Equity and alternative food initiatives in The Netherlands

Deepening our understanding of social sustainability in food systems through a study of how Dutch AFIs understand equity

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I. Summary

Social sustainability is a much used concept in food system transitions. It is, however, also a concept of which it is unclear what exactly it means and how it is to be interpreted or put to use. This thesis therefore attempts to clarify the concept through a study of a related core dimension, equity. The main research question guiding this these is: *How can the way Dutch alternative food initiatives invoke concepts of equity help in understanding social sustainability in relation to food systems?* This question is answered through a combination of research methods. First, through use of secondary data analysis, an understanding of the concept 'equity' is developed, which is then brought into relation with food systems and their social dimension. After this, and also through use of secondary data analysis, a clarification of the concept 'alternative food initiatives' is given. Then, four semi-structured interviews with Dutch alternative food initiatives are analysed in order to understand how they invoke the concept of equity in their work. The results of these analyses are used to answer the main research question. The ways in which Dutch alternative food initiatives invoke concepts of equity can help in understanding social sustainability in food systems because they point to three key areas where equity, food systems and their social side come together. These key areas are 1) the extent to which ecological boundaries are respected by food system actors; 2) the way prices are regulated in food systems, and; 3) the extent to which food systems take the (needs of the) people that are involved in them actively into consideration. By identifying these three key areas, this thesis contributes to improving the overall understanding of what a socially sustainable food system entails.

II. List of figures

1. Introduction

Ever since the publication of the *Our Common Future* UN-report in 1987, the notion of 'sustainable development' has been placed firmly on the international agenda. It defined sustainable development as 'development that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs (WCED, 1987, pp. Chapter 2, Point 1). Sustainable development and the affiliated concept of sustainability have become prime targets for policy makers in a wide range of contexts. A prime example of this is the ratification of the Sustainable Development Goals by all 193 United Nations (UN) member states in 2015. Similarly, sustainability has become so important in a number of societal domains that scholars in the field of macro-marketing argue it has become a 'megatrend', pointing to the way that sustainability is one of those 'significant social, economic, political and/or technological movements that shape[s] our lives' (Mittelstaedt et al., 2014, p. 254).

Sustainable development is often subdivided into three pillars of sustainability: economic sustainability, ecological sustainability and social sustainability. Economic sustainability relates to matters such as employment, taxes, income and expenditure; ecologic sustainability relates to things such as water and air quality, natural resources and biodiversity; social sustainability relates to social variables such as equity, access to social resources, quality of life and education (Slaper & Hall, 2011). This typology has come to be known as the 'triple bottom line', referring to the way that sustainable development is only achieved when performance on all three dimension of sustainability is above a certain threshold level (a bottom line). The triple bottom line in this sense assures a kind of development that is healthy in relation to all three domains of sustainability. However, a number of scholars argue that the three pillars of sustainability are not all equally easy to operationalize, with 'social sustainability' being the most side-lined and neglected pillar of the three (Boström, 2017; Murphy, 2012). Reasons for this range from a historical focus on the environmental pillar of sustainability (Boström, 2017) to its dynamic and open nature, making it a contestable term (Baker, 2006) and the extent to which its interpretation is contingent on place and time (Dempsey et al., 2011). In short, it is unclear what exactly the social in social sustainability means, how it is to be interpreted and how it is to be put to use.

In debates about food systems transformations, this tension over confused integration of social sustainability into food system changes becomes glaring. For example, research has shown that no widespread consensus on assessment tools for measuring social sustainability-performance exists (Janker & Mann, 2018), making it virtually impossible for e.g. policymakers to assess interventions in food systems aimed at fostering this social sustainability. Nevertheless, powerful organisations such as the European Commission (EC), the Dutch government, the UN, and the Food and Agriculture Organization of the UN (FAO) do employ notions of 'sustainability' and 'social sustainability' in their efforts to foster transitions towards more sustainable food systems (European Commission, n.d.; Nguyen & FAO, 2018; Sociaal-Economische Raad, 2021). This creates a problematic tension: if some of the most powerful organisations in the world strive for a socially sustainable food system by employing concepts of which it is not clear what they are supposed to entail, how then will we know for sure that these efforts bear the fruits that we want them to bear?

Because of the critical appraisal that the concept of social sustainability has received, this thesis will aim to contribute to clarifying what it, in the context of food systems, entails. It will do so through a focus on a related core dimension of social sustainability: equity. Equity is, according to Murphy (2012), one of the key concepts in the broader social sustainability discourse. It appears

in the *Our Common Future* report by the UN (WCED, 1987) as well as in more recent reports by the FAO (see e.g. Nguyen & FAO, 2018). Murphy (2012, p. 20) defines equity as a 'distribution of welfare goods and life chances on the basis of fairness'. This not only refers to a fair distribution of e.g. financial resources, but to a whole spectrum that is situated between the mere ability to survive as a human being and the ability to fully develop ones potentials. Things that should be equitably (re)distributed therefore do not only apply to material things such as access to nutrition, clean water and shelter, but also to nonmaterial things such as employment, education, access to social networks as well as freedom from discrimination on any ground.

Guy and McCandless (2012) state that equity has to do with the intersection of disadvantage and advantage, and that interventions undertaken in the name of equity will therefore always encounter resistance from a status quo. The reason for this is that interventions in the name of equity are 'designed to compensate for complex causes of inequality', thereby disturbing existing power-relations (2012, p. 5). This disturbance inevitably leads to resistance from those profiting from the status quo, or those in power. Guy and McCandless (2012) therefore argue that it is necessary to understand the complexities that are involved in interventions aimed at fostering equity. This effect also brings with it a constant need to bring equity under attention as it is so easily brushed off by those that are advantaged by the status quo as they do not experience the incentive to enact change and strive for equity. Because of the aforementioned dynamics, equity should be one of the focal points in monitoring and studying food systems transitions towards a more socially sustainable future, wherever it will take us.

As is mentioned above, equity is the concept through which this thesis attempts to improve our understanding of social sustainability in food systems. The specific focal point for this thesis is the way in which equity is understood and invoked by food-related grassroots initiatives in the context of The Netherlands. For these initiatives, the term *alternative food initiatives* (AFI) will be used. Dutch AFIs are the focal point for two reasons. Firstly, according to DeLind (2011), it is at the level of grassroots initiatives where the true potential for sustainability[1]—economic, ecologic *and* social—is found:

> 'The integrity and the creative possibilities found at all levels—but most especially at the smallest (or least) level—and within all systems and subsystems were the sources of diversity and redundancy—the *sin qua non* of a regenerative system and in this case a regenerative food system' (DeLind, 2011, p. 274).

To DeLind, it is the flexible, innovative and multifunctional bottom-up initiatives in the food system that one should look to when searching for promising sustainable alternatives to conventional food system practices. Here, the argument made by Guy and McCandless (2012) is applicable: alternative food initiatives are, by definition, not part of the status quo, and the stakes, goals and scale-levels

1 In the quote, DeLind uses 'regenerative' as an alternative term for 'sustainable'. She does so because she builds on an essay by Dahlberg (1993), who preferred the term 'regenerative' over 'sustainable'. He did so because the term 'sustainable' bears connotations of sustaining business as usual-practices, with all its harmful effects. 'Regenerative' on the other hand refers more explicitly to what is actually meant with sustainable: the 'basic reproductive and generational questions that are crucial to the health of individuals, populations, and societies'. In Dahlberg, K. A. (1993). Regenerative Food Systems: Broadening the Scope and Agenda of Sustainability. In P. Allen (Ed.), *Food for the Future: Conditions and Contradictions of Sustainability* (pp. 75-102). John Wiley & Sons. P. 80.

with which AFIs work differ from those of more established parties and institutions such as corporate agriculture and the UN and FAO. This difference puts AFIs ahead of the status quo in pursuing a truly equitable food system because they are in a much better position to advance creative, adaptive and flexible solutions to, in this case, problems related to inequity. Therefore, studying how notions of equity are invoked by AFIs will help in gaining a better overall understanding of what a socially sustainable food systems might or should entail with regard to equitability.

A second reason, flowing from the first, for why AFIs are an ideal frame to explore the concept of equity is that they place values of justice, redistribution and fairness at the core of food systems reformers agenda. This becomes clear when studying the work of a whole range of food scholars that engage with the social side of food systems form outside the sustainability-paradigm. Examples of these are the literatures on the 'emancipatory question' (Constance, 2008a, 2008b), food justice (Alkon & Agyeman, 2011; Guthman, 2008; Smith II, 2019), civic agriculture (Lyson, 2008; Lyson, 2004) and the 'local food movement' (Hassanein, 1999; Smith II, 2019). These writers all raise their own set of complex issues with regard to food systems and their social dimension, addressing issues such as inclusivity and access to healthy food, the rights and protection of food workers, producer-consumer (power-) relations, sense of community and the extent to which food economies are controlled and managed in ecologically and socially sound ways at the scale of the local from their own, unique perspectives. These literatures therefore help to gain an insight of the diversity of social issues that are present in food systems as well as how some of these are already being addressed by AFIs. This will help in understanding what a socially sustainable food system might look like, and what the role of equity therein might be.

A third and final reason for studying specifically *Dutch* AFIs is that most of the above mentioned literature is written from an American perspective. Here, the argument made by Dempsey et al. (2011) is applicable—what is to be considered socially sustainable is context dependent. What is considered socially sustainable in the United States may be different from the Netherlands as different social, cultural and historical contexts have generated different social problems, interventions and other dynamics. In the context of this thesis, this means that, even without connecting it to social sustainability, there is a need to study how concepts related to equity intersect with food systems in the geographical context of the Netherland. This way, the this thesis will also, although sideways, contribute to this broader literature on food systems and their social dimension.

This thesis' main goal is to contribute to a better understanding of what social sustainability in food systems is about by studying how equity is invoked by Dutch AFIs. The main research question guiding this thesis is as follows:

- *How can the way Dutch alternative food initiatives invoke concepts of equity help in understanding social sustainability in relation to food systems?*

Sub questions that need to be answered in order to answer this main research question are as follows:

- What is equity, and what are equity-related concepts?
- How are equity and equity-related concepts referred to throughout literature on food systems?
- What are alternative food initiatives?

- How do Dutch alternative food initiatives invoke concepts of equity?

The first three sub questions will be answered through studying the literature. The answers to these questions are discussed below, in the theoretical framework. The fourth and final sub questions will be answered through a qualitative case-study of four Dutch AFIs, the results of which are discussed down below, in the section on results. The four cases are Odin (wholesaler/organic supermarket chain), UDEA (wholesaler/organic supermarket chain), De Peelconnectie (care farm/organic garden and food forest) and De Waalgaard (food forest). They were selected because they meet two selection criteria: 1) They form 'alternatives to more standardized industrial mode of food supply' (Renting et al., 2003, p. 394), and 2) they share the aspiration to 'develop a critique of corporate, intensive and de-personalised modes of agricultural production, distribution and consumption' (Psarikidou, 2022, p. 3). For each of the cases a representative was interviewed in a semi-structured manner, due to which a variety of topics was addressed. The interviews were analysed with regard to how the interviewees invoked equity and equity-related concepts. In the discussion-chapter, these findings are related back to the main research question: *How can the way Dutch alternative food initiatives invoke concepts of equity help in understanding what a socially sustainable food system entails?* This section also discusses the limitations of this thesis as well as providing some suggestions for further research. The thesis finishes with a small chapter that contains a conclusive statement.

2. Theoretical framework

2.1. Equity, a key lever for social sustainability

As Murhpy (2012) argues, equity is a key concept in much of the broader literature on social sustainability. It is a part of what social sustainability entails, *Equity* is a concept that connects ideas and ideals about fairness and justice to the way 'welfare goods and life chances' are distributed within a society (Murphy, 2012, p. 20). These welfare goods and life chances can be material—food, shelter, money, etc.—but they can also be nonmaterial, as is the case with things such as access to education, employment and social networks, and freedom from discrimination. What an equitable distribution of these resources (both goods and chances) is, is often elucidated by contrasting equity with equality. Equal distribution is achieved when recipients all receive an identical amount of the thing distributed. Distribution according to this logic does not take account of the recipient's needs or of what recipients already have. Therefore, even though recipients receive the exact same amount of the exact same thing, significant differences between them may persist because they already existed before distribution took place. Equity on the other hand applies a more flexible logic of distribution, taking into account what a person's needs are and adjusting the amount of the thing given to these needs. Someone that already possesses a lot of resource X would need less of that resource than another person that possesses little of resource X. An equitable distribution takes these different needs into account, adjusts the amount of the thing distributed and gives some more and some less. The goal of an equitable distribution is thus achieving a situation in which everybody is endowed in a way that is considered fair or just.

In their analysis of equity, Guy and McCandless (2012) argue that equity as a concept emerged as a philosophical concern, having its roots in the works of Enlightenment-thinkers such as Rousseau, Locke and Hobbes. They employed the concept of 'natural rights', arguing that all people are created equal and therefore have equal rights by nature. In a context of emerging governments, they argued that it was a state's duty to protect these equal rights. Hobbes (1660/1982) argued that, in order for that society to be peaceful and just, it is necessary that governments recognize this equality by nature-principle (Guy & McCandless, 2012, p. 6). Later, from the late 19th century onwards, equity developed from a philosophical concern to what Guy and McCandless call a 'structural concern', or a 'constitutional concern'. In this sense, equity became more thoroughly embedded in laws and constitutions and was employed as a directive for government processes. An example of this is the way the American constitution (in theory) provided equal protection under the law for all its citizens. Later, in middle and later half the 20th century, equity became 'social equity' and the scope of the concept was broadened. Social equity became an instrument with which governments could 'correct the power imbalance between the advantaged and the disadvantaged' (Guy & McCandless, 2012, p. 6). During this period, social equity became an 'administrative goal', pushing governments to function more and more as an equalizer through, for example, ending racial inequalities by targeting practices of segregation, or addressing gender-related inequalities by targeting unequal employment opportunities for men and women.

Guy and McCandless argue that nowadays, the concept of social equity functions as a framing device for a wide range of problems. Social equity is 'a lens through which needs are identified and processes are grounded', which, if used properly will help in moving towards a more

fair and just society (Ibid., p. 9). Some examples of issues and areas to which this social equity-lens is applied are public transport, health care and environmental threats. In the case of public transport, a poorer neighbourhood might suffer more from a lack of or cut in funding for public transport-services then a richer neighbourhood would because of differences in the availability of a car that exist between residents of both neighbourhoods. The same goes for health care and environmental threats. Should access to care, or protection from environmental hazards be regulated by the amount of money people have at their disposal, or should these differences in financial resources be accounted for by providing some people with a little more access, protection or help than others who might need it less? On top of that, and especially relevant in the case of the environment, there is also an intergenerational aspect to equity. Future generations will inherit this planet with all the environmental problems as they are created by current and past generations. In this sense, one can ask if the principle of social equity should be applied in order to protect future generations' rights to a hospitable living environment. This way of applying the concept of social equity in reflected in the *Our Common Future*-report as it argued for a kind of development that 'meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs (WCED, 1987, pp. Chapter 2, Point 1).

2.2. Equity and food systems

In relation to food and food systems, these dimensions of equity (welfare goods and life chances, material and nonmaterial, present and future) are also present. To DeLind, equity in food systems is about a 'fair distribution of resources, voice, and power' (DeLind, 2011, p. 274). What these dimensions of equity mean will be elucidated below with the help of different literatures on food systems and their social dimension. In relation to how equity in the sense of a fair distribution of resources is understood, the *Our Common Future*-report provides an example:

> The challenge of sustainable agriculture is to raise not just average productivity and incomes, but also the productivity and incomes of those poor in resources. And food security is not just a question of raising food production, but of ensuring that the rural and urban poor do not go hungry during the short term or midst a local food scarcity. All this requires the systematic promotion of equity in food production and distribution (WCED, 1987, pp. pp. Chapter 4, point 5).

This example ties equity up with issues of maldistribution of income and access to food, focussing on the economic processes of food production and distribution. It problematizes the way the economically underprivileged enjoy relatively little food security and receive low income. Equity in this sense is about levelling the economic rewards—access to food and income— that are earned by different groups (the poor, the rich).

Another example of how this distributive dimension of equity is invoked is found in the literature on the local food-movement. This movement is founded upon a critique of corporate agriculture, which is seen as ecologically, economically and socially destructive (Smith II, 2019). Allen et al. (2003, p. 62) describe how the local food-movement uses market strategies to 'construct and portray alternatives to the construction and reproduction of hegemonies of food (and agriculture) in the conventional food system'. Some examples of the forms this may take are direct marketing programs (e.g. weekly delivered boxes of self-grown vegetables), *community supported agriculture* (CSA)—a form of agriculture where consumers pay a producer a fee upfront, in order to

later receive products directly from the producer (Durrenberger, 2002), and community gardens. The goal of using these kinds of direct-marketing programs is to make sure that food is grown locally and with care for the environment, all the while making sure that the small and medium scale farmers that operate these programmes are able to gain enough profits from their work. Gaining enough profit is often an issue for farmers operating in this way, as Hageraats illustrates, arguing that a vast majority of CSA-farmers earns below less than minimum wage (Hageraats, 2021, p. 7). Both these approaches, local food's and *Our Common Future's,* to equity focus predominantly on resource-distribution, and less on voice or power.

An example of what voice means in relation to equity in the food system is found in the definitions of socially sustainable food system by the FAO as well as in the food justice movement. The following example is the FAO's definition of a socially sustainable food system:

> On the social dimension, a food system is considered sustainable when there is equity in the distribution of the economic value-added, taking into account vulnerable groups categorized by gender, age, race and so on. (Nguyen & FAO, 2018, pp. What is sustainable food system development? section, para. 3)

Again, attention is paid to resource distribution. But this time, the scope of who ought to receive attention in this sense is broadened. Instead of the division between poor and non-poor, the FAO talks about 'vulnerable groups'. These vulnerable groups, which are pointed out in a non-exhaustive way in the example, ought to receive attention according to the quote. They, and their situation as it relates to the distribution of economic value-added, should be recognized. In other words, they should be given voice.

The second dimension of equity found in alternative food movements concerns the concept of voice. food justice movement too draws attention to issues of voice. The origins of this movement are found in the USA, where it was strongly intertwined with the struggles for freedom amongst black Americans in the 1960's and 1970's (Potorti, 2017). The food justice movement is strongly committed to an agenda of social change and racial justice and connects issues such as unequal access to healthy, nutritional food to larger structures of oppression such as racism, sexism and classism. It therefore aims to give voice to people that are underrecognized due to these larger structures of oppression. Examples of scholarly work that can be in this movement are Guthman (2008, p. 388), who demonstrated how in many Californian farmers' markets and CSAs 'discourses associated with whiteness' serve to exclude black people from spaces of alternative food practices. In a similar way, White (2011) focussed on how urban agriculture in community-based systems in Detroit is a way for black women to exert agency and self-determination. By creating community-based agricultural projects in the city, they were able to create safe spaces that are used by their communities to 'exercise political agency and bring about community transformation and, in the process alleviate the food crisis and demonstrate social and political change' (White, 2011, p. 15). On a much larger scale, Alkon and Agyeman argue that the whole agri-food system is '*racial projects*, political and economic undertakings through which racial hierarchies are established and racialized subjectivities are created' (Alkon & Agyeman, 2011, pp. 4-5). Voice in this sense is thus very much about giving the underrepresented and unrecognized people in society recognition and thereby acknowledging their needs, or food-needs in this case.

In the civic agriculture-literature, voice too is an element. Civic agriculture is a term that is coined by American sociologist Thomas Lyson (2004). It refers to the 'embedding of local agricultural and food production in the community' (2008, p. 92), thereby placing much emphasis

on the interconnectedness of the actors involved and the way they are bound together by a shared geographical nearness. A concept used in the literature on civic agriculture is that of *food citizenship*, which pertains to a situation in which people not only have a 'stake but also a voice in how and where his or her food is produced, processed, and sold' (Lyson, 2004, p. 72). Voice in this sense thus relates to having a say in or exercising a little control over the way food systems are shaped.

The aspect of voice can also be moved beyond people and be related to non-humans such as animals, nature, a culture or structural concerns. All of these things might easily be overlooked when thinking about food systems and therefore can be given voice. An example of this is found in the definition of sustainable food systems that the FAO uses:

> On the social dimension, a food system is considered sustainable when there is equity in the distribution of the economic value-added, taking into account vulnerable groups categorized by gender, age, race and so on. *Of fundamental importance, food system activities need to contribute to the advancement of important socio-cultural outcomes, such as nutrition and health, traditions, labour conditions and animal welfare.* (Nguyen & FAO, 2018, pp. What is sustainable food system development? section, para. 3. Empasis added.)

In this case, voice is about recognizing all elements that are in some way connected to or impacted by the way food systems operate. In the same way, it is also often suggested that future generations should be given voice, since they will inherit our planet after current generations are replaced. Voice in this sense is present in the definition of sustainable development that the *Our Common Future*-report provides, as well as in more contemporary definitions of the FAO of what a sustainable food systems is supposed to entail:

> A sustainable food system (SFS) is a food system that delivers food security and nutrition for all in such a way that the economic, social and environmental bases to generate food security and nutrition for *future generations* are not compromised. (Nguyen & FAO, 2018, p. 1. Emphasis added)

In short, voice is about giving recognition to all things, both human and non-human, that are impacted by food systems. The extent to which these different elements are given voice is part of what makes a food system equitable or not.

The third dimension of equity DeLind (2011) mentions is power. In a general sense, power refers to the ability or capacity to influence or exercise control over something. A way of looking at power in the context of food systems is through focussing on power-relations. An example of such a power-relation is given by Smith II (2019), who, basing himself off of Lyson (2004), argues that the local food-movement initially arose to provide an alternative to large scale, conventional agriculture. As corporate agriculture dominates markets, it has a monopoly on economic and political power. Due to this, small and medium sized farmers are marginalized and the food system is almost completely controlled by large corporations who decide what people get to eat (Smith II, 2019, p. 827). Civic agriculture aims to provide an alternative to this domination of large scale, corporate agriculture through focussing on the local and community, aiming to regain some control over the way food is produced, distributed and consumed:

> Civic agriculture embodies a commitment to developing and strengthening an economically, environmentally, and socially sustainable system of agriculture and food

> production that relies on local resources and serves local markets and consumers. The imperative to earn a profit is filtered through a set of cooperative and mutually supporting social relations. (Lyson, 2008, p. 92).

Nevertheless, the local is not free of inequities that are power-related, as it, according to Constance may just as much be 'embedded in racist, sexist, ageist, and classist social relations' (2008b, p. 154). This argument reflects the issues that the food justice movement raises. Another area where power relations are prevalent has to do with the relationship food entrepreneurs, be they big or small, have with governmental institutions. These may be supportive or discouraging and their policies may have different impacts depending on what type of food entrepreneurs you are. Supermarket chains may be supported differently than an organically operating farmer would be. Finally, power-relations also exist between different actors in the food system. Different actors (e.g. supermarkets or farmers) may compete with each other for market share, clients, products, institutional support, etc. Also, food systems are often organised in chains, with producers or growers supplying raw "materials" (fruits, vegetables) to processors that turn these raw materials into commodities. These processors in turn sell their products to supermarket chains, who in turn sell to consumers. All of these relations are separate links in the food chain, and in all of these relations there interdependencies and differences in power. For example, multiple growers may grow the same crop, but a producers only needs so much of that crop. Therefore, the processor has the power to choose from which grower he buys. This gives him the power to negotiate prices. In the context of the Netherlands, research by the Planbureau voor de Leefomgeving (PBL, 2012) shows how the Dutch food chain is structured. The image below (figure 2) shows how, in 2012, 65.000 farmers supplied 6500 food processors, who then supplied their products to 1500 suppliers. These suppliers supplied to only 5 procurement departments that then distributed their products among 25 supermarket chains in the Netherlands. The PBL argues that, because of the large amount of suppliers (from farmers to food processors to suppliers), the relatively small number of procurement departments have a lot of power to negotiate prices. The picture also show two lines, indicated as 'boerenmarkten' (farmers' markets) that directly connect farmers to household. No numbers are given in this image, but the Dutch Central Bureau for Statistics (CBS; Centraal Bureau voor de Statistiek) pointed out that in 2017, there were about 4000 market stalls in The Netherlands that sold food (Centraal Bureau voor de Statistiek, 2017). This explains why there are only two very small lines used to depict them.

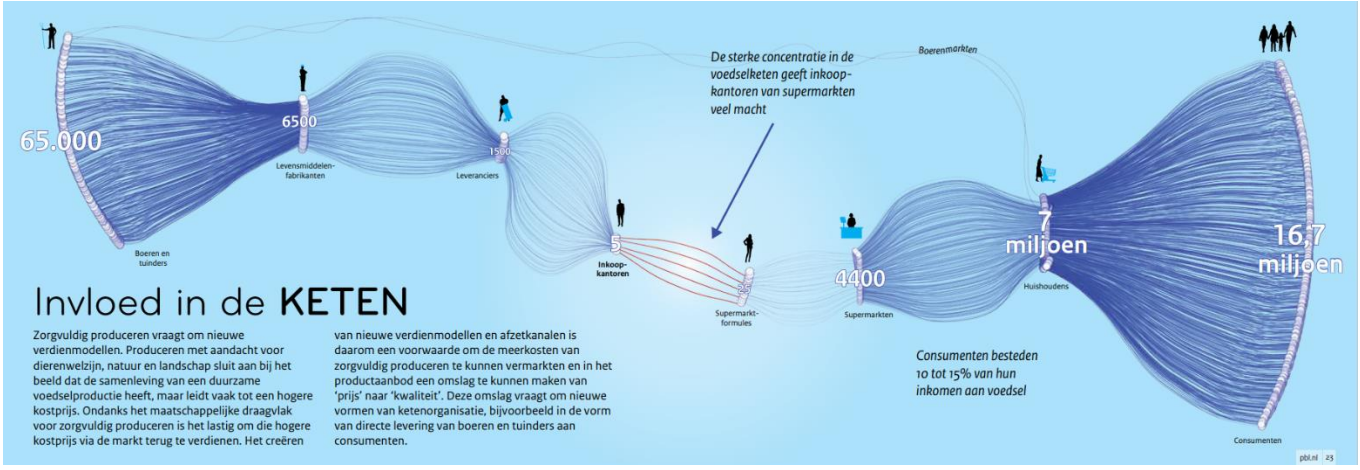

Figure 2: Structure of Dutch food chain. Source: PBL. Nederland Verbeeld (2012)

In short, equity is about the distribution of welfare goods and life chances on the basis of fairness (Murphy, 2012). There are a number of ways equity is relatable to the food system, namely through the following dimensions: distribution of resources, distribution of voice, and distribution of power (DeLind, 2011). A fair distribution of resources pertains to equal access to healthy and nutritional food for everybody. A fair distribution of resources is also applicable to what farmers and food workers earn for the work they carry out in the food system. With regard to resource distribution, topics are the extent to which different groups of people have access to nutritional and healthy food, and the way farmers ensure an acceptable income. With regard to voice, topics are the representation of vulnerable groups categorized along the lines of gender, race, age, income, etc., the ability to have a say in the way a food system is constructed, the attention that is paid to non-human elements such as nature and socio-cultural outcomes as well as future generations. With regard to power, topics are the extent to which different food system-actors have different amounts of economic and political power due to the power-relations that exist between them and the way they are or are not embedded in and supported by the political structures that exist in a given place.

2.3. Alternative food initiatives (AFIs)

Scholars often take a systems approach when studying and conceptualizing the way food is dealt with by people and in societies across the world. This systems approach takes (a part of) the world, the system, and looks at how it is 'composed of regularly interacting or interrelating groups of activities' (von Braun et al., 2021, p. 4). The interacting and interrelating groups of activities in a food system encompass 'the entire range of actors and their interlinked value-adding activities involved in the production, aggregation, processing, distribution, consumption, and disposal (loss or waste) of food products that originate from agriculture (incl. livestock), forestry, fisheries, and food industries, and the broader economic, societal, and natural environments in which they are embedded' (Ibid.). This of course includes the communities of farmers, but also every producer of input resources such as seeds and fertilizers that are used in agriculture. As opposed to conventional or corporate agriculture, there are also bottom-up initiatives, or grassroots initiatives, in the food system that aim to provide an alternative way of growing, distributing and consuming food. Terms for initiatives that do this are *alternative food networks* (AFN), and *alternative food initiatives* (AFI). Renting et al. define AFN's in the following way: 'newly emerging networks of producers, consumers, and other actors that embody alternatives to more standardized industrial mode of food supply' (Renting et al., 2003, p. 394). Psarikidou (2022) claims that the (networks of) people involved in AFN's are diverse, stretching from consumers to environmentalists and from farmers to food security advocates. What they have in common is that their activities are characterised by the aspiration to 'develop a critique of corporate, intensive and de-personalised modes of agricultural production, distribution and consumption, but also, through that, contribute to more socio-economically just and environmentally responsible societies and futures' (Psarikidou, 2022, p. 3). In this paper, the term alternative food initiative (AFI) will be used as this relates to single cases.

3. Methodology

In order to answer the research question, this study takes a qualitative and inductive approach to doing research. According to Denzin and Lincoln, qualitative research is characterised by an attempt to 'make sense of, or to interpret, phenomena in terms of the meanings people bring to them' (2000, p. 3). As the main aim is to understand how the meaning people involved in Dutch AFIs attach to their work invokes and relates to concepts of equity. It is inductive in the sense that a small number of cases are taken as the objects of study in order to say something about the larger whole to which these specific cases belong.

The use of qualitative methods in this study (elaborated on below) has implications for the method of selecting cases, or sampling. As Hennink et al. argue (2020), qualitative studies usually make use of what is called 'purposive sampling'. Contrary to what is typical for quantitative studies, qualitative studies usually do not make use of statistical methods of analysis, and sampling therefore often does not need to be statistically representative. Instead, what is aimed for in purposive sampling is gathering a set of cases that allow the researcher to gain a 'detailed contextualized understanding of the phenomenon studied' (Hennink et al., 2020, p. 91). Such a sample needs to be small enough to allow the researcher to go in depth, but at the same time diverse enough so that enough dimensions of the issue at hand can be covered. In other words, the sample should contain enough information, or consist of participants whom are 'information-rich' (Patton, 2015).

The first step in case selection is determining what the study population is. As mentioned in the research question, this study aims to understand how Dutch alternative food initiatives invoke concepts related to equity. The study population should therefore be made up of people that represent or are involved in Dutch AFIs. In this sense, this study is inductive as it has the goal of stating something about the larger whole of Dutch AFIs through looking at a few of them. In order to be considered as an appropriate cases, the initiatives in this study have to reflect the features of *alternative food networks* and *alternative food initiatives* that are mentioned in the theoretical framework above. This means that any Dutch initiative that embodies 'alternatives to more standardized industrial mode of food supply' (Renting et al., 2003, p. 394) could be used as a case in this study. A second feature of such alternative food initiatives is that they, according to Psarikidou (2022, p. 3), generally share the aspiration to 'develop a critique of corporate, intensive and de-personalised modes of agricultural production, distribution and consumption', and through doing so aim to 'contribute to more socio-economically just and environmentally responsible societies and futures'. This last feature is more difficult to assess from an outsider perspective, and it can only be checked if it pertains to a case after getting to know them through an e.g. an interview or a visit. This second feature therefore functions as a confirmatory criterium afterwards.

As Hennink et al. argue, purposive sampling is often characterized by a large degree of flexibility, allowing the sample to 'evolve as the study progresses rather than following a rigid procedure from the outset' (2020, p. 92). This is exactly what happened in this study. At the onset of this study, a number of AFIs in the Netherlands were contacted. Some responded, others did not. The first to AFIs to agree to participate were UDEA, an organic wholesaler that operates the supermarket chain Ekoplaza, De Peelconnectie, an organic garden that combines a CSA-program with a care program, and Odin, an organic food-cooperation owned by about 14.000 members that operates close to thirty small supermarkets across the Netherlands. Later on in the process, De

Waalgaard, a food forest that also helps people who experience difficulty in accessing the labour market. All of these organisations meet the first selection criterium, as they all provide alternatives to conventional, standardized modes of food supply through providing strictly organic products through methods that are different from those utilized by standardized and industrial food suppliers. The second criterium is also applicable to them as, after getting to know them, it appeared that they all show elements of critique of the conventional modes of food supply as well as that they share the aim of providing more socio-economically or environmentally sound alternatives to such conventional modes of food supply. These elements are present throughout the interviews.

Data collection was done in a qualitative manner through conducting semi-structured interviews. For each of the cases, a representative was interviewed. Next to that, or actually concurrently, UDEA, De Peelconnectie and De Waalgaard were also visited. Odin was interviewed through Zoom, so no visit was paid to them. The process of setting up these interviews and conducting them was an iterative process. At the time of the interviews, the main research question was not yet fixed, and the process of deciding on this was a very iterative process, going back and forth between the literature and research questions multiple times. However, the topic of 'social sustainability' and the social side of food systems was always the domain within which that research question would eventually be situated. After initial contact with interviewees, it appeared that 'social sustainability' as a concept was hardly used by the interviewees and the AFIs they were involved in. Because of this, for the earliest interviews (Odin, UDEA and De Peelconnectie) it seemed best to ask questions on a broad range of topics that relate to the work of these AFIs, their visions on sustainability and the social side thereof as well as their (personal) motivations for doing what they do in order to be able to answer the final research question of this thesis. This meant that interviewees were given a lot of room to tell the story about who they are and what they do in their own words. The interviews were conducted with different interview guides that, in the end, were mainly used as a guide for steering conversations with interviewees. In a sense, this approach reflects what DeLind argued for when researching alternatives in the food system: '[l]etting these places speak for themselves and listening to them carefully (i.e. less partially) are much of what Dahlberg meant by "contextual analysis"' (DeLind, 2011, p. 274). The interview guides are attached as appendices.

This way of conducting interviews reflects what Creswell and Poth (2018) argue to be the social constructivist paradigm. This paradigm suggests that people seek an understanding of the world they live in, and do so through developing their own meaning of the things (objects, interactions, situations) they experience. These meanings are diverse, and differ from person to person. A researcher operating in this paradigm therefore aims to look for this 'complexity of views' without enforcing upon them some overarching category or idea. As meaning is 'typically forged in discussions or interactions with other persons' (Ibid., p. 60), a researcher can look for it by asking open and broad questions, allowing an interviewee to construct his or her meanings while the interview takes place. In order to better understand these meanings, other topics that are often addresses in such interviews are the processes of interaction between individuals and the context in which people live and work, since both these give insight into the 'historical and cultural setting' of the interviewers, allowing for a better understanding of the interviewee's meaning by the researcher. Research in this paradigm is above all interpretative, as it is not only an interviewee's meaning that is (socially) constructed in a subjective way, it is also the researchers interpretation of this meaning and in turn the 'knowledge' this kind of research brings forward that is subjective

and interpretative. Because the research question guiding this thesis aims to interpret the way people involved in Dutch AFIs invoke (or interpret) equity and related concepts, it seems that this social constructivist paradigm fits well with it.

In the context of data analysis, the open approach to interviewing allowed for the collection of broad, but useful data that later made it possible to analyse how what was said connects to the scientifically grounded concept of equity as elaborated on in the theoretical framework. The coding was done by splitting equity up into the three dimensions that are established in the theoretical framework: distribution, voice and power. These dimensions were further divided into subtopics that are mentioned in the theoretical framework (e.g. 'access to food' for distribution, 'future generations' for voice, and 'policy' for power). Then interviews were analysed and the parts, or quotes, where these subcodes appeared where marked to be analysed further later on in the process. Additional subcodes per equity-dimension were also added when they had not been created beforehand. The eventual list of subcodes is added as appendix (appendix V).

The analysis of the interviews was done per interview, instead of per equity-dimension. This was done because one equity-dimension might, for example, be very present in one interview, but not so much in another. Analysing the interviews this way simplified the process. The software program Atlas.ti was used in the process of analysing, but mostly as a tool to mark pieces of text that related to one of the dimensions of equity. Most of the more advanced options the programme offers, such as the creating of word clouds, cross-tabulation between different documents and codes and code-code links were not used. The results that flowed from these analyses are elaborated on in the following chapter. A final note with regard to methodology is that the interviews were conducted in Dutch, as the interviewer is a native Dutch speaker and that direct quotes are therefore translated into English.

4. Results

4.1. Odin

Odin is a Dutch food-cooperation that has been set up in 1983 and is currently co-owned by its 14.000 members. Odin operates 28 stores, 150 pick-up points, a wholesale as well as a farm and a apiary. It does so with the aim of contributing to a 'fair, healthy and sustainable world' (Odin, n.d.). The reason for this is that Odin believes that we should not live only for ourselves, but for each other. A healthy, clean and liveable planet, now and into the future and with living and fertile soils is part of this. Other topics that Odin addresses as part of their philosophy are respect for animals, clean water, liveable rural areas and fair relationships with suppliers. The interview was done with an employee that works at Odin's marketing and communication-department.

Figure 3: Odin store in Nijmegen. Source: https://www.odin.nl/over-odin/winkels/-27332-odin-nijmegen-/.

4.1.1. 100% organic, and preferably biodynamic

The interviewee was first asked to elaborate on what Odin is and what it does in a broad sense. The first theme that emerged is that to Odin, sustainability is of the highest importance. The interviewee explains that, in the context of working organically, he believes that they are the most radical chain or large food-organisation in the Netherlands. There are only two proper retail chains in the Netherlands that sell 100% organically, UDEA (next interview) and Odin, of which Odin is the smaller of the two. However, according to the interviewee, Odin is the more radical one of the two because they prefer to sell biodynamically grown products over organically grown products. Biodynamic agriculture is a way of doing agriculture that pays a lot of attention to the soil. It has its origins in the 1920s and stems from ideas held by its progenitor Rudolph Steiner. In the literature, there is

discussion on where the border between organic and biodynamic should be drawn, but the main differences centres around the following: organic farming takes a relatively down-to-earth approach to farming, and the label 'organic' can be obtained by cutting out the use of the pesticides and synthetic fertilizers that are used in conventional agriculture, while biodynamic agriculture on the other has a much more spiritual and mystical undertone as it connects things such as the force of the cosmos to farming. to Chalker-Scott (2013, p. 815), the only practical difference between organic and biodynamic farming is the application of what are called 'preparations' in biodynamic farming. These preparations could be considered homeopathic mixes of organic elements such as various herbs, bark and manure. In the use of these preparations, the mystical undertone of biodynamic agriculture is resonated: 'Steiner believed that the chemical elements contained in these preparations were carriers of terrestrial and cosmic forces and would impart these forces to crops and thus to the humans that consume them' (Chalker-Scott, 2013, p. 814). This mystical element of farming biodynamically was only briefly mentioned by the interviewee. Instead, what was talked about most was the attention that biodynamic farmers pay to their soil and how they treat their animals:

> The soil, that is where everything has its origin. Biodynamic farms pay a lot of attention to it. I've experienced it myself. When you're at a biodynamic-farm and stick a spade into the ground, there's all sorts of insects: worms, centipedes, woodlice, you name it.. microorganisms.. If you were to go to a conventional farmer and stick a spade into the ground there, there's just very little life there. (Odin, personal communication, March 23, 2022)

And in relation to animals:

> Some organic farmers also go to great lengths, but in general, biodynamic-farmers go even further. Cows, for example, get to keep their horns. Almost all farmers in the Netherlands remove a cow's horns. In biodynamic agriculture this is seen as a violation of an animals physical integrity, and it also has impacts on the health of the animal. So, the horns are left on. This does mean that those animals are a little more dangerous as they can, by accident, hurt us or each other. As a consequence, the barns of biodynamic-farmers are larger so that the cows have more space. (Odin, personal communication, March 23, 2022)

By sourcing organically and where possible biodynamically, Odin gives voice to natural elements such as the soil or animals and their rights that are often overlooked by conventional farmers.

4.1.2. Long-term relations with suppliers

Another important aspect of the way Odin's tries to go about its business is that they strive to build long-term relations with their suppliers. Having built such a long-term relationship with suppliers, some of which go all the way back to 1983, allows both parties to be attentive to the needs of the other. It is a matter of giving and taking according to the interviewee. As was elaborated on in the theoretical framework, the food chain in the Netherlands is characterized by a concentration of power in the hands of five procurement departments that supply a small number, twenty-five, of supermarket chains. Before food reaches these links in the food chain, it is grown by about 65.000 farmers and processed by about 6.500 food processing-companies (PBL, 2012). Because of this, procurements departments have a lot of power to negotiate prices without taking the (financial) needs of their suppliers that much into consideration. Odin approaches their suppliers from a

different perspective, arguing that they believe in a 'new and critical economic moral', as well as that 'all involved parties in the chain receive proper compensation' (Odin, n.d.). The farm Odin owns has a function too in this regard. Besides its main goal, which is to diversify and broaden the range of crops that are sold in the Netherlands, it is very helpful in understanding what it is like to be in a farmer's position. About this, the interviewee says the following:

> 'We deal and have relationships with a lot of farmers and associated parties, and wanted to experience what it is like for a farmer to have to negotiate with retail-parties. There is no better way to do so than through having your own farm. Because of that farm, we too have to have those kind of conversations in which we try to reach agreements on prices, and, as a farm sometimes say: 'Yes.. but the price you are asking is just too low..' (Odin, personal communication, March 23, 2022)

Understanding the position and situation of your partners is crucial for Odin in building the long-term relations with its suppliers. They therefore actively approach or visit their suppliers and ask them how they are doing. This in turn allows for a kind of flexibility. An example of this, given by the interviewer, involves a farmer that had a carrot yield that was bigger than expected. Normally, farmers are bound to contracts in which they agree upon the volumes that are to be delivered by the farmer to the buyer. These contracts usually do not allow farmers to sell any more crops than the agreed upon volume. So, a harvest that is unexpectedly large results in a small proportion of the yield not being sold (Hageraats, 2021, pp. 60-62). Sometimes, those extra crops are then thrown back onto the fields, where they rot away. This would be the case too in the example given by the interviewee. However, outside of their regular agreement, Odin agreed to take on the extra volume of carrots. These were then sold in stores as a special action in combination with a few suggestions for recipes and some of the needed extra ingredients. This way, Odin was able to help out the farmer, but this flexibility has also worked the other way around in the past. An example of this is the way Odin was able to lend money very easily from some of the bigger parties it works with when they were going through a rough patch. The interviewee mentions that this aspect, the way Odin structures its business-relations, is very well appreciated by both himself and by suppliers, farmers and other parties. It is an example of giving voice to the needs of other actors in the food chain by being attentive to their needs and situation as well as distributing the risks and costs of doing business in an equitable way.

4.1.3. Social involvement

Aside from Odin's emphasis on organic/biodynamic and the care they take in building long-term relations with suppliers, they are also engaged in a number of other social initiatives. An example of this is the way Odin handles food that is doomed to be wasted if no action is undertaken. About this, the interviewee says:

> It is of course very sad when we are forced to throw away food. Therefore, we pay careful attention to that. But, if it would happen that something is going to expire within a short amount of time, then we always try, through all sorts of sustainable and social initiatives, to hand it out or sell it at a very low rate. (Odin, personal communication, March 23, 2022)

One way of doing this is by giving the food to food banks, but another way that also works well through using the mobile application Too Good To Go to sell food surpluses at a discount rate to clients that have installed the app. There, clients are shown real-time what stores or restaurants

have a surplus food and are offering assembled portions of this surplus at very low prices. Clients are then able to decide if they want to buy such a portion. If so, these portions are set aside and picked up by the client. The main aim of Too Good To Go is to prevent food from being wasted (Too Good To Go, n.d.-b), but they do so for various reasons that all intersect with notions of equity. Food waste has a number of (unnecessary) consequences across a number of domains. The domains Too Good To Go mentions have to do with the damage done to land and sea, the loss of energy, water scarcity and waste of water, carbon footprint, the economic costs of food waste, and the impacts all of the above will have on humanity now—through mass migration, climate refugee's and violent conflict— and into the future (Too Good To Go, n.d.-d). All of these issues can (partly) be addressed by focussing on tackling food waste, and there are elements of equity found throughout what Too Good To Go writes about this on their website. For example, in relation to water scarcity, the problem of unequal distribution of access to water and the disproportionate amounts of water that are consumed in the richer countries of the world are addressed (Too Good To Go, n.d.-c). Also, the needs of future generations are taken in considerations as Too Good To Go argues that the current systems of food production produce enough to feed the entire world, but that much of it currently goes to waste. The argument here is that if current food systems are sustained, there won't be enough resources left for future generations to depend on, thereby giving voice to their needs (Too Good To Go, n.d.-a). Aside from these aspects of equity that are connected to the goals of Too Good To Go, Odin's use of their services also has another impact that could be considered as contributing to a more equitable society. As the food sold through the Too Good To Go-app is sold at a discount rate, it is made more accessible to people with lower incomes.

Another way Odin contributes to social affairs is through supporting people that experience difficulties in accessing the labour market. They support a number of people that now work in their stores, at their office or in their distribution centre. The interviewee mentions that some of these people receive unemployment benefits because they are out of employment, or because they are partly unfit for work, as is the case with 'Wajongers'. Wajongers are young people that are or have become (partly) unfit for work due to having a disability. Depending on the severity of the disability, these people receive a Wajong benefit. Another group the interviewee mentions consists of people that are taking part in a program called 'Tweede Spoor'. This is a reintegration program that helps people that work at places that are unfit for them to find a job that is better suited for them. Together with these people, Odin tries to find out if there is a place for them within the company. When asked about why Odin takes up this proactive role on the job market, the interviewee refers back to the progenitor of biodynamic agriculture, Rudolp Steiner:

> This proactive role has, in a way, also to do with the vision of Odin. In some way it emerges from philosophy and especially anthroposophy, which was conceived of by Rudolph Steiner, who came up with biodynamic agriculture. It [anthroposophy] starts from the assumption that everything is connected, and that you shouldn't focus solely on sustainability in a narrow way. You should do so in every aspect of life. So, for example, in economics and culture too. (Odin, personal communication, March 23, 2022)

After this, the interviewee went on to add that the circumstances under which their suppliers produce and transport their products are also of importance to Odin. They makes use of a pricing method that is called 'true pricing', which takes a product's market value and adds to that all social and environmental costs that would normally not be incorporated into a product's price. Usually these costs are left out since competition amongst businesses forms an incentive to keep prices

low. The result is that issues such as environmental damage or bad labour conditions are financially unaccounted for. By incorporating the economic costs of these negative externalities into the price of a product, it is possible to sell it at its *real* price. There are a few ways this method of pricing intersects with equity. On the one hand, the price rise (when comparing "truly" priced products with regularly priced products) will inevitably render some products inaccessible for people with lower incomes. This is an aspect of the true pricing method that might be considered to contribute to inequity with regard to the way resources are distributed in a given society. This issue was not further addressed in the interview with Odin, but it was discussed in the interview with UDEA and will be elaborated on further below. On the other side, the true pricing method does contribute to fairer income and better working conditions for food workers by taking labour- and social conditions in general into consideration. This aspect connects to both the voice- and resource-dimension of equity as it recognizes the social impacts that the product has on both an individual scale (under what labour conditions —salary, insurance, protection against hazards—is it produced?) and the broader social context (what is the impact that producing this product brings about in relation to the community it is embedded in?) and allow for issues therein to be addressed with the help of the extra financial resources that the truer price brings with it. The method also addresses the intergenerational equity in the intergenerational sense by taking into the consideration the need for a healthy planet that future generations will have. This is, for example, done through incorporating the environmental costs that transport related CO2 emissions bring about into the price of the product. With respect to the above mentioned labour conditions, Odin also tries to make sure that they only do business with farmers that employ food workers in a legal way. As an example, the interview refers to the way in which many agricultural companies employ illegal migrants to do the work. These companies profit from these people's *condition of vulnerability*, by putting them to work in bad and dangerous circumstances (Siegmann & Williams, 2020). Odin tries to prevent such practices from taking place in their supply chain by strictly doing business with companies that give their employees a proper contract, thereby ensuring that social (or working) conditions at their suppliers are well. Not doing business with companies that exploit illegal migrants is a way of contributing to more equitable relations of power between employees and employers in the food system.

4.2. UDEA / Ekoplaza

UDEA is a wholesaler in organic food and non-food products. It also operates the organic supermarket chain Ekoplaza, which is why they are considered as one and the same in this paper. UDEA is, together with Odin, one of the two big organic chains of stores/wholesalers in the Netherlands. Despite this, Ekoplaza still only has 0.3% of the market share of supermarkets in the Netherlands. Because of the fact that they operate organically and are such a small player in the food chain, they can be considered an alternative food initiative. For the interview, one of the company's 'quality-managers' was interviewed. He has been working at the company for over 10years and his work revolves around ensuring the company meets all the required certifications, that the quality of their work (both products and relations) is kept at a high level and that everybody that works for the company sticks to the rules. Within UDEA, he functions as a representative of the company in case of interview-requests like the one held for this thesis.

Figure 4: Main office of UDEA, Veghel. Source: author.

True Pricing

UDEA and Ekoplaza aim for a 100% organic food chain and guarantee that everything that is sold in their stores is organically produced. It is a basic condition for the company. In relation to the food system, they aim for a sustainable system that could, in theory, exist endlessly into the future without causing any harm to the three pillars of sustainability, or 'People, Planet, Profit' in the

words of the interview. A concern for future generation's perspectives and their ability to meet their needs through use of such a system of food production, distribution and consumption is actively invoked by the interviewee. In this sense, future generations are given voice. Because of these concerns, UDEA makes use of a pricing method that is called 'true pricing'. It takes a product's market value and adds to that all social and environmental costs that would otherwise not be incorporated into a product's price. Usually these costs are left out since competition amongst businesses forms an incentive to keep prices low. The result is a neglect of issues such as environmental damage or bad labour conditions. The interviewee illustrates this with the help of an example:

> Conventional agriculture uses pesticides. These are bad in terms of biodiversity and cause, for example, water pollution. Treatment of polluted water and investing in nature to increase biodiversity costs money. In the system we have now, we all pay, or these issues are neglected. All the while, you could also think: the person that uses pesticides is the one that actually should pay for the damage that he causes. You could do so through fining him, or you could pass on the extra costs into the price. (UDEA, personal communication, April 12, 2022)

Following the true price-methods, products with a big environmental footprint, or a negative social impact (e.g. due to child labour or low salaries), therefore become more expensive than they would otherwise be in order to compensate for and address these negative impacts. Despite the lower environmental footprint that organic products often have, the use of true pricing elevates the price of many of the products sold by UDEA and in Ekoplaza above that of many products in regular supermarkets. Where regular supermarkets compete for the lowest prices, giving them the ability to sell the products in their store below the price of their real value, using the true pricing method blocks this possibility. Also, some organic products have to come from far, and labour conditions are attended to under the true pricing method, which both raise prices too. The high prices of these organic and "truly priced" products makes them unavailable for people on a tight budget. When asked about his thoughts on this, the interviewee explains that this is something that UDEA is aware of. The choice to price products by making use of the true pricing-method is a conscious one:

> Something simply carries a certain value. And that is what we want to pay for it. … We consciously chose to support a certain type of agriculture, and a way of working together that just requires that we ask a certain price. In the long term, this approach should have many other positive effects, which brings us back to the question: What is the true price of something? At the same time, there is the cliché question that asks 'How much do we actually spend on food? (UDEA, personal communication, April 12, 2022)

This final question is reflected in another comment by the interviewer. When deciding where to open up new stores, they prefer municipalities of at least 30.000 inhabitants, or smaller places where people are highly educated and receive a high income. These people, the interviewee argues, are often more inclined to think about what they want to consume and how they can contribute to solving e.g. environmental issues through the way they consume.

4.2.1. Short chains, cooperation and lasting relations

UDEA is also a strong advocate for giving voice to the needs and concerns of their partners in the supply chain. They also want to provide these partners with a high enough income to allow their

partners to invest in their business in a sustainable way. In order to do this, UDEA prefers to work with what they call short supply chains. 'Short' then applies more to the amount of middlemen involved than it does to distance covered. This allows for the development of lasting relationships in which both parties are flexible, understanding and attentive to the needs of each other. The interviewee mentions the examples of bad harvests, when UDEA tries to make sure that the farmers that suffered from these still get adequate payment in order to be able to keep growing in later seasons. Most regular supermarkets use the power they have to get the lowest prices on products, forcing producers and farmers to deliver their product as prices that sometimes do not cover their work. This in turn drives to skimp expenses in order to be able to make a profitable. This could impact the labour conditions for food workers, or lead to upscaling and other unsustainable practices at farms. UDEA tries to prevent these things by asking producers and farmers how much they need in order to deliver. Price calculations, for example, are sometimes even done with both negotiating parties being completely transparent:

> Some growers even use 'open price calculation'. That way, we look at how their price is determined together. If we agree, then that's the price fort that year. We know what we are up to. And if harvests are bad, we always ask ourselves: 'Does the farmers have at least enough income to get to the end of the season? (UDEA, personal communication, April 12, 2022)

UDEA believes that building these lasting relations that are based on sufficient income (resource-equity), concern for each other's needs (voice-equity) and transparency (power-equity) is helpful in transforming the food system into a more sustainable one. It is all about cooperation.

4.2.2. Food workers

UDEA aims to apply the same logic to the way its 1.000 employees are treated. These employees are employed in various professions, varying from truck drivers to warehouse workers and from the engineers who keep the automated storing systems in that warehouse running to the people working at the main office. For them, UDEA tries to create an environment in which they feel safe and comfortable. They use a model (Baarda, 2022) that allows salary to be calculated in a fair, open and transparent way by looking at type, level and level of difficulty for each function within the company. This way, UDEA is able to give its employees insight into how and why they earn what they earn. When asked how they do this with employees coming from outside the Netherlands, who are, for example, employed through temporary job agencies, the interviewee admits that this is sometimes difficult. UDEA tries to ensure that there are always people that speak the language of these temporary employees, who often speak Russian or Polish, present in the workplace. Sometimes these are 'in house' representatives of the employment agencies, sometimes these are regular UDEA-employees. The interview argues that it is always important to be able to communicate with these people, so that it is possible to explain to them what they have to do. It does seem as if there is a limit to what UDEA can do with regard to the extent to which these temporary, foreign employees are treated in an equitable way. For example, housing and insurance-affairs are outsourced to the employment agencies. UDEA tries to be involved in these affairs by keeping an eye on how employment agencies go about their work and relying on past experiences:

> We often work with multiple employment agencies at the same time, and sometimes we've gone a bit too fast, especially in relation to these 'under the surface' theme's [outsourced

> housing and insurance]. At a certain point you see what happens and you find out that certain employment agencies do not operate correctly. For example: some employees have an income, but they are also tied to certain expenses [housing, insurance], which just doesn't add up. Or a situation in which we say: 'Sorry, we have to terminate your contract', after which these people immediately become not only jobless, but also homeless. That kind of stuff, we've seen it happen. So, based on that we adjust the choices we make and stop working with those agencies. (UDEA, personal communication, April 12, 2022)

The interviewee mentions that the same forces that are at work with regard to suppliers and farmers are found here too. When a producer is forced to deliver products for a low price that is in fact too low, he or she is bound search for ways of producing that bring the production costs down. Here, the power that purchasers such as supermarkets and procurement departments have is at work, as they are the ones that aim for the lowest prices. Besides turning to environmentally harmful, but cheaper ways of producing, a way in which producers can economize is by paying employees less, or turning to the above mentioned temporary employment agencies that treat their employees badly. After learning from experience, UDEA now feels partly responsible for these issues, arguing that it is important that food chain-actors feel a joint responsibility. Asking what producers and farmers need in order to produce what they produce is in this sense needed in order to accomplish a more equitable situation for food workers.

4.2.3. Policy and power

In the interview, the issue of power also emerged in relation to the government. For example, when asked about the broader concept of 'social sustainability', the interviewee mentioned Maatschappelijk Verantwoord Ondernemen (MVO), which is the Dutch alternative to Corporate Social Responsibility. The Dutch government requires businesses to make yearly statements on this, explaining what their MVO-strategy is. There are a lot of ways in which a company can do something in this regard, but MVO is also, according to the interviewee a very non-obligatory thing. He described it as a bit of 'cherry picking, but with good intentions'. For example, another supermarket chain (one of the two biggest chains in the Netherlands) a special type of checkout where people, mostly elderly, can have a chat with the cashier. This allows lonely elderly people to get have some social interaction on a daily basis. It is a very nice and socially-minded idea, but the interviewee says that it is not something that would fit with UDEA, since they, with regard to MVO, mainly focus on the supply chain and their relations with suppliers. Besides, he adds, the checkout lines at their Ekoplaza-stores are often so slow that there is always the possibility of having a chat, despite them not having a "chat-checkout". The thing this example illustrates is that MVO-policy is very non-obligatory, as every supermarket gets to decide for themselves on what themes they focus, as well as on what scale. In this sense, MVO is an opportunity for supermarkets to brand themselves as socially sustainable, giving them the power to shape their public image. Worries about this are reflected by MVO Platform, an organisation consisting of a group of Dutch (or Dutch branches of) NGO's such as Amnesty International, Fairtrade Nederland, and UNICEF Nederland, companies such as ASN Bank, Fairphone as well as academics and unions. As of 2017, Dutch business are required to report on their MVO-strategy, which is what the interviewee referred to. However, this requirement only applies to business with more than 500 employees, is characterized by 'minimal ambition', and very easily utilized as a vehicle for greenwashing since there is it is only mandatory for accountants to check *if* an MVO-statement is present in a company's annual report, while it is not mandatory to verify that statement and check it for correctness (MVO Platform, 2020). MVO

Platform therefore lobbies for more stringent national legislation on this domain. The Dutch government has the power to instigate such legislation, but is, according to MVO Platform hesitant because of the fear this "enormous administrative workload" triggers in a large part of the Dutch business community (MVO Platform, 2017, April 4).

Another area of governmental power that was discussed relates to taking responsibility with regard to price. As the sections above demonstrated, price is a domain to which all dimensions of equity are in some way related. In the sense of resource-equity, price determines who gets to have access to the food UDEA supplies as well as determining if farmers and others suppliers have the opportunity to conduct business in a (socially) sustainable way. With regard to the power dimension of equity, supermarkets, because of the way they form a bottleneck in the food chain (see figure 1), have the power to negotiate prices. With regard to voice, price determines of businesses are able to give voice to underrepresented elements such as nature, which is addressed through e.g. the true pricing-method. According to the interviewee, the government should use this power in shaping prices in a way that is more in accordance with the method of true pricing:

> The role of the government.. well, since we were already talking about prices, I think they should take the lead in this regard. If you know that something has, in some way, a negative impact, then shouldn't you pay for these consequences? It doesn't matter if it's health, climate or other important theme's such as CO2, biodiversity, land-use, water-use. … If we appeal to people's feelings of responsibility, were never going to get there. And the costs are already here.. So, as a government, you should ask yourselves 'What is good for the country, and what isn't?' And, 'Should I change my tax-system in accordance with that? What do I subsidize? What do I tax?'. … Such a system would make much more sense. If you're talking about liberalism, that would be far more liberal than when you measure everything with the same rod. (UDEA, personal communication, April 12, 2022).

In the case of food products, the interviewee argues for no taxes on organic food, with the exception of animal products. Meat products and the meat-processing industry should then be taxed more heavily because of the impact they have on both human health and on the climate. These are problems that are currently not being paid for or being paid for collectively, through health-insurances or investments in climate adaptation/mitigation through tax money. Considerations of such nature—who and what should be taxed? —are all to be made with the questions such as 'What is equitable?' and 'What is fair?' in the back of the mind.

4.3. De Peelconnectie

De Peelconnectie is an organisation in Liessel that runs an organic garden and food forest where it also provides day-care activities for clients that suffer from mental problems, have trouble participating in the labour market and social life in general, or are going through a rough patch and need some help with getting back on track. Both owners of De Peelconnectie have a background in psychiatry and have worked for various mental health institutions in the region. There, they struggled with the bureaucratic way in which that sector is organised, while at the same time developing a passion for gardening and working outside. At a certain point they decided to give up their jobs and start De Peelconnectie, as they thought that they could better help people by providing them with the opportunity to work outside and help run the garden. The organisation is has been officially registered as a care provider in a number of neighbouring municipalities for a number of years now. Their clients are involved in all of the work that needs to be done in order maintain the food forest and garden. Harvests are sold to 35 customers who have signed up to receive a box of mixed fruits and vegetables on a weekly basis for which they pay €9,50 a week. One of the owners mentioned that there is more demand for these boxes, but that the limit of 35 boxes was set in an agreement with the clients in order to keep the workload at a healthy level. Nevertheless, the financial resources obtained through the providing of day-care are the main source of income for the De Peelconnectie. The plot of land they works on is leased from a foundation called Het Eibernest. That foundation owns two hectares of land on which on which it hosts workshops, rent out their land for green events and runs a mini-camping. They do so with the aim bringing about a connection between people and nature. All of the land Het Eibernest owns is cared for in accordance with the principles of permaculture, which will be elaborated upon further below.

Figure 5: The organic garden of De Peelconnectie. Source: author.

4.3.1. Working with nature

Permaculture is a broad, almost philosophical approach to using land that is based on a number of ethical and design principles that allow for the establishing or building of a *'permanent culture'*. In this way, permaculture is a way of envisioning and moving towards a more sustainable future in the broadest sense of the word. Holmgren (2020, p. 3) describes permaculture as an 'integrated, evolving system of perennial or self-perpetuating plant and animal species useful to man' as well as 'consciously designed landscapes which mimic the patterns and relationships found in nature, while yielding an abundance of food, fibre and energy for provision of local needs'. The ethical principles encompass care for both earth and people, as well as a fair distribution of surpluses that are attained and the setting of limits to consumption (Ibid., p. 7). These principles are reflected in what one of the owners calls Het Eibernest's motto:

> Het Eibernest is a place that hosts all kinds of events. Cultural.. Educational. It is a place where many different people can get together, all with their own purposes. The underlying motto is always 'green'. A green approach, doing things together in a way that is environmentally responsible. (De Peelconnectie, personal communication, May 3, 2022)

This attentiveness to nature has an important function in the work of De Peelconnectie. According to the owners, the region they work and live in suffers from a gap in terms of kinds of (day-)care that are offered in the region. The way many care facilities in the region provide care to clients is by putting them to work. Day-care in this sense then refers to, for example, packing products in a factory or other relatively simple and monotonous tasks. The owners of De Peelconnectie noticed how many people in the region have an agrarian background. They therefore believe that these people from this area that are in need of care would be helped much better by taking them outside and letting them work in and with nature. Some of De Peelconnectie's clients are already helped simply by being enabled to slow down and get back in touch with themselves, to find a sense of peace or meaning in nature. The element of being able to do something for people on this local scale is one of the main motivations for the two owners:

> We chose this formula because we wanted to do something on a local scale. I live in Heusden, X [other owner] lived there, and we were surrounded by a beautiful nature reserve [De Peel]. We said: we want to be able to provide care right here, especially for the people of Asten, Deurne and Someren. Back then, if you had mental health-related problems you had to go to Padua, or Venray, or Eindhoven. While.. most of these people have their roots right here, they have no business going to a city like Eindhoven. Furthermore, most of the times these people end up sitting inside, while many people here are from agrarian families. We thought: these people just have to go outside, they shouldn't be placed behind some conveyor belt. If you want people to feel better again, then they should be enabled to do so. For many people this doesn't mean locking them up in some factory where you get kicked out if you miss a day. … We really wanted to provide day-care in a different way. (De Peelconnectie, personal communication, May 3, 2022)

Working with nature, growing food organically and helping out clients is also very much appreciated by De Peelconnectie's clients, which is, in turn, also beneficial for the sense of purpose and validation that clients feel:

> We consciously chose to work this way, because doing work that is appreciated has a

> positive effect on our clients. We are able to explain very clearly why they do the work they do. And, on the other side, the people that we deliver our food-boxes to very much appreciate the way we farm organically. We want to work in a way that is respectful to the environment, and that gains us a lot of goodwill. The environmental aspect is very important, but so is the social aspect: why and with whom [clients]. (De Peelconnectie, personal communication, May 3, 2022).

In this sense, De Peelconnectie contributes to a more equitable care system in which overlooked groups of people are given voice and are able to access the resources that they need in order for them to feel better, all the while contributing to a more environmentally sustainable food system.

4.3.2. Being flexible

Because De Peelconnectie is an officially registered care provider, they are embedded in relationships with governmental bodies as well as in structures that are present in the care system. Such embeddedness brings power-relations with it. In order to become a legitimate care-provider, an organisation has to offer a municipality a tender with regard to the kinds of care they can provide. If a tender is accepted by a municipality, an organisation can start providing care in that municipality. De Peelconnectie's tender offer is accepted by a number of neighbouring municipalities. As a result, they have to be in contact with municipal WMO-consultants (Wet Maatschappelijke Ondersteuning; Social Support Act) that assist citizens that are in need of care. This way of organizing care, placing municipalities at the centre, is the result of a reorganization that has been happening over the last 10 years in The Netherlands. The owners of De Peelconnectie argue that this reorganisation has created a lot of competition between care-providers, thereby making the financial aspect very important. Many small care-providers are outdone by bigger organisation that convince municipalities to work only with them by using the argument that they can provide most of the care that smaller providers would otherwise provide while also keeping the organisation simple as municipalities only have to deal with one provider. The result of this is that many clients end up in the hands of these bigger providers, making it very hard for smaller providers to keep their business running. At the same time, budget have been cut and there is less money circulating in the sector than there used to be. When asked if and how De Peelconnectie manages to deal with this, the owners state their alternative approach to providing care (outside and in nature) is vital to this:

> The question we ask municipalities is: 'How many care-providers that are aimed at working outside do you know?' And, not in the sense of just feeding chickens at the petting zoo, going for a walk or drinking coffee in the outdoors.. no, with a real focus on work. And.. with the aim of getting people back on track and reintegration. In this whole region there is only one other, they do a similar thing. But that's about it. .. In the end, that is why you see that municipalities rely on us. … Slowly but surely we notice that we have made a name for ourselves and that our knowhow is appreciated. (De Peelconnectie, personal communication, May 3, 2022)

Nevertheless, De Peelconnectie is often not present at meetings hosted by municipalities because they don't have the time to do so. Therefore, they have to negotiate this power-relations between them and municipalities in a way that is different from the way larger care institutions would do.

Figure 6: A polytunnel at De Peelconnectie. Source: author.

They work around this by investing in personal relations with WMO-consultants who are invited to visit De Peelconnectie and see how clients are doing there. This way, De Peelconnectie is able to prove that their approach works for their clients. In many care institutions, the Peelconnectie's owners argue, there is a sense of distrust. Clients are urged to get back to work as soon as possible and their troubles are sometimes too easily brushed off. De Peelconnectie's owners argue that in the regular care system, things first have to go wrong in order for someone to receive help. This may lead to hospitalization or the prescription of medication. Both of these can be traumatic experiences as people may get the feeling that things have gone completely wrong for them. The owners argue that it should be normal for people to be able to get help before things go wrong. Taking a step back and asking yourself where you want to go should be normal. Working at De Peelconnectie for a few days a week can help in regaining the stability that a client needs in order to figure out where to go next. In this sense, De Peelconnectie aims to place the client at the centre of attention, thereby giving voice to people's care-related needs.

4.4. De Waalgaard

De Waalgaard is a former pear-orchard in Weurt (next to Nijmegen) that is being transformed into a food forest. The structure of a normal orchard, lines of trees, is being preserved in that process, while all kinds of new fruit bearing plants are planted in between them. The aim of De Waalgaard is to transform the orchard into a piece of land where the presence of different kinds of insects, animals, fungi and micro-organisms forms a self-balancing natural ecosystem that supports the growing and harvesting of food. De Waalgaard is owned by cooperation Arbres. This corporation has 20 members, and was created in order to be able to buy the land that De Waalgaard is situated on as well as lease a second plot of land where another food forest is being created. In order to raise the needed money, the cooperation sold sixty certificates at a price of €5.000,- to its members. With the money, the land, trees and others plants were bought. A part of the money also supports De Waalgaard during the first years it is in business. The cooperation also provides consultation to people and parties (e.g. the Dutch province of Gelderland) that want to know more about or even start their own food forest (Arbres, 2019). There is also a For the interview, one of the founders of the cooperation and De Waalgaard was interviewed.

Figure 7: Plan of De Waalgaard. Source: author.

Figure 8: Informational sign at De Waalgaard's entrance. Source: author.

4.4.1. Biodiversity, future generations and inclusivity

As a personal motivation for his involvement in the food forest, the interviewee mentions that he felt a need to address issues such as loss of biodiversity and CO2-reduction, and that food forest are a perfect vehicle for addressing these. When asked why restoring biodiversity is important, the interviewee first went on to explain how declining biodiversity is a big problem to humanity as it threatens the existence of many ecosystems, which are vital to the survival of people. Loss of a single, or a few, species can already result in the collapse of a complete ecosystem. Later on in the interview, the element of equity for future generations was added to this. After becoming a parent, the interviewee started thinking about what kind of world his children would inherit. These thoughts were the interviewee's main driver to embark on the quest of tackling the aforementioned issues of biodiversity loss and CO2-emissions. In this sense, both nature and future generations are given voice at De Waalgaard. De Waalgaard also involves people that experience difficulties in accessing the labour market in their project. One of the reasons for this is that the interviewee has worked for Pluryn, a Nijmegen-based, care provider, for six years. There, while working at different positions in the organisation, the interviewee had been involved in assisting people that are distanced from the labour market. At a certain point in time, he came up with the idea of involving these people in the energy-transition that was (and still is) going on in The Netherlands at the time. His idea was to teach the clients how to install e.g. solar panels and heat pumps by installing them in and on the many buildings that Pluryn owns throughout Nijmegen. This way, the clients would gain the knowledge that would be needed in the labour market that emerged as a result of the energy transition. However, due to constant reorganisations, lack of funding and the rigidity that comes with a big organisation such as Pluryn, the plan never fully took off. The link with De Waalgaard is that these experiences made the interviewee want to start for himself. De Waalgaard now gets a portion of its clients through Pluryn, but also gets them through other organisations such as the UWV (Uitvoeringsinstituut Werknemersverzekeringen; the Dutch Employees Insurance Agency) as well as through other organisations. This is also a source of income for De Waalgaard.

Figure 9: Time for a coffee break at De Waalgaard! Source: author.

Currently, De Waalgaard offers multiple kinds of subscriptions. For example, becoming a full member, which grants a member the ability to harvest throughout the full season, costs €150,- a year, but people can also pay €10,- to harvest twice. There are also a number of supporting-subscriptions that De Waalgaard offers that are aimed at supporting De Waalgaard itself. They offer people the option to become a 'Friend of de Waalgaard' for €50,- or donate and get a lane (the pathway in between two rows of trees) named after themselves for €100,-. The interviewee mentions that De Waalgaard does aim to provide people with small incomes the ability to become a member too. The goal in this sense is to offer people the same price as they are offered in the supermarket. The interviewee makes the argument that there is a big difference between the price growers get for their products and the price for which these products eventually end up in the supermarket. In the first year of De Waalgaard, they harvested the pears that were growing there and sold them for 30 cent per kilo. These same pears eventually ended up in the supermarket for €2,- per kilo. Because of these experiences and the prospect of selling directly to custommers, the interviewee sees opportunities for fairer prices.

4.5. How do Dutch alternative food initiatives invoke concepts of equity?

When comparing the cases that were studied, a number of different themes to which equity and equity-related concepts are applicable in the context of food systems. These themes will be discussed below. The first theme that emerged centres around the extent to which nature and future generations are given voice in food systems. All four cases address issues that are related to these. UDEA and Odin aim to provide 100% organically grown food in their stores, while both De Peelconnectie and De Waalgaard also pay a great deal of attention to producing and growing in ways that respect and even support nature. In all interviews, the concern for future generations' ability to live on a healthy planet were addressed in some way. In the interview with Odin it emerged with respect to their philosophy and ideals, encompassing the believe that people should not only live for themselves, but should also take the needs of others into consideration, a perspective stemming partly from the philosophy of Rudolp Steiner. These others exist now, in the form of e.g. animals, but also as future generations. This philosophy moved Odin to take on a method of pricing products (true pricing) that incorporates the negative social and environmental costs that product bear with them into a products' price. This is done too by UDEA. They do so because they are motivated to create a food system the can exist endlessly into the future without causing any harm to the three pillars of sustainability, thereby providing future generations with the ability to meet their food-needs. This is, aside from a voice-related conception of equity, also a resource distribution-related one as the true pricing-method ensures that all resources (be they social or environmental) that are extracted in order to produce a product are compensated for, at least financially. At De Peelconnectie, the aspect of intergenerational equity was not explicitly mentioned, but they do operate from a philosophical perspective (permaculture) that aims to find ways of creating culture and cultural systems that are able to exist permanently. Without explicitly mentioning it, they thereby take the needs of future generations into consideration. In the interview with De Waalgaard, the extent to which future generations are given voice emerged most explicitly. The interviewee stated that what moved him to start the food forest he now runs were the thoughts that appeared to him right after he became a parent—e.g. 'What kind of a world would he leave to his children?'.

The second domain that emerged from the interviews and to which equity and equity-related concepts in the context of food systems are applicable is that of cooperation and power-relations between actors in the food system. The specific themes and issues that emerged with relation to this were very diverse. Odin, for example, stressed the importance of long-term relations with suppliers and other actors in the supply chain. As was mentioned in the theoretical framework, there are power differences between farmers/growers and procurement departments and supermarket chains. Odin strongly advocates being sensitive to the needs and positions of other parties in the food chain and they even started their own farm (partly) to be able to understand what it is like to be in the position of a farmer and having to negotiate prices with buyers. Having this experience and the understanding about their partners' financial positions in the food chain allows Odin to contribute to a fairer and more equitable distribution of the costs and risks (e.g. bad harvests) that come with growing food. In this sense, this is both a form of equitable distribution of resources, as suppliers are paid sufficiently, and a form of voice-equity, as the needs and concerns of farmers are attended to by their buyer, in this case Odin. In the interview with De Peelconnectie, the issue of cooperation and power-relations emerged too, but it did so outside of the context of

food systems. This is so because De Peelconnectie's is less of a food-provider then they are a care-provider. Nevertheless, the way they place the needs of their clients front and centre, as opposed to the way clients are dealt with in the regular care system, reflects the responsiveness (or giving voice) to the needs of others that is also advocated by Odin. Furthermore, by providing a kind of care that suits the people in the region that De Peelconnectie works in, they actively aim to include an otherwise overlooked segment of the population. In a way this reflects the way the food justice movement aims to give voice to people that are underrecognized due to larger structures of oppression within society. The goal here is not to connect issues of unequal access to healthy, nutritional food to larger structures of oppression such as racism, sexism and classism, but to address the issue of unequal access to appropriate health care in a centralized care system that is characterised by a focus on the more urban segment of the Dutch population, side lining the more rural part of the population.

Similar to Odin, UDEA too advocates a healthy relationship with their suppliers, through so called 'short-chains'. By knowing their partners, UDEA is able to meet their (financial) needs. Investing in such an equitable distribution of voice in the food chain may prevent, according to the interview, farmers and producers from needing to scale up (with all the environmentally detrimental effects that this brings with it) or, for example, exploiting food workers in order to keep costs low. With regard to an equitable distribution of power in the food system, UDEA has no problem with the Dutch government having a little more power than other actors, as long as it uses it for a good cause. One domain in which this is applicable is the way the Dutch government regulates prices. As appeared form the interview with UDEA, prices play a key role in the extent to which a food system is equitable or not, and they intersect with all three dimension of equity: with regard to resource-equity, price determines who gets to have access to the food UDEA supplies as well as determining if farmers and others suppliers have in UDEA's supply chain can attain enough financial means to conduct or transform their business in a way that is (socially) sustainable. With regard to the power dimension of equity, supermarkets, because of the way they form a bottleneck in the food chain (see figure 1), have the power to negotiate prices. Interventions by the government could level this playing field. With regard to voice, price determines of businesses are able to give voice to underrepresented elements such as nature, future generations and underprivileged groups such as food workers or people with lower incomes.

Issues related to the power dimension of equity were left relatively under addressed in the interview with De Waalgaard. This is partly because, from the interview, the impression emerged that De Waalgaard operates relatively independent of other actors in the food system. They have relations with governmental bodies such as the municipality of Nijmegen and the province of Gelderland, but the interviewee mentioned that, to him, it is always a question of what the efforts put into navigating the bureaucratic systems that make up such institutions will yield, stating that he would not know what he would need from these governmental bodies. This was not meant in a cynical way, as the interviewee mentioned that his relations with these institutions is good. For example, a group of civil servants as well as the city council of Nijmegen were planning to pay De Waalgaard a visit around the time of the interview. They were doing so because they are genuinely interested in the project. The current relationship between them and the interviewee is in fact characterised by the governmental bodies turning to him for advice on issues related to local food systems and food forests.

A final domain that emerged from the interviews and to which equity and equity-related concepts in the context of food systems are applicable is that of inclusivity and the social role that these AFIs fulfil. Odin, for example, is involved in a number of social initiatives. The first that was mentioned in the interview is Too Good To Go, an app that allows Odin to sell the surpluses they have in their stores at a discounted rate. This allows people with lower incomes, who may normally not shop at Odin, to buy Odin's products all the while preventing food from being wasted. Next to that, Odin also provides opportunities for people that difficulties in accessing the labour market for a variety of reasons. An example of this is the way young people with a disability are helped in finding a suitable job at Odin. This is an example of both an equitable distribution of voice (recognizing that accessing the labour market is not equally easy for everyone) and resources (providing an overlooked part of the population with the chance of gaining an income). Similarly, De Peelconnectie also attends to the needs of an overlooked part of the population, as is discussed above. At UDEA, the fulfilment of a societal role takes the form of pushing for a new way of envisioning food systems. UDEA aims for a food system in which true prices are paid and power-relations amongst food chain-actors are relatively equal. An example of this is UDEA's aim to engage with its employees that are come from abroad. These food workers are often employed through employment agencies and are not in a position to stand up for themselves when it comes to e.g. housing or insurance. UDEA's past experiences with malpractices has lead them to take on a more responsible role and to try and make sure that every employee is treated in an equitable way. Finally, at De Waalgaard, one of the aims is to contribute to a more inclusive food system by employing people that experience difficulties in accessing the labour market as well as aiming to sell their products at a rate that is similar to the one in supermarkets.

Figure 10: Cutlings waitng to be planted at De Waalgaard. Source: author.

5. Discussion

This thesis set out to find out how the way Dutch alternative food initiatives invoke concepts of equity can help in understanding what social sustainability in food systems is about. It did so through first answering a number of sub questions. These were:

- What is equity, and what are equity-related concepts?
- How are equity and equity-related concepts referred to throughout literature on food systems?
- What are alternative food initiatives?
- How do Dutch alternative food initiatives invoke concepts of equity?

In this section, the answers to these sub questions will be briefly summarized. After that the main research question will be addressed.

The first sub question, 'What is equity, and what are equity-related concepts?', was answered with the help of Murphy (2012) and Guy and McCandless (2012). Murphy argues that equity is a concept that connects ideas and ideals about fairness and justice to the way 'welfare goods and life chances' are distributed within a society (Murphy, 2012, p. 20). This can pertain to both material (food, shelter, etc.) and nonmaterial (e.g access to education) things. An equitable distribution of these things is achieved when they are distributed on the basis of fairness and in accordance with the extent to which a person or group has a need for them. Because of this, Guy and McCandless argue that equity functions as a framing device, functioning as 'a lens through which needs are identified and processes are grounded', one that, if used properly, will help in moving towards a more fair and just society (2012, p. 9).

The second sub question, 'How are equity and equity-related concepts referred to throughout literature on food systems?, was answered with the help of a variety of texts that deal with the food system and their social dimensions. To structure the findings, a typology of equity in relation to food systems was used, which was derived from DeLind's (2011) work. She argues that equity in food systems is about a 'fair distribution of resources, voice, and power' (DeLind, 2011, p. 274). With regard to the resource-dimension of equity, the *Our Common Future*-report (WCED, 1987) focusses on a fair distribution of income and access to food, taking on a predominantly economic perspective by focussing on the economic privileges, or lack thereof, that certain groups in society enjoy. The literature on the local food movement too emphasized this element of income, but in doing so focusses more on the income of farmers. The local-food movement employs all sorts of marketing programs (e.g. CSA) to allow farmers to have earn an adequate income. Finally, more recent reports by the UN/FAO (as opposed to *Our Common Future*) extend the focus of whose income should be focussed on to include that of a much broader group: 'vulnerable groups categorized by gender, age, race and so on' (Nguyen & FAO, 2018, pp. What is sustainable food system development? section, para. 3).

This broadening of the scope also fits needly with the voice-dimension of equity. Voice is about recognition. In an equitable food system, all things (both human and non-human) that are in some way impacted by that system should be given voice by taking their needs into consideration. Examples were found in the food justice-literature, which connects issues such as unequal access to healthy, nutritional food to larger structures of oppression such as racism, sexism and classism. The literature on civic agriculture too reflects elements of voice, as it focusses on embedding

agriculture in local networks and communities, thereby granting the local more control over the way the food systems with it interacts are shaped. The local, and the communities and networks that are involved in it, are thereby given voice. Two final elements of voice that were found in the literature were the ones that moved the aspect of voice beyond people and related it to non-humans (e.g. animals, nature, or a culture), and future generations. These elements were found in a more recent text on sustainable food system by the FAO (Nguyen & FAO, 2018).

Power is the third dimension of equity. Equity and inequity in this sense centres around the way power-relations are negotiated. For example, the way the Dutch food chain is structured (figure 4) places a lot of negotiating-power in the hands of a few (5) procurement departments that work for a small number of supermarket chains. These procurement departments buy (indirectly) from a relatively large number (65.000) of farmers. This puts farmers at a disadvantage when having to negotiate prices because there is so much competition. This dynamic puts a lot of decision-making power in the hands of a few food chain actors. The literature on civic agriculture aims to provide an alternative to this by promoting the embedding of agriculture in local networks and communities, thereby handing over control of the food system from a few, centrally operating procurement departments to local and diverse actors. A final theme in this regard is the ability, or power, that governments have to shape food systems through policy. They could, for example, address imbalances in the power-relations between food chain-actors.

To answer the third sub question, the definition provided by Renting et al. (2003, p. 394) was used. They define alternative food networks as initiatives that embody 'alternatives to more standardized industrial mode of food supply'. Psarikidou (2022, p. 3) provided an additional feature of AFIs, namely that they generally share the aspiration to 'develop a critique of corporate, intensive and de-personalised modes of agricultural production, distribution and consumption', and through doing so aim to 'contribute to more socio-economically just and environmentally responsible societies and futures'. Both these features were used when selecting the cases that were studied in order to answer the fourth sub question.

The fourth and final sub question, 'How do Dutch alternative food initiatives invoke concepts of equity?' was answered through studying four cases with the help of qualitative research methodology. Four Dutch AFIs (Odin, De Peelconnectie, UDEA and De Waalgaard) were interviewed in a semi-structured manner. These interviews were then analysed with regard to how the interviews mentioned and referred to the three dimensions of equity (resources, voice, power) that are described in the theoretical framework-section on 'Equity and food systems'. The findings of these analyses will be used in the following paragraphs to arrive at an answer to the main research question '*How can the way Dutch alternative food initiatives invoke concepts of equity help in understanding what a socially sustainable food system entails?'.*

Before answering the main question, it is helpful to restate the problem statement and goal that guided this thesis. After an initial review on the literature on social sustainability, it appeared that it is unclear what exactly the social in social sustainability means, how it is to be interpreted and how it is to be put to use. This problem becomes glaring when placing it in the context of food systems and food system transformations. While some of the world's most powerful organisations such as the UN and the FAO strive for sustainable food systems, how will such visions ever be achieved an important element of sustainability, social sustainability, remains vague? Because of this problem, this thesis aimed to contribute to clarifying what social sustainability in the context of food systems entails through focussing on a core dimension of social sustainability: equity.

So, what can the way in which Dutch alternative food initiatives invoke concepts of equity

teach us about what it takes for a food system to be socially sustainable? Firstly, studying the way Dutch AFIs invoke concepts of equity revealed that there are a number of theme's that were important across the different cases. The first of these themes is a recognition of the earths ecological limits by all AFIs. They all aim to supply food in a way that respects nature. This might, at first glance, not seem to be connected to a socially sustainable food system. But, when considering the way that natural resources are distributed it is. Firstly, respecting the ecological limits of earth ensures that ecosystems can be sustained and natural resources are not depleted. Not overstepping these boundaries leaves more for others now, but also more for others in the future. These ideas are, for example, reflected in the true pricing-mechanism that is used by Odin and UDEA. They are also reflected by De Peelconnectie, where the link between ecological and social sustainability is also found in the goodwill that farming organically gains them, thereby helping its clients feel a sense of purpose and validation. At De Waalgaard, for example, a main driver for respecting the earth's ecological boundaries is the obligation that is felt to provide future generations with a hospitable planet.

A second theme that re-emerged throughout interviews is the way that price intersects with all three dimensions of equity and therefore plays a key role in achieving a socially sustainable food system. Firstly, food prices determine who gets to have access to healthy and nutritional food, and who does not. This aspect was most explicitly discussed in the interviews with De Waalgaard and UDEA. De Waalgaard aims to achieve a price level for their food forest-grown products that is similar to the one in supermarkets, making their products attainable for the bigger part of society. UDEA on the other hand sticks to their true-pricing methods, a method that increases prices by incorporating the social and environmental costs involved in creating a product. They, however, argued that this, in the long run, would yield benefits. Price is also a key factor in the relations between food chain actors such as farmers/growers, food processors and supermarkets. Because of a relatively large number of farmers/growers and a relatively small number or supermarkets, the latter are in a position of power when it comes to negotiating prices. Without taking an approach that is sensitive to the (financial) needs of other parties (as UDEA and Odin try to do), this skewed power-relation might lead to (socially) harmful situations such as the exploitation of food workers in order to keep production costs low. Price also determines if there is enough of an opportunity for farmers/growers to give voice to underrepresented elements such as nature, future generations and underprivileged groups such as food workers or people with lower incomes in the way they conduct their business. Because of the above, the way prices are set plays a vital role in achieving a socially sustainable food system.

Finally, a third theme that emerged from the interviews, although maybe not directly, is the way and extent to which food system-actors simply pay attention to the people they are involved with and to their needs. At UDEA this was, for example, reflected in the way they feel a joint responsibility for the people that work there through external employment agencies. It is also reflected in the way UDEA and Odin aim to build lasting relations with their partners in the food chain. At Odin, De Peelconnectie and De Waalgaard it is reflected in the way they go out of their way to help and find a place for people that experience difficulties in accessing the labour market. In a socially sustainable food system, it should therefore not only be food or financial aspects that are focused on, it should also be all the people that are involved in those systems.

5.1. Limitations & Suggestions for further research

Before getting to the conclusion of this thesis, its limitations will be discussed in this section as well as some suggestions for further research. A first limitations to this study was the sample size, as only four Dutch AFIs were interviewed. In order to make a general statement about all Dutch AFIs, which was how the relevant sub question was formulated, more data about more cases might be needed. A suggestion for further research would therefore be to carry out the same study, but with a bigger sample.

A second limitation of this study has to do with one of the knowledge gaps that were identified in the introduction. There, it was stated that what is to be considered socially sustainable is context dependent, and that a lot of the scholarly work on food systems and their social dimension is written from an American perspective. Therefore, what is to be considered socially sustainable outside of this American context remained unclear. In order to fill this knowledge gap, it might have been helpful if a more structured comparison between the collected data and these scholarly works would have been made. An example of this is the way that the food justice literature explicitly addresses issues of racism, classism and sexism in the food system. This study left these issues relatively unaddressed. A suggestion for further research would therefore be carry out a study that these possible differences between the social dimensions of food systems in the United States and in The Netherlands as its main focal point.

A third limitation of this study is the relatively unstructured and iterative way in which it was carried out. The research process was characterised by a constant going back-and-forth between different literatures, research questions and ideas about where to take the thesis. Factors that played a role in this may have been the lack of prior research experience by the researcher as well as the need to get to grips with a completely new field of knowledge.

A fourth limitation, closely connected to the one mentioned above, is the way in which data was collected. The interview guide that was used to collect data varied from case to case. This can be seen in the appendices that are attached to this thesis. These shifts resulted in a different approach to each interview, making it difficult to carry out a critical comparison of them.

Finally, a fifth limitation to this study is that it aims to clarify a concept (social sustainability) through studying a related concept (equity). This is in itself not a limitation, because how else could a relatively new concept such as social sustainability be given substance? However, it might have been insightful to contrast this dimension of social sustainability with other related dimensions such as participation and social cohesion (Murphy, 2012).

6. Conclusion

Social sustainability is a much used concept in food system transitions. It is, however, also a concept of which it is unclear what exactly it means and how it is to be interpreted or put to use. This thesis therefore attempted to clarify the concept through a study of a related core dimension: equity. The main research question guiding this these was: *How can the way Dutch alternative food initiatives invoke concepts of equity help in understanding social sustainability in relation to food systems?* Dutch alternative food initiatives were taken as the object of study for two reasons. Firstly, such initiatives are in an ideal position to implement creative, adaptive and flexible solutions to the social problems they encounter, making them a useful object of study when attempting to better understand what social sustainability in the food system might entail. Secondly, a review of the literature on the social dimension of food systems suggested a lack of research in the context of The Netherlands, implying the need for research in this specific geographical context. Four semi-structured interview were held with these Dutch AFIs, which were subsequently analysed with regard to how their contends maps onto the three dimensions of equity (resource, voice, power) that were established in the theoretical framework. Findings suggest that there are three important aspects, with regard to what social sustainability in food systems entails, that can be taken from this study. Firstly, in a socially sustainable food system, the actors that make up that system should respect the earths ecological limits. This relates to social sustainability because respecting the ecological limits of earth ensures that ecosystems can be sustained and natural resources are not depleted, thereby leaving them available to for others people too, now and in the future. A second important aspect relates to the role that prices play in a food system. In a socially sustainable food system, prices are regulated in such a way that the render healthy and nutritional food accessible for everybody, that they ensure a fair income for every actor in the food chain, thereby decreasing differences in power between those actors, and that they account for any negative social and environmental impacts that arise as a consequence of producing a product. A final aspect that emerged from the findings is that a socially sustainable food system should not only be structured around food or financial aspects, but should considerate of the people that are involved in and impacted by it through actively taking their needs actively into consideration.

7. Reflection

7.1. Philosophical assumptions & Positionality

The methodology-chapter of this paper discussed the methods of research in a factual way. However, choices made with regard to what methods are used for research are far from clear cut. Researchers inevitably bring their own beliefs and philosophical assumptions into their work, which in turn affects the way they carry out their work and the methods they choose for collecting and interpreting data.

Creswell and Poth (2018) argue that there are four important philosophical issues that have significant implications for how a researchers conducts his or her work. The four issues are ontological, epistemological, axiological and methodological. The first issue, ontology refers to the question of what the nature of reality is. Creswell and Poth (Ibid.) argue that in qualitative research, researchers embrace the idea that multiple realities exits. The goal of the qualitative researcher then is to bring these multiple realities to light through studying, for example, the different perspectives that individuals participating in the study have towards a certain subject. This is what is also done in this study, as different actors that all work in different context are asked about their experiences about one subject. This goal reflects some of the characteristics that the social constructivist-paradigm and research conducted within this paradigm have. Cresswell and Poth argue that this paradigm suggests that:

> individuals seek understanding of the world in which they live and work. They develop subjective meanings of their experiences—meanings directed toward certain objects or things. These meanings are varied and multiple, leading the researcher to look for the complexity of views rather than narrow the meanings into a few categories or ideas. The goal of research, then, is to rely as much as possible on the participants' views of the situation (Creswell & Poth, 2018)

Second is the issue of epistemology, referring to the question of what counts as knowledge and in what ways knowledge can be gained. In the context of qualitative research, a researcher can only gather subjective knowledge, or knowledge that is 'know through the subjective experiences of people' (Creswell & Poth, 2018, p. 55). To do this in the best possible way, it is necessary for the researcher to get as close as possible to the people being studied. This means that it is just as important for the researcher to understand a participants context as it is to understand what they say or state. the context of this study, this has been achieved to various degrees. For example, three of the four interviews were conducted on site. The interview with UDEA took place at their main office in Veghel. After the interview, the interviewee even gave the researcher a tour around the facility, showing how they conducted their work. This allowed the researcher to got to know the context a bit better. The interview with De Peelconnectie also took place on site. The researcher visited their place twice, the first time to observe and get to know the interviewees, the second time to record the interview. De Waalgaard was also interviewed on site. At both these places the interviewees showed the researcher around before conducting the interview, thereby allowing the researcher to get to know the context a bit better before conducting the interviews. Odin was interviewed via ZOOM, and it was therefore harder to understand the context of the interviewee. However, Odin has shops across all of the Netherlands, one of which happens to be in Nijmegen. This shops is regularly visited by the researcher, which helps in understanding the context within which Odin works. Aside from this, there is also the issue of time. Creswell and Poth (2018) argue

that spending more time around and in the context of the people who are studied will allow the researcher to better interpret and "know" what interviewees are actually saying. In the case of this study, only limited time was spend in the actual company of interviewees, thereby limiting the ability of the researcher to "know" what they meant with what they said to some extent.

The third philosophical issue is axiological, referring to the values that the researcher brings into the research. This is also referred to as *positionality*. Creswell and Poth (2018) that this is the place where researchers explicitly reflect on how their owns social position, personal experience as well as beliefs of a more political or professional nature impact their study. Another definition of positionality is given by Coghlan and Brydon-Miller, who define it as 'the stance or positioning of the researcher in relation to the social and political context of the study—the community, the organization or the participant group' (2014). Firstly, I am a third year bachelor student, so I engage with the social and political context of my study with relatively little expert knowledge or experience with working 'in the field'. The social and political context I engage with does interest me. It is not without a reason that I chose the subject of 'food systems' and take alternative food initiatives networks as a case. I am interested in and supportive of the ideas that are connected to these initiatives, and may not yet have developed the 'professional distance' that is necessary to critically reflect on some of the aspects I will encountered while doing the research. Another thing that I think is important to mention is that some of the themes addressed in the literature might prove to be uneasy to engage with. One of these is race, a theme that is addressed in the work of authors such as Guthman (2008). I found this topic hard to bring up in interviews. I do not exactly know why tis is the case, but it felt like it is something that is too far away from me in order to say something meaningful about it. It seemed irrelevant to me or the people interviewed (which may, in the grand scheme of things, be one of the reasons for why issues of race are so problematic sometimes).

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i. Appendix 1 – Interview guide Odin

Interviewer: Cas Krijnen
Name interviewee(s): X
Organisation: Odin
Date: March 23rd, 2022
Place: Online, via Zoom

- Could you explain who you are and in what way you are involved in Odin?

- Could you explain to me what Odin's vision towards sustainability in general is?

- Could you explain to me in what way Odin connects social aspect to this understanding of sustainability?

- In what way does Odin lean on certificates and external programs in the quest for social sustainability?

- What are some social values that turn out to be difficult to bring into practice?

- How do you communicate with governmental bodies about such topics? What is the relation like?

- What would you want other actors in the food system that are less concerned with social sustainability to be more concerned with?

- What issues do you face in going after the social ideals that you support? E.g. in terms of policy, authorities, untransparent supply chains, cultural differences, financial limitations.

Further topics of interest:

- Emancipation with regard to vulnerable groups such as people with low income

- Organisational structure of Odin

- Participation

ii. Appendix 2 – Interview guide UDEA

Interviewer: Cas Krijnen
Name interviewee(s): X
Organisation: UDEA / Ekoplaza
Date: April 12th , 2022
Place: Main office of UDEA, Veghel

Topic: Vision

- What is your vision on sustainability?
- Why do you strive for sustainability?
- How do you do so, outside of ecological sustainability?
- Do you have a special department that is concerned with the social aspects of the products that you have in store?

Topic: Business operations

- Is there a specific target group that you focus on, and if so, who are they?
- How do you decide where to set up new stores or departments?
- How do you try to stimulate people to buy more organic products/sustainably/your products?
- Does it matter to you that some people cannot afford the products that are for sale in Ekoplaza-stores?
- Are there things or issues that you run into with regard to client-relations?

Topic: Farmers

- What is it like for farmers to be a supplier of you?
    - Does it yield them any extra benefits, aside from satisfaction/idealism?
    - What does a company such as UDEA mean to farmers that would like to work organically?
    - How would they manage without organisations such as UDEA?

Topic: Personal motivation?

- What is your motivation for working for this company?
- Is there something that the people working here have in common, with relation to these motivational aspects?

Topic: Context of the Netherlands

- What is your relationship with the Dutch government like?
    - Do they stimulate you in any way?
- Do you face any challenges, difficulties or problems in this relation?
    - Are there differences with regard to visions on sustainability?
    - Do you miss something, things such as encouragement, normalisation or subsidies?
- Do you communicate with policymakers about (social) sustainability?
    - Do you notice differences with regard to vision when communicating with them?

- How important is Maatschappelijk Verantwoord Ondernemen (MVO; Dutch version of *Corporate Social Responsibility*)?
    - And if you were to look at the whole food sector?
    - What does MVO mean for the competitive position of your company?
- Do different stakeholders, such as the government, the business community or societal actors, get together to discuss issues of social sustainability?

Topic: Social values

- What social values are important to your company?
- In what ways do you contribute to conserving and passing on these values?
- Is it hard to integrate these social values into the way your business operates?
    - If so, why?
- How can I verify your commitment to these social sustainability-goals?

Topic: Other

- How do you get insight into the chains that your products go through?
- Can you, in the context of The Netherlands, identify specific problems that are located at the intersection of food and society?
- Do you see a shift on societal focus or attention with regard to (social) sustainability in the last 20/30 years?
- What aspects of the food system should receive more attention according to you? Or what aspect should be better understood according to you?
- Who should take the lead in transitioning towards sustainability?

iii. Appendix 3 – Interview guide De Peelconnectie

Interviewer: Cas Krijnen
Name interviewee(s): The two owners of De Peelconnectie
Organisation: De Peelconnectie
Date: May 3rd , 2022
Place: De Peelconnectie, Liessel

Topic: De Peelconnectie

- What is the history of origin of De Peelconnectie?
- What are the goals of this place/organisation?
- What target audience are you focussing on?
- Do consider yourself more of a care institution, or as a part of the food system?

Topic: Sustainability

- What is your vision on sustainability?
- Does this vision, besides ecological sustainability, also incorporate other kinds of sustainability?
- Why do you use gardening/agriculture as a tool?

Topic: Social sustainability

- What problems with regard to the social side of food systems do you identify?
- Are there things or issues that you run into with regard to client-relations?
- In what way do you contribute to the conservation and passing on of social values such as..?
- What social values are important to you?
- How can I verify your engagement with social sustainability-goals?

Topic: The government

- Do you communicate with policymakers about (social) sustainability?
    - Do you notice differences with regard to vision when doing so?
- Do you face any difficulties, challenges or issues in your relationship with governmental institutions?

Topic: Other

- What social issues would you like to address through your work?
- What are some of the problems you run into when/with regard to…?

iv. Appendix 4 – Interview guide De Waalgaard

Interviewer: Cas Krijnen
Name interviewee(s): One of the founders/owners of De Waalgaard
Organisation: De Waalgaard
Date: June 16th , 2022
Place: De Waalgaard, Weurt

Aside from 'Who are you, where am I?' no questions, just topics:

- Motivation *(personal)*
- Vision *(aim of this organisation)*
- Food system *(the place of this organisation therein)*
- Social dimension identify with *(what social issues does the interviewee regard to this organisations' work? Who benefits from their work?)*
- Relation with governmental institutions *(what are power-relations like?)*
- Income *(resource dimension of equity; how is income generated and distributed?)*

v. Appendix 5 – List of subcodes used for analysing interviews

Equity →	Resources	Voice	Power
Subcodes derived from theoretical framework	- Equal access to food - Fair income for farmers - Fair treatment for food workers	- Inclusivity – age - Inclusivity – gender - Inclusivity – race - Inclusivity – income - Future generations - Oppressive structures - Having a say in structuring food systems - Nature, ecology and biodiversity	- Economic power - Political power - Policy - Market share
Additional subcodes derived from interviews	- Transparency and equal access to knowledge	-Inclusivity – health related - Inclusivity – distance to job market - Ability to negotiate working conditions (a.o.) for food workers - Attentiveness to needs of and cooperation with other actors in food chain - Others in society / societal function - Philosophy	- Policy – national - Policy – provincial - Policy – municipality - Policy - supportive - Policy – discouraging - Policy – perceived need for… - Power to negotiate prices - Power to shape public image/opinion - Fair distribution of costs and risks