



From the ground up: Exploring the potential contribution of citizens' assemblies in radical food-system transformation

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Abstract

To contribute to food-system democratization and its transformation towards socio-ecological sustainability, various civil-society actors jointly organized a national citizens' assembly in Switzerland in 2022. For six months, 80 randomly selected Swiss residents learned about and deliberated on the food system. They then co-formulated and democratically approved 126 food-policy recommendations. Employing a political agroecology approach, this study entails two analyses that assess the transformative nature of these recommendations as well as six participants' development of "critical food-systems literacy", i.e., the ability to critically analyze the food system and take action to change it. Based on our findings, we propose that capitalist realism, or the acceptance of capitalism as the only viable political-economic system, must be countered to facilitate citizens' roles in envisioning radical transformation towards post-growth food systems.

Keywords

citizens' assemblies; food-system transformation; agroecology; critical food systems literacy; capitalist realism; food citizenship

1. Introduction

The global food system is both a driver and victim of the 21st century's "dual social-ecological crisis" (Hickel, 2023), with wide-reaching ecological, socioeconomic, and health impacts (Heron *et al.*, 2025; McGreevy *et al.*, 2022). Food systems have also come under fire for their highly undemocratic structure and functioning (see e.g., Lang, 1999). Accordingly, in Switzerland, grassroots movements, non-governmental organizations, and now the federal government have promoted the transformation of the Swiss food system towards greater socio-ecological sustainability and popular participation. To catalyze this process democratically, various civil-society actors organized a national citizens' assembly in Switzerland in 2022 called the Swiss Citizens' Assembly for Food Policy (SCAFP). A total of 80 Swiss residents were randomly selected to learn about and deliberate on problems facing the food system and to jointly devise food-policy recommendations to address them. After 6 months, the SCAFP participants voted to approve 126 such co-formulated policy recommendations that address a broad range of food-system issues.

Using the SCAFP as a case study, this article aims to address the following research questions to assess the potential contribution of citizens' assemblies to radical food-system transformation: (1) Do the SCAFP policy recommendations support the *making* of agroecology and the *unmaking* of capitalist social-property relations? (2) Did the SCAFP participants develop critical food-systems literacy (CFSL)?

To answer these questions, we performed two separate analyses. In the first, we analyzed the 126 SCAFP food-policy proposals using two different frameworks. The first framework was the 13 principles of

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agroecology developed by the UN's Committee on World Food Security High-Level Panel of Experts (HLPE, 2019), and the second was the three capitalist social-property relations formulated by Mark Tilzey (2017, 2019).

For the second analysis, we interviewed six SCAFP participants to assess their development of CFSL on the basis of both their knowledge of the food system and their expression of hegemonic common sense and counter-hegemonic good sense.

The article is structured as follows. Section 2 elaborates the paper's theoretical foundations. To contextualize the SCAFP, Section 3 provides the reader with a brief overview of the Swiss food system. Section 4 then introduces the citizens' assembly as an increasingly popular form of participatory governance to address sustainability challenges, while Section 5 explores the specific case study of the SCAFP. In Section 6, we present our methods and positionality. Section 7 presents and discusses the results of our two analyses. Finally, Section 8 provides some concluding remarks.

2. Theoretical foundations

"Making" and "unmaking" in transformation towards sustainability

The capitalist mode of production is the primary driver of socio-ecological crises today. The realization of systemic sustainability, therefore, requires both the *making* of sustainable alternatives to the capitalist status quo and the deliberate dismantling, or *unmaking*, of capitalism itself (Feola *et al.*, 2021).

Agroecology is an alternative paradigm to the industrial food system supported by grassroots advocates, practitioners, and researchers of sustainable agriculture around the world. As a holistic scientific discipline and a set of agricultural practices rooted in context-specific knowledge, agroecology aims to enhance ecological circularity and reduce the need for external inputs (Holt-Giménez & Altieri, 2012). It is also a social movement struggling for food sovereignty and community empowerment (Holt-Giménez & Shattuck, 2011). Agroecology's potential to ameliorate the food system's socio-ecological impact is also increasingly acknowledged by formal institutions, including the Swiss Federal Office for Agriculture (2016b). In 2019, the HLPE released a set of 13 agroecological principles (

Figure 1; HLPE, 2019). This set of far-reaching principles could serve as a touchstone to guide the *making* of a post-growth food system rooted in socio-ecological sustainability and justice.



Figure 1: HLPE's 13 principles of agroecology (modified from GIZ, 2020)

Many proponents of agroecology argue that the unsustainability and injustices that characterize the food system are driven by the dynamic forces of capitalism (e.g., Altieri *et al.*, 2017; Gliessman *et al.*, 2022; Holt-Giménez, 2017). Political ecologist Mark Tilzey (2017, 2019) identified three key social-property relations that uphold capitalism (). These social-property relations result in the imperatives of profit maximization and wealth accumulation at the level of individual producers as well as macroeconomic growth and imperialist value drain at the system level (Heron *et al.*, 2025; Hickel, 2021; Marx, 1867). Thus, to achieve post-growth food systems, the *unmaking* of these social-property relations is imperative (Tilzey, 2017).

Social-property relations	Description
Primitive accumulation	The process of expropriating producers from their means of subsistence and commodifying their labor power, resulting in their loss of control over the means of production and the fruits of their own labor.
Absolute property rights	The granting of complete dominion and ownership over land, nature, and other use values, for instance commodified food, that are necessary for human life and flourishing to individuals or legal entities.
Market dependence	Reliance on the capitalist market to obtain the use values that are necessary for human life and flourishing.

Table 1: Three key social relational foundations of capitalism as identified by Tilzey (2017, 2019).

Capitalist social-property relations render the food system, and the economy writ large, fundamentally undemocratic (Tilzey, 2019). This is because they deny those who do not own the means of production (MOP), who constitute the majority of people in society, a meaningful say in how and for what purpose production is carried out (Hickel, 2023; Marx, 1867). It is the private owners of the MOP who decide at what prices produced goods are sold and how the resulting profits are invested. Similarly, the ability of consumers to influence the food system is largely reduced to their purchasing power in market interactions. As such, most people have no say over the fact that, under capitalism, the food system is oriented not toward nourishing humans in accordance with ecological regenerative capacities, but toward maximizing profits (Holt-Giménez, 2017).

(Insufficient) food democracy and transformative food citizenship

This lack of democracy is addressed in the scholarship of food democracy which promotes a bottom-up approach to food governance (Booth & Coveney, 2015; Lang, 1999). It claims that empowering 'food citizens' (i.e., active, decision-making political subjects) to exercise their agency in the food system should lead to systemic transformation shaped by their needs and interests (Renting *et al.*, 2012). Some argue, however, that most food-democracy literature (e.g., Hassanein, 2008) focuses on *political* rights and obligations without challenging "the *economic* powers of capital and their operation through market dependence" (Tilzey, 2019, p. 202, emphasis added).

The related concept of critical food-systems literacy (CFSL) pertains to people's ability to both understand the complex and interconnected factors that shape food systems and take action to make them more sustainable and equitable (Cullen *et al.*, 2015; Rose & Lourival, 2019). According to Rose and Lourival (2019), people must develop CFSL in order to practice *transformative* food citizenship, i.e., to actively engage in the food system so as to address the root causes of its crises. This entails dispelling the dominant ideas and beliefs that make capitalism seem inevitable. Such ideas and beliefs represent what Marxist theorist and revolutionary Antonio Gramsci called hegemonic common sense, i.e., the dominant narratives in a society that serve to cement its power structures and inequalities by shaping the way people think and perceive the world (Gramsci, 1971). Such hegemonic common sense must be transformed through critical education into what Gramsci

called good sense, or the ability to critically analyze and challenge dominant beliefs in order to socialize liberatory ideas and practices (Gramsci, 1971; Moyo, 2019).

3. Overview of the Swiss food system

Agriculture represents the largest use of land in Switzerland (Federal Office for Spatial Development, n.d.). Its agricultural production intensity is among the highest worldwide (Scharer, 2022). This has contributed to massive increases in agricultural yields and labor-productivity (economicsuisse, 2019; Federal Office for Agriculture, 2016a), but has also led to profound ecological impacts, including soil degradation, biodiversity loss, water pollution, and large greenhouse-gas emissions (Fesenfeld *et al.*, 2023).

Yield gains have driven overproduction and falling farm-gate prices, giving competitive advantages to large producers that can benefit from economies of scale (Scharer, 2022). This has resulted in dramatic structural change in Swiss agriculture. Over the past 50 years, the number of farms has fallen by nearly 60% and those that remain today cultivate, on average, over twice as much land (Federal Statistical Office, 2022). They are also increasingly specialized and indebted (Huber, 2022).

To nevertheless provide Swiss farmers with some protection from the whims of capitalist markets, a voluntary scheme of direct payments was introduced in 1993, designed to compensate farmers for the multitude of functions agriculture serves that are not otherwise remunerated (Federal Office for Agriculture, 2009). Producers must comply with defined ecological standards in their agricultural practices to receive these payments, directly linking their income to their ecological behavior (Federal Office for Agriculture, 2009). These direct payments make up a considerable proportion of both individual farm incomes (Bosshard, 2017) and the annual budget of the Swiss Federal Office for Agriculture (74% in 2020; Federal Statistical Office, 2022).

The Swiss food system is also characterized by corporate concentration up- and downstream of on-farm production. For example, the country's two largest supermarkets together dominate over 70% market share of food retail (Federal Department of Foreign Affairs, 2017). This market structure gives corporate actors considerable power over both producers and consumers, particularly in price-setting processes (Clapp, 2021).

In response to these dynamics, a host of alternative food initiatives and political projects have arisen. For example, non-corporate provisioning initiatives such as community-supported agriculture and direct sales have become more popular in recent years (Federal Statistical Office, 2022; Schümperlin, 2020). Various civil-society organizations advocate for the proliferation of sustainable agriculture and the improvement of farmer livelihoods in Switzerland (e.g., Biovision and Koopernikus). State institutions are also increasingly prioritizing socio-ecological sustainability, with the Swiss Federal Council (SFC) promoting food-system transformation as a means to meet its sustainable development goals (SFC, 2021a).

Despite a widespread acknowledgement that transformation is necessary, the question of *how* to bring it about remains open. Prevailing institutions have not proven to be up to the task of catalyzing sustainability transitions; despite the growing popular will for action against climate and ecological breakdown, political inertia persists (Rigendinger, 2023). Recent attempts to democratically address the fallout from the growth-based economy have met dire fates in Switzerland. Between 2017 and 2022, various national popular initiatives aiming to promote ecologically and ethically produced food, to institutionalize corporate responsibility, to diminish drinking-water pollution, to reduce synthetic pesticide use, and to abolish industrial animal agriculture were defeated in nationwide votes. These efforts provoked reactionary mobilization and contributed to ongoing political polarization (Brandt, 2021; Huber, 2022). At the same time, institutional agricultural politics in Switzerland have failed to adopt adequate policy measures to address socio-ecological challenges (Scharer, 2022). These patterns indicate the need for innovative political processes capable of fostering radical transformation by addressing the systemic root causes of the crises facing humanity.

4. Citizens' assemblies as an approach to transformation

An increasingly popular approach to addressing complex societal issues is through citizens' assemblies (Talmadge, 2023). Citizens' assemblies are deliberative bodies that bring people together to learn about,

discuss, and make recommendations on a particular issue (Hennig, 2017). Drawing on deliberative democracy, this form of participatory governance emphasizes inclusive, informed deliberation and rational decision-making by a group of randomly selected people that is representative of a wider population in terms of age, gender, or race etc. (Dryzek *et al.*, 2019; OECD, 2020).

Proponents of deliberative democracy are enthusiastic about its potential to foster the conditions necessary for sustainability transitions (Pickering *et al.*, 2022). Deliberation can, for example, promote social learning, trust, and reflexivity amongst participants, allowing them to better understand the issues at hand and why their own concerns do or do not align with those of others (Bächtiger *et al.*, 2018; Dryzek & Pickering, 2017). By involving people in decision-making processes, citizens' assemblies can activate citizen empowerment (OECD, 2020) and invigorate political consciousness (Fischer, 2006). Citizen participation in government decision-making has also been found to contribute to overcoming political gridlocks (Irvin & Stansbury, 2004).

In the food system, there are calls to "put citizens at the heart of food-system governance" (Pimbert, 2012, p. 1). Inclusive democratic participation is crucial to ensuring justice in food-system transitions towards sustainability (Tschersich & Kok, 2022). Thus, given the urgency of food-system transformation and the growing interest in democratically tackling societal problems through citizens' assemblies, it is vital to investigate whether they could potentially contribute to food-system transformation.

5. Case study: the Swiss Citizens' Assembly for Food Policy

The SFC identified various measures to achieve food-system sustainability, including promoting inclusive dialogues (SFC, 2021b). It publicly called for the engagement of representative food-system actors to generate holistic recommendations for policymakers. Three Swiss civil-society organizations heeded this call and organized a national citizens' assembly on food policy that took place in 2022 – the Swiss Citizens' Assembly for Food Policy (SCAFP).

"What should a food policy for Switzerland look like that, by 2030, makes healthy, sustainable, animal-friendly, and fairly produced food available to all?" This was the guiding question that 80 residents from across Switzerland collaboratively addressed over six months. Participants were randomly selected to be representative of the population based on their gender, age, language, and settlement type (i.e., urban, town, or rural) (SCAFP, 2023). The participants were divided into 10 groups, each of which covered one of five thematic areas (Table 2).

The SCAFP was launched on June 11, 2022, when the participants were all gathered for a kick-off weekend and introduced to the Swiss food system by various stakeholders (SCAFP, 2022b). Subsequently, the groups met in online meetings that involved presentations from experts about problems facing the food system, discussions with these experts, and facilitated deliberations amongst the participants. As shown in Table 2, the groups identified transformation needs for the food system within their respective thematic areas (Amos, 2023; SCAFP, 2023). In July and August, the participants attended excursions to various innovative food-system projects across Switzerland so they could learn about and experience firsthand some practical examples of producing, processing, and selling food in more sustainable and just ways (SCAFP, 2022d).

Beginning in September, the participants developed goals for food-system change and corresponding policy recommendations to address the previously determined transformation needs (Amos, 2023; SCAFP, 2023). During the concluding weekend on November 5-6, 2022, the participants finalized the 137 co-developed policy recommendations, which were then subject to a plenary vote (SCAFP, 2022a). To be adopted, a recommendation needed to achieve over 50% approval from the voting participants. A total of 126 recommendations passed, forming the SCAFP's final output.

Thematic area	Transformation needs
Health	☐ Information for consumers ☐ Reduction of sugar consumption ☐ Promotion of healthy diet through food foundation ☐ Promotion of healthy diet through health insurance
Environment	☐ Site-appropriate agriculture and promotion of biodiversity ☐ Promotion of sustainable agriculture through financial incentives ☐ Reduce food waste
Economy	☐ Promotion of healthy and sustainable food through pricing policy, financial incentives ☐ Advertising and marketing ☐ Ethics
Production	☐ Promote balanced diet, more plant-based food ☐ Promote seasonal and locally adapted, regional products ☐ Fair payment for producers
Social affairs	☐ Role of large corporations ☐ Public education and awareness ☐ Understanding nutritional behavior and taking targeted action

Table 2: The SCAFP thematic areas and the corresponding transformation needs identified by participants.

Based on the SCAFP case study, we explore the following research questions: (1) Do the SCAFP policy recommendations support the *making* of agroecology and the *unmaking* of capitalist social-property relations? (2) Did the SCAFP participants develop CFSL?

6. Methods

Two main components comprise this study: (1) the analysis of the SCAFP recommendations using two analytical frameworks and (2) interviews with six SCAFP participants and the subsequent analysis of the corresponding transcripts and notes.

Data collection and analysis of the policy recommendations

To answer our first research question, the first author performed a directed content analysis (Hall & Steiner, 2020; Hsieh & Shannon, 2005) of the 126 approved co-formulated food-policy recommendations to assess their alignment (yes/no) with the HLPE's 13 agroecological principles and their subversion of Tilzey's three key social-property relations of capitalism. We used the two frameworks because, although the agroecological principles clearly demonstrate the food system we need, they do not adequately address the capitalist social relations that underlie the current organization and functioning of the food system and prevent the realization of agroecological principles. The coding process allowed for a recommendation to align with multiple agroecological principles/social-property relations.

Data were collected by downloading the SCAFP recommendation catalogue from the SCAFP's website on December 8, 2022. The analysis was carried out in the software MAXQDA (VERBI Software, 2021), whereby the 13 agroecological principles (HLPE, 2019) and Tilzey's three social-property relations (2017, 2019) served as the initial code to analyze each recommendation.

Data collection and analysis of the interviews

Semi-structured interviews with six SCAFP participants were carried out by the first author to address the second research question. She was inspired to formulate this question after witnessing discussions between participants at SCAFP events in which they expressed paradoxical narratives: a desire for more a sustainable and just food system and the belief that it is infeasible. Only six participants were interviewed because of access and scheduling difficulties.

Using the interview transcripts, the first author conducted a conventional content analysis (Hsieh & Shannon, 2005) to examine the participants' knowledge of the food system as well as their expression of narrative patterns. For this analysis, there was no initial set of codes. Instead, patterns were inductively identified with an iterative approach. These patterns were then categorized as Gramscian hegemonic common sense or counter-hegemonic good sense, depending on whether they served to discursively uphold and comply with, or challenge the capitalist status quo, respectively. Additionally, she took note of when participants expressed their knowledge about the food system. The analysis of the interviews was also performed with MAXQDA (VERBI Software, 2021).

7. Results and discussion

Results of the policy recommendation analysis

Alignment with agroecological principles

In this section, we will present first how the SCAFP recommendations align with agroecological principles and then whether they subvert key social-property relations of capitalism, followed by a discussion of whether the recommendations are transformative.

The 126 approved SCAFP recommendations address a variety of pressing food-system issues, including farmer livelihoods, the ecological impact of animal agriculture, people's access to affordable healthy food, and food waste. Our analysis revealed that each of the agroecology principles was supported by at least one policy recommendation. The distribution of this alignment was imbalanced, however, with 6 of the 10 principles (*Soil health*, *Animal health*, *Biodiversity*, *Synergy*, *Economic diversification*, and *Participation*) being supported by fewer than 10 recommendations each, while the principle of *Social values and diet* was supported by 95 recommendations.

This finding is likely due to the prevalence of certain terms such as "sustainable" and "healthy", for which no democratically decided definition was provided. The absence of a clear definition of what was meant by these terms in the context of the SCAFP made it impossible to determine the potential impact of the corresponding recommendations. For example, it is unclear whether SCAFP recommendations vaguely promoting "sustainable agriculture" would, in fact, contribute to concrete agroecological processes such as on-farm biodiversity enhancement as would be required to align with the agroecological principle of *Biodiversity*. Thus, we considered recommendations containing such normative but undefined terms to indicate the participants' values and therefore to align with the agroecological principle of *Social values and diet* rather than with principles that pertain to biophysical outcomes.

Besides sustainability, the values identified in the recommendations include regionality, seasonality, fairness, and transparency. They evoke a vision of the SCAFP participants' ideal food system. These values are, however, the result of our deduction, since the participants themselves did not explicitly discuss and co-determine what values they want the food system to embody. Despite these limitations, this finding provides an instructive implication for the potential role of citizens' assemblies in complex societal transformations, namely the discussion of shared values.

Lack of alignment with agroecological principles

Some agroecological principles were not fully supported by the recommendations but had some level of alignment with them. This was the case, for example, with the principles *Connectivity* and *Co-creation of knowledge*. A total of 17 recommendations seek to increase consumers' confidence in food products through more transparency by improving the information on food products and introducing voluntary certification programs. This objective corresponds with, among others, *Connectivity*, which also seeks to increase confidence and trust in the food system. In agroecological food systems, however, this is done first and foremost by bringing producers and consumers closer together and by cultivating relationships between them (Nicholls & Altieri, 2018). Instead, the recommended measures seek change by influencing individual behavior, aligning with the liberal concept of rational, informed decision-making. This approach individualizes systemic problems and obscures the power imbalances from which they arise (Holt-Giménez, 2017; Maxton-Lee, 2020).

Similarly, 42 recommendations pertain to the need for education and awareness-raising about the food system – an essential objective for agroecological transitions. However, over three-quarters of the relevant recommendations propose approaches to learning and education that are top-down rather than horizontal and co-creative. Although such measures may contribute to greater consumer confidence and knowledge, these examples demonstrate that many of the approaches proposed in the SCAFP recommendations do not align with the principles of *Connectivity* and *Co-creation of knowledge*. In other words, while the objectives of the SCAFP recommendations – such as transparency, education, and awareness-raising – are compatible with agroecology, the concrete methods proposed by the SCAFP to achieve these goals are inadequate.

Subversion of capitalist social-property relations

Of the 126 SCAFP recommendations, 106 do not subvert any of the three key capitalist social-property relations (Tilzey 2017, 2019). Among those that do, 16 contribute to reducing market dependence by increasing people's ability to meet their needs outside the capitalist market, e.g., by encouraging direct collaboration among producers or between producers and consumers, or by actively teaching people how to grow food (Loconto *et al.*, 2018). Regarding the reversal and prevention of primitive accumulation, four recommendations seek to increase people's access to the MOP or hinder their further privatization, for instance, by increasing people's access to seeds. Finally, the private ownership of the MOP, as bestowed via absolute property rights, was not challenged at all in the recommendations. Nevertheless, over a third of the recommendations were found to challenge profit maximization by opposing the externalization and minimization of costs, overproduction, and the unequal distribution of profits.

Our analysis supports the hypothesis that these social-property relations are interconnected and that their subversion is interdependent. For example, while some recommendations seek to reduce market dependence, people's actual ability to meet their needs beyond the market remains constrained without the reversal of primitive accumulation, e.g., by establishing agroecological public-common partnerships (Heron, *et al.*, 2025). Ultimately, this reversal would require challenging the property rights that deny people access to the MOP in the first place. Private ownership leads to artificial scarcity, the commodification of labor power and resources, market competition, and, ultimately, the capitalist imperatives of profit maximization and infinite growth. Radical food-system transformation towards post-growth sustainability thus necessitates that the means of food production be brought under social ownership and democratic control.

Transformative nature of the SCAFP recommendations

Overall, the SCAFP recommendations signify the necessity of food-system transformation and highlight the centrality of trust and knowledge-sharing in that process. They contain measures that are vital for agroecology to flourish, and many seek to counteract the accumulation of profits by the few. For the most part, however, they seek to address deleterious symptoms of the capitalist food system by reforming it rather than by confronting the root causes. In large part, the recommendations maintain the alienation that characterizes the dominant food system today by privileging transparency, hierarchal education, and individual responsibility

over interpersonal connection and community empowerment. Ultimately, these dynamics can only be overcome through the subversion of the social relations of domination and oppression that characterize capitalism, which the SCAFP recommendations largely do not address. This is not to say that the recommendations would not move the food system in a more sustainable, equitable, and healthy direction, but they do not envisage a post-growth, agroecological food system.

Results of the interviews

Development of CFSL

Developing CFSL may be necessary for practicing transformative food citizenship (Rose & Lourival, 2019) and thus also for bringing about post-growth transformations of the food system. This section will present our analysis of the SCAFP participants' CFSL. Their development of CFSL was assessed based on their knowledge of the food system as well as the Gramscian hegemonic common sense and counter-hegemonic good sense they expressed.

In the interviews, all six explicitly acknowledged that they had learned a lot about the food system, which is an essential element for developing CFSL (Rose & Lourival, 2019). They all gained an understanding of the complexity of the food system, expressed through remarks about interconnectedness, multifunctionality, and trade-offs. For example, in speaking about the different thematic areas of the SCAFP and the issues addressed by the recommendations, one participant claimed that none of them can be approached as "detached" from the others. Five participants discussed the interconnectedness of ecosystems, agricultural production, and farmer livelihoods, with one comparing the components of a farm to the different organs of a human body that need to work in harmony. She also remarked on the difficulty of changing the food system due to food's emotional and cultural associations. Another participant expounded on the large number of actors associated with the food system, laughingly saying, "The whole issue, I've found, is incredibly complex. Unbelievably! Everything plays into it, from the legislation, from the lobbyists, the middlemen who buy directly from farmers [...] and many jobs are obviously linked to it."

Assessing the distribution of power between these many actors in the food system is another important aspect for developing CFSL (Rose & Lourival, 2019). All six participants identified corporations as having a lot of power in the food system. This assertion is in line with numerous recent articles that have identified the concentration of corporate power as a major obstacle to food-system transformation (e.g., Béné, 2022; Clapp, 2021). The participants recognized various ways that corporations exercise power, including through the control of markets and prices, the creation of dependency, as well as lobbying and marketing. The participants diverged, however, regarding whether they approved of how corporate actors exercise this power; some outright opposed corporate activities aimed at increasing profits, such as advertising, while others accepted them as an inevitable aspect of doing business.

In the interviews, the SCAFP participants also revealed a range of hegemonic common senses, i.e., beliefs that serve to justify and naturalize capitalism. First, half of the interviewees focused primarily on **individual behavior changes to reach the objectives of food-system transformation**, which contradicts the collective political approach necessary to bring about systemic change (Heron & Dean, 2022). One participant criticized consumers for not making better food choices to take advantage of the fact that they represent the largest group in the food system because "ultimately, consumers have control over everything." Another interviewee similarly stated that "purchasing power is the greatest power" and argued that by reducing their consumption of unsustainable products, such as strawberries in winter, consumers could push retailers to not offer these products. These perspectives are in line with mainstream narratives regarding how to achieve sustainability and health that reduce avenues of transformative political action to the 'ethical consumption' of individuals (Evans *et al.*, 2017; Maxton-Lee, 2020). Despite their focus on individual behavior, all interviewees also identified corporations as powerful actors who maximize their profits and influence consumer behavior to do so. A participant justified this contradiction with the statement, "As long as people pay for something [and] it's not a necessary food, [...] then it's the consumer's own fault." Following this logic, the ultimate responsibility for change would lie primarily with individual consumers.

What prevents change, as argued by four participants, is egotistical and stubborn **human nature**. This claim is often used to argue against the possibility of radical social transformation (Marinescu, 2016) and represents a second hegemonic common sense. It was illustrated well by one participant's words: "Humans are simply not willing to embrace dramatic change [...] and that's really the perverse thing. [...] we are perverse enough to just continue our comfort." He and another participant also extended this perversity to those working for private companies, arguing that it is the greed of individuals within corporations – as opposed to systemic imperatives such as profit maximization and growth – that impedes those corporations from taking up their role as "pioneers" in the transition towards sustainability.

Despite their condemnations of corporate activities, two-thirds of the interviewees claimed that **large corporations are necessary for the functioning and transformation of the food system**, representing a third common sense. For example, corporations' role in connecting producers and consumers and their role in driving innovation were deemed essential. Two interviewees argued that many corporations are already doing "more than they have to" to transition towards sustainability, and both specifically mentioned Switzerland-headquartered Nestlé as a pioneer in this regard. This narrative aligns with a recent report that found that, despite their central role in driving the problems facing the food system, corporations have increasingly and successfully advocated for their participation in food-governance processes in recent decades, often emphasizing their indispensability in transforming the food system (IPES-Food, 2023). The interviews with participants of the SCAFP indicated that this belief has become a hegemonic common sense.

Our analysis identified two final hegemonic common senses: the **right to profit** and the **infeasibility of alternatives**. In the former case, four interviewees discussed private firms in a way that depicted them as having the natural right to engage in money-making activities regardless of those activities' socio-ecological consequences. Such perspectives are necessary to ideologically legitimize the capitalist food system and are incompatible with a system that is sustainable and just (Gliessman *et al.*, 2022; Holt-Giménez, 2017). Finally, five interviewees considered alternative food-related initiatives that prioritize sustainability, justice, and health to be infeasible due to their context-specificity and inability to be scaled up and generalized. For example, the participants applauded the projects they visited but voiced "concerns about whether this can be implemented on a large scale." This notion that solutions must be scalable indicates the inevitability of growth as a dominant belief, underpinned by what degrowth scholars refer to as the "ideology of growth" (Schmelzer *et al.*, 2022).

The hegemonic common senses observed in the interviews represent narratives that align with dominant elements of the growth-based capitalist food system. These can be summarized as what Fisher (2009) referred to as capitalist realism, or "the widespread sense that not only is capitalism the only viable political and economic system, but also that it is now impossible even to imagine a coherent alternative to it" (p. 2). Capitalist realism obscures the structural forces that organize our societies, for example by promoting the narrative that societal progress is synonymous with economic growth. Such mystification limits people's ability to take transformative action (Chomsky & Waterstone, 2021). It therefore both sustains the industrial food system to which capitalism gives rise and serves to prevent radical transformation towards post-growth sustainability, justice, wellbeing, and democracy.

Nevertheless, we also observed Gramscian good senses in the interviews, represented by participants' capability to critically analyze and challenge dominant beliefs and values. All six asserted that the transformation of the food system is necessary and urgent, with one proclaiming the need to "rethink [the food system] on all fronts." Despite their expression of capitalist realism, all interviewees also denounced the primary orientation of the food system toward profits at the expense of other objectives, with one participant calling it a "profit machine" and saying it "should not be based on profit, but on health and sustainability." Four interviewees made the case for more systemic and critical thinking in food politics, while all six advocated for more citizen engagement in the food system and for ordinary people's voices to be elevated. As such, they laid out a vision of greater grassroots engagement in the food system and its transformation.

According to one interviewee, this bottom-up direction is an absolute necessity: "Every revolution started with the people [...] every change started with the people. You can't expect it to come from the top down." For this purpose, all interviewees found citizens' assemblies to be a good mechanism by creating a "mouthpiece for the people." A participant described that it felt good "as ordinary citizens [...] to feel useful."

He explained his empowered perspective with a metaphor: "It's like a dog that has its leash in its own mouth, that goes for a walk, it does it itself. Normally you always have a politician or a master holding the leash. And here we have the leash in our mouth, and we walk ourselves."

Finally, four participants mentioned that their participation in the SCAFP had induced more self-reflection about their own role in the food system and encouraged them to share their ideas and experiences with others. And with this act, they were, in fact, extending the food democracy they practiced in the SCAFP beyond the citizens' assembly – as activated food citizens.

Overall, the participants learned a lot in the SCAFP and exhibited the development of some counter-hegemonic good senses. These processes are essential to attaining CFSL. However, one's comprehension of what drives the food system remains incomplete without a systemic understanding of the social-relational foundations of capitalism, limiting their potential to take systemically transformative action (Holt-Giménez & van Lammeren, 2019; Tilzey, 2019). This was exemplified in the participants' expression of narratives that correspond with capitalist realism. Thus, we determined capitalist realism to have constrained the level of CFSL that the participants attained.

Synthesis: critical food systems literacy and transformative food policies

The prevalence of capitalist realism may have prevented the formulation of transformative food policies by the participants of the SCAFP. This process is depicted in Figure 2 in which we propose a framework for understanding the potential role of citizens' assemblies in radical food-system transformation. It portrays how citizens' assemblies can contribute to the democratization of the food system and foster food citizenship among participants who co-create food policies. A citizens' assembly that is transformative would enable its participants to develop CFSL by gaining knowledge about the food system, overcoming capitalist realism, and fostering good sense, e.g., through processes of critical pedagogy (see e.g. Freire 1974, 2000). This, in turn, could lead to the co-formulation of transformative food policies. Such food policies would support both the dismantling of capitalist social relations and the cultivation of agroecological initiatives, in other words the unmaking of the dominant industrial food system and the making of a post-growth alternative. In addition, participation in a citizen's assembly that allows one to develop CFSL can foster transformative food citizenship, leading to altered perspectives and behavior beyond the citizens' assembly.

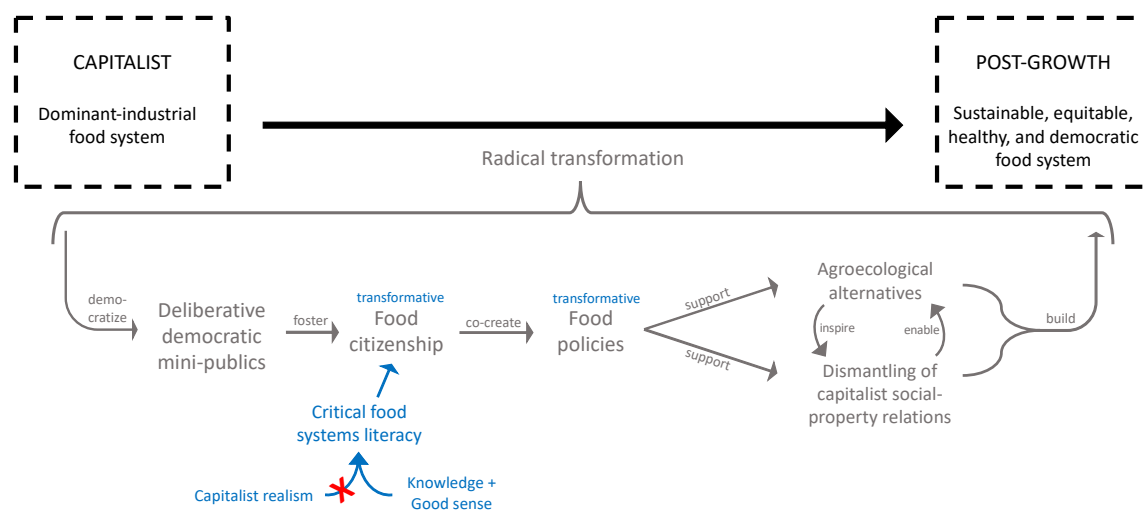


Figure 2: A framework for the potential role of citizens' assemblies in radical food-system transformation from a capitalist to a post-growth food system. The grey elements represent the process in a reformist citizens' assembly, while the blue elements indicate a transformative citizens' assembly.

8. Conclusion

Our analysis of the SCAFP revealed that citizens' assemblies can bring people together as members of a community to have constructive and empowering conversations about the food system, i.e., to *practice* food democracy. The SCAFP recommendations and interviews indicate that the participants became more knowledgeable about the current food system and that they desire one that is more sustainable, just, healthy, and democratic. Citizens' assemblies could also provide fertile ground for food citizens to discuss and co-define the values according to which they want the food system to be organized.

Our research indicates, however, that as long as capitalist realism obscures the structural imperatives that drive the food system, the root causes of its problems cannot be addressed, leading to a politics of reformism rather than of radical transformation. Nevertheless, such processes capable of facilitating the emergence of engaged political agents, i.e., food citizens, could help grassroots movements mobilize a greater diversity of people in their struggle for socio-ecological sustainability. Looking forward, agroecological principles should be integrated into policymaking processes, including citizens' assemblies, in order to fertilize post-growth food systems.

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