and important levels of interest that consumers show towards the products distributed through FMs. Similarly to directors, producers recognize critical issues related to the effectiveness of online/box sales and the cost of transporting the products from farms to markets.

The environmental facet is the least emphasized by directors in the stage setting, as the relatively low mean scores of the relevant items confirm (Table 3). However, most respondents consider the environmental impact per unit of product to be low, thus stressing the fundamental environmental function held by the FMs. The variable with the highest mean score in the set of items presented in Table 3 concerns the reduction of food miles, which feed the direct externalities of farmers’ markets. Among the emphasized strengths, there is the possibility of reducing food waste through production planning. Alongside these advantages, directors recognize that the machinery used in production and vehicles of transportation have environmental impacts.

Table 2 Mean scores and standard deviations of the items used to assess the economic value of farmers’ markets. *Source:* Own elaboration

Item	Directors		Producers		
	Mean	Std. Dev	Mean	Std. Dev	Diff
Farmers markets...					
Effectively Distribute products through farmers’ markets	4.53	0.514	4.3	0.823	0.23
Offer customers the opportunity to visit the farm	4.29	0.588	4.2	1.033	0.09
Attract consumer interest	4.65	0.702	4.2	1.033	0.45
Are able to offer high-quality agri-food products produced by local farmers	4.94	0.243	4.1	0.994	0.84
Exploit authentic farmers’ knowledge	4.65	0.493	4.0	1.155	0.65
Use effective selling strategies	3.53	0.624	3.0	1.054	0.53
Have low transportation costs for the products’ delivery to farmers’ markets	3.12	1.111	2.9	1.101	0.22
Offer high revenues to producers	3.59	0.795	2.8	1.033	0.79
Effectively distribute products through food boxes	3.24	0.97	2.8	0.919	0.44
Effectively distribute products through local stores	3.29	0.849	2.7	0.949	0.59
Effectively distribute products through online direct sales	2.47	0.717	2.7	1.16	−0.23
Effectively target schools/old age homes	2.76	0.903	2.6	1.43	0.16

Table 3 Mean scores and standard deviations of the items used to assess the environmental value of farmers' markets. *Source:* Own elaboration

Item	Directors		Producers		
	Mean	Std. Dev	Mean	Std. Dev	Diff
Reduce the food miles (the distance between producers and consumers), with positive environmental effects	4.65	0.862	4.9	0.316	-0.25
Have a low environmental footprint per unit of product sold in farmers' markets	4.12	0.6	4.6	0.699	-0.48
Contribute to the reduction of food waste	4.35	0.786	4.4	0.699	-0.05
Reduce food waste through better production planning	4.29	0.92	4.4	0.699	-0.11
Are based on small-scale (local) transportation that does not harm the environment	2.76	0.831	3.6	1.174	-0.84
Have a low environmental burden due to farm machinery used	3.24	0.664	3.4	1.174	-0.16
Are based on efficient energy use at the farm level	3.53	0.514	3.4	0.966	0.13

Table 4 Mean scores and standard deviations of the items used to assess the social value of farmers' markets. *Source:* Own elaboration

Item	Directors		Producers		
	Mean	Std. Dev	Mean	Std. Dev	Diff
Promote local consumption	4.88	0.332	4.8	0.422	0.08
Help preserve local traditions and cultures	4.94	0.243	4.7	0.483	0.24
Enhance intracommunity relationships	4.88	0.332	4.7	0.483	0.18
Strengthen the sense of community in farmers and consumers	4.88	0.332	4.6	0.699	0.28
Provide consumers with information on the production methods	4.71	0.47	4.6	0.699	0.11
Create social capital	4.65	0.493	4.5	0.707	0.15
Offer significant benefits to local communities, Facilitate the development of trust	4.65	0.493	4.5	0.707	0.15
Between community members	4.94	0.243	4.4	0.699	0.54
Promote a culture of belongingness	4.76	0.437	4.3	0.675	0.46
Contribute to the development of sustainable communities	4.65	0.493	4.2	0.632	0.45
Offer farmers independence from mainstream market channels	4.59	0.618	4.2	1.033	0.39
Offer extra services to consumers	3.82	0.636	4.2	0.632	-0.38
Promote intracommunity collaboration	3.76	0.831	3.7	1.059	0.06

The environmental dimension is of primary importance for producers since it registers higher values than directors for all the statements used to depict the environmental facet of value. For example, they perceive that the products distributed through FMs have a limited impact on the environment and reduce the distance between farmers and consumers. Another relevant point is related to the possibility of reducing food waste.

Finally, social aspects (Table 4) play a key role for directors and producers, particularly regarding disseminating contextual knowledge and preserving historical and local culture. The involvement of consumers in the stage setting is realized through relational capital and empowered by cultural assets. Several social factors catalyse the social value produced through FMs. These include the building of social capital, the promotion of local consumption, and the formation of a local community of citizens-consumers and producers reinforcing the sense of belonging to a local community. Stage setting provides essential benefits to final consumers in terms of reducing information

asymmetries. On the other hand, points of weakness are related to the reduced ability to offer extra services to consumers and to favour intracommunity collaboration, aspects on which directors and producers agree.

Discussion and conclusions

The present work aimed to identify how farmers who sell their products in Italian FMs, and the related directors evaluate the three facets of value emerging through the operation of these marketing channels. Following a stage-setting approach, these three facets are crucial preconditions for defining the intangible attributes of products (and markets). Through a stage-setting lens, the capacity to trigger these types of value plays a pivotal role in developing successful localized modes of food provisioning (Jeannerat 2013; Van Herck et al. 2012).

Our analysis indicates that the stage-setting strategy, developed within a rural entrepreneurship approach (Korsgaard et al. 2015), is grounded on strong social values, such as community building, preservation of contextual knowledge, and local culture sharing. Indeed, the relevance of social and cultural aspects has been pointed out by both directors and producers, which is in line with the idea of broadening the perspective of innovation to sociocultural values (Jeannerat, Crevoisier, 2022). Therefore, our analysis confirms previous research which assimilates farmers' market to an example of social innovation from a dual perspective (Murray et al. 2010): the first one implies a sociotechnical transition involving a change of the shared cognitive routines of production towards localized agri-food systems (Geels, Schot, 2007). The second one activates value creation processes through a reconnection between consumers and producers mediated by social capital and localized food cultures. As a consequence, a virtuous combination of composite territorial resources is the engine for the FMs success (Mazzocchi, Marino, 2018) and creates the conditions for a community-based rural entrepreneurship, a process of community engagement in the discovering and exploiting opportunities (Peredo, Chrisman, 2006; McElwee et al. 2018). This process is realized through a mechanism of "stage-setting", which requires dedicated resources positively impacting the territorial performance of the FMs (Corade et al. 2022), such as material resources, human, natural, organizational, and patrimonial resources related to shared common values. The extent of the impact cannot be taken for granted, depending on how actors are engaged in the stage setting. Despite the generally positive results, the empirical analysis also revealed a non-symmetric view of the values to be staged. Our research shows how the process of stage-setting involves actors with different perceptions. In the long term, it could limit the potential development of these alternative food networks, so previous research on the role of collective action in boosting collective FMs initiatives is confirmed (Tisenkopfs et al. 2011). For instance, producers attribute great importance to environmental issues and to the contribution to building sustainable agricultural systems through FMs. Directors, on the other hand, emphasize the economic facet of value. These different perceptions can be an obstacle in drawing effective strategies and policies to strengthen the stage setting and, consequently, enhance the potential of farmers' markets. Set against the background of the aforementioned proximity perspective (Mulder 2022),

this means that similitude logic does not emerge due to the asymmetries in the shared values, which may represent a barrier to boosting a full collective action, as pointed out in other analyses (Crespo et al. 2014).

Although the results make a novel contribution to the literature, the paper is not without limitations. The first is that the study used the stage-setting approach, focusing only on the production and local governance stages. This represents a limit of the paper because, as pointed out in the previous paragraphs, the role of the consumer is paramount in the process. The decision to limit the study was made to focus on the relational choices between producers and governance without using consumer influence. This second step represents a possible and necessary development of the study. Future studies may also focus on delving into the production side, how they do business and what innovations they adopt, which at the same time shape farms' relational architectures and new territorial proximities, as emphasized by De Rosa et al., (2024). This could become interesting to understand the value produced by short supply chains and the role of the production fabric of small and medium-sized enterprises, which as Vecchio et al., (2021) argued is the mainstay of Italian agriculture.

The second concerns using a qualitative approach, such as the focus group, which does not allow us to generalize the results. This result, therefore, represents a first step to be able to limit the size of surveys in a possible study that wishes to capture the representativeness of farmers' markets.

This study examined FMs as contexts wherein the perceptions of various stakeholders play a significant role in shaping the stage setting. In future research, gathering insights from the consumers' point of view on the contribution to the stage setting will also be helpful. Gaining insight into different viewpoints can facilitate the comprehension and improvement of the processes through which environmental, social, and economic value is generated within specific agri-food supply chains. Understanding these dynamics is crucial to stimulate the sustainable transition paths supply chains are called upon to undertake in the upcoming years.

From a normative point of view, spatial-based policies are required, to boost both geographical and organizational proximities. In particular, bottom-up, participative, and multi-actor policy approaches should be addressed (Bryden 2019) to raise awareness about the potential of the FMs to strengthen the biocultural identity of the rural territories (Scaramuzzi et al. 2023). Concerning the stage setting, the territorial embeddedness of the stage setting process calls for "directional policies" targeted towards new disruptive modes of production (alternative to the globalized mode of food provisioning), consumption and living aimed *at* societal change. As Jeannerat and Crevoisier (2022) pointed out, this policy should focus on the "entrepreneurship ecosystem" shaping social conditions for exploiting the opportunities provided by the localized modes of food provisioning.

The stage-setting mechanisms analysed in this paper represent an example of setting up an entrepreneurship ecosystem where a diversified set of values is at stake and to which a dedicated policy mix (Magro, Wilson, 2019) is required. Multi-goals, multi-policies, and multi-level governance are necessary for a wide inclusion of values involved in the stage-setting process.

Abbreviations

TSS	Territorial staging system
LAS	Localized Agri-food system
SFSC	Short food supply chain

Author contributions

The presented research was conjointly designed and elaborated. All authors participated in the discussion, and all authors contributed to the writing of this paper. All authors have read and approved the final manuscript.

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Availability of data and materials

The authors declare data availability under request.

Declarations

Competing interests

The authors declare no conflict of interests.

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