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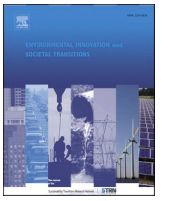

Enacting justice in food systems transitions: A critical lens on governance, power and participation

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ABSTRACT

Food systems are characterised by persistent injustices – from exploitative labour and unequal access to healthy food to disproportionate environmental burdens on marginalised communities. These injustices have spurred diverse conceptual frameworks (e.g., food democracy, food sovereignty, food justice), resulting in a fragmented debate around justice that tends to conceptualise it as an ideal outcome, rather than as a process. In this paper, we introduce the concept of "just sustainability transitions" to integrate distributive, recognitive and procedural dimensions of justice within a dynamic, process-oriented approach to food governance. Focusing on Food Policy Networks (FPNs) – i.e., multi-stakeholder networks operating at the intersection of policy and practice – we conducted 67 semi-structured interviews across varied institutional and cultural contexts and examined how justice is negotiated, enacted and transformed in everyday governance. Our analysis reveals that distributive justice often remains aspirational rather than structurally embedded, whereas recognitive and procedural justice are pursued unevenly due to local power asymmetries and institutional cultures. Within these constraints, emergent practices – such as reconfigured leadership models and enhanced participatory mechanisms – illustrate how actors experiment with redistributing power and reimagining inclusion. These practices suggest that power redistribution should be understood not merely as a democratic outcome, but as a precondition for achieving meaningful and equitable participation. By framing justice as a plural, contested and evolving process, this study bridges fragmented discourses of justice in food systems research and positions participatory governance platforms such as FPNs as sites where "justice-in-the-making" unfolds.

1. Introduction

Food systems are marked by a range of persistent and interrelated forms of injustices – from exploitative labour conditions and inequitable access to healthy food, to the disproportionate environmental burdens borne by marginalised communities across the supply chain (Béné et al., 2019; Duncan et al., 2022). These entrenched injustices have led scholars to adopt normative frameworks (such as food democracy, food sovereignty and food justice) that explore the intersection of (in)equity and sustainability in food

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governance (Bedore, 2010) – i.e., the "processes and actor constellations that shape decision-making and activities related to the production, distribution and consumption of food" (Bers et al., 2016, p. 95). *Food democracy* emphasises participatory governance, advocating for inclusive decision-making and collective action to ensure equitable access to sustainable food (Lang, 1998; Hassanein, 2003; López Cifuentes and Gugerell, 2021). *Food sovereignty*, in contrast, focuses on the importance of self-determination and community control, particularly for small-scale and Indigenous producers confronting the power of global agri-food corporations (Patel, 2009; Wittman, 2009; Loukes, 2024). *Food justice* addresses structural inequities rooted in race, class and geography and examines how these shape access to food, conditions of labour and exposure to environmental harm (Alkon and Agyeman, 2011; Agyeman and McEntee, 2014; Coulson and Milbourne, 2021). The diversity of focus across these frameworks – each favouring different aspects of justice – reflects the multi-dimensional nature of justice in food systems, which, however, has all too often been framed as a normative end-state – i.e., what a just food system should look like. What remains less explored is a processual understanding of justice – that is, how claims of justice are negotiated, enacted and transformed in practice. Such a perspective does not require collapsing diverse conceptual traditions into a single definition; rather, it provides a way to examine how justice is materialised amidst plurality.

In this paper, we propose the concept of *just sustainability transitions* (Swilling et al., 2016; Kaljonen et al., 2023; Avelino et al., 2024) as a promising entry point to address these limitations. By explicitly attending to power relations and the risks of exclusion, marginalisation and the reproduction of existing hierarchies, this concept challenges the assumption that sustainability transitions are inherently just or universally beneficial (Bennett et al., 2019; Heidenreich et al., 2024). Crucially, it advances a dynamic approach to justice that is concerned not only with distributive outcomes, but also with the recognition of diverse identities, values and knowledge systems and the inclusivity and fairness of decision-making processes – i.e., with the distributive, recognitive and procedural dimensions of justice (Huttunen et al., 2022).[1]

Applying a "just sustainability transitions" lens to food governance serves a dual purpose. First, it helps to bring greater coherence to fragmented discourses within the food literature, providing a multi-dimensional and pluralised framework that connects various dimensions of justice. Second, it introduces a more dynamic, relational and process-oriented understanding of justice – one that makes visible the ways in which notions of fairness and legitimacy are shaped and reshaped through food governance practices over time (Smaal et al., 2021; de Bruin et al., 2024; Parzonko et al., 2025).

To explore the interplay between food governance and the just sustainability transitions perspective, we focus on *Food Policy Networks* (FPNs). Building on den Boer et al. (2023), FPNs are defined as networks of actors that intersect with policy in the realm of food and encompass a diverse range of stakeholders – including government bodies, non-governmental organisations, academic institutions, community groups and private sector entities – to collaboratively address food system challenges and contribute to transformative change (den Boer et al., 2023). There has been increasing attention to FPNs in the food governance literature, especially within debates on the integration of grassroots action into policy (den Boer et al., 2023; Edwards et al., 2024) and, importantly, on the promises of inclusivity embedded in the participatory dynamics that FPNs often set in motion (Huttunen et al., 2022; Giesbers et al., 2025).

Despite sharing the same core goals, FPNs are highly context-specific and operate differently (based on local policy needs and their strategic positions in local politics). Such diversity offers a promising frame to analyse the integration and negotiation of justice within debates on FPNs' contributions to just sustainability transitions Drawing on 67 semi-structured interviews with members of FPNs across diverse geographical contexts, the paper explores how notions of justice are problematised and enacted by FPNs – examining how questions of redistribution, recognition and representation are negotiated in practice. In particular, the paper interrogates how justice is understood through situated struggles over who is supported, whose perspectives are legitimised and who is granted space in decision-making. In doing so, the paper also investigates how differing political, institutional and cultural contexts shape the interpretations and performances of justice, revealing its contingent and contested nature and what this might imply in the context of ongoing efforts to develop more dynamic, grounded and integrated accounts of justice within both food systems and sustainability transitions research.

2. Understanding justice in food systems transitions

Sustainability transitions are inherently political processes, marked by power imbalances, conflicts and social struggles, which often bring to the surface social injustices, such as the exclusion of certain stakeholders, inequitable decision-making processes or the unequal distribution of costs and benefits (Bennett et al., 2019). Scholars have increasingly drawn from the environmental justice

[1] Scholars have articulated a variety of other justice dimensions within debates on sustainability and governance. For instance, restorative and reparative justice highlight the need to address past harms and historical injustices, often through processes of repair, compensation or reconciliation. Intergenerational justice emphasises fairness between present and future generations, ensuring that current actions do not compromise future well-being. Cosmopolitan and ecological justice extend moral and political consideration beyond national or human boundaries, recognising global interdependence and the rights of non-human actors (McCauley & Heffron, 2018; McCauley et al., 2024; Heidenreich et al., 2024). While these perspectives offer important normative insights, we focus on distributive, recognitional and procedural justice because they are widely recognised as the foundational and complementary principles of justice in sustainability transitions, capturing how resources are distributed, how identities and knowledge are recognised and how decisions are made (McCauley et al., 2024). Together, they provide a robust and widely adopted framework that allows for a systematic yet pluralistic exploration of justice across contexts, making them particularly suitable for analysing food governance. These three dimensions of justice are exemplified in food system debates particularly through the frameworks of food justice, food sovereignty, and food democracy, which respectively emphasise distributive, recognitional and procedural aspects of justice.

literature to explore social injustices, recognising the uneven distribution of environmental harms (McCauley and Heffron, 2018; Bennett et al., 2019; Heidenreich et al., 2024; Avelino et al., 2024). Historically, philosophical perspectives on justice – particularly those advanced by John Rawls and Robert Nozick – have offered valuable frameworks for understanding the ethical implications of injustices (de Bruin et al., 2024). Rawls (1971), for example, foregrounded the protection of the least advantaged through fair resource distribution, which in sustainability transitions translates into safeguarding marginalised groups from disproportionate environmental burdens (Tribaldos and Kortetmäki, 2022; McCauley et al., 2024). In contrast with Rawls' emphasis on distributive justice, Nozick's libertarian approach (1974) prioritised individual entitlement and voluntary agreements, challenging redistributive policies unless consensual (McCauley et al., 2024).

Building on these philosophical perspectives, a growing body of research on sustainability transitions has begun to integrate insights from environmental and climate justice, which address broader power imbalances, systemic inequalities and collective responsibilities. This scholarship examines justice across three key distinct yet interrelated dimensions (distributional, recognitional and procedural), addressing the multifaceted aspects of equity and fairness in sustainability transitions (McCauley et al., 2024). Recent contributions collected in the EIST special issue on "just food system transition" highlight that addressing justice in food systems transitions requires explicitly multi-dimensional approaches that include more than distributive concerns alone; indeed, transition governance must also attend to issues of recognition and procedural fairness (Kaljonen et al., 2023).

Specifically, *distributive justice* in sustainability transitions concerns the fair allocation of resources, benefits and burdens, ensuring that no group bears an undue share of the costs associated with these transitions (McCauley and Heffron, 2018; Huttunen et al., 2022). Spatial justice also plays a role here, as injustices manifest differently across scales and geographies (Heidenreich et al., 2024; McCauley et al., 2024). *Recognitive justice* involves recognising and respecting the diverse identities, cultures and needs of different groups, particularly of historically marginalised groups (Bennett et al., 2019; Huttunen et al., 2022; Heidenreich et al., 2024). Finally, *procedural justice* focuses on the fairness and inclusivity of decision-making processes, calling for transparent governance that empowers marginalised communities to participate actively (Wijsman and Berbés-Blázquez, 2022; Avelino et al., 2024; Parzonko et al., 2025). However, different narratives and entrenched power asymmetries shape how justice and sustainability concerns become visible – or remain suppressed – within contested discursive spaces, with civil society organisations in particular advancing radical transformation agendas that emphasise democratic regulation, procedural justice and enhanced recognition (Kaljonen et al., 2021; Wijsman and Berbés-Blázquez, 2022).

Although distributive, recognitional and procedural justice are usually kept analytically distinct, in practice they are often interlinked: inequalities in one dimension affect outcomes in the others and transformative interventions need to consider these interactions to fully address justice in sustainability transitions (Bennett et al., 2019). Building on this point, Tschersich and Kok (2022) argue that a deeper democratisation of food systems transitions governance requires fundamental paradigm shifts – namely, from expert-centric toward pluralist understandings of knowledge; from dominant economic materialism toward post-growth strategies; and from anthropocentric worldviews toward relational and regenerative human–nature perspectives.

Food systems provide a salient and practical domain to explore these three dimensions of justice and their interrelationships within sustainability transitions (Lamine et al., 2019; Smaal et al., 2021; Huttunen et al., 2022). Indeed, dominant industrial food systems have been extensively described as characterised by significant inequalities, including the exploitation of workers in the food supply chain and unequal access to healthy and sustainable food (Holt Giménez and Shattuck, 2012; Campbell et al., 2017; Haley et al., 2020; Mattioni et al., 2022). Rather than being remediable side effects, injustices are determining traits of industrial food systems, and transformative change necessarily rests on addressing them (Minkoff-Zern, 2017; Feola, 2020).

To date, scholarship has engaged with all core dimensions of justice. Specifically, distributive justice concerns arise around the unequal access to healthy food, unfair labour conditions and differential environmental impacts, which affect primarily marginalised communities – all issues that align with food justice's focus on structural inequities in resources and harms (Alkon and Agyeman, 2011; Agyeman and McEntee, 2014; Coulson and Milbourne, 2021). Recognitional justice, central to food sovereignty, highlights the importance of respecting diverse cultural identities, knowledge systems and community autonomy by addressing the marginalisation of small-scale farmers and peasants (Patel, 2009; Wittman, 2009; Sampson et al., 2021). Procedural justice, which is particularly emphasised in food democracy discourse, foregrounds inclusive and participatory governance as a means to redistribute power and enable meaningful involvement of diverse food system actors in decision-making (Lang, 1998; Hassanein, 2003; López Cifuentes and Gugerell, 2021; López Cifuentes and Sonnino, 2024). Yet, these justice dimensions are too often pursued in isolation rather than as mutually reinforcing components of a coherent transformative agenda. As several authors have argued, the ways in which narratives, power asymmetries and democratic deficits shape justice outcomes remain central challenges for transition governance (Tschersich and Kok, 2022; Kaljonen et al., 2023). As we will argue below, research on Food Policy Networks (FPNs), which have emerged as promising arenas for embedding justice in food system transitions, is a case in point.

3. Food policy networks in just sustainability transitions

Practically, FPNs vary in structure and name.[2] Such diversity reflects the multiple objectives pursued by these initiatives and their different strategic positionings in local politics. In general, FPNs experiment with various inclusive and participatory practices aimed at

[2] Well-known examples of FPNs include food policy councils (Bassarab et al., 2019; Schiff et al., 2022), local food policy groups (Santo & Moragues-Faus, 2019), food coalitions (Coulson & Sonnino, 2019; McCartan & Palermo, 2017) and food partnerships (Dailey et al., 2022; Gold & Harden, 2018).

fostering shared objectives, frameworks and strategies among stakeholders who face similar food systems challenges yet might not have previously collaborated. In doing so, they help connect local needs in terms of food access, security and justice (Gupta et al., 2018; Schiff, 2008) with broader institutional frameworks (den Boer et al., 2023; Santo and Moragues-Faus, 2019; Schiff, 2008).

Positioned as participatory governance platforms, FPNs have been celebrated for their potential to advance justice through inclusive deliberation, recognition of marginalised knowledge systems and efforts to redress structural inequalities (Sieveking, 2019; Candel, 2022). FPNs, it has been argued, can foster procedural justice through their efforts to involve diverse actors to engage in collective decision-making; they can contribute to recognitional justice by elevating under-represented voices and forms of knowledge; and they can progress distributive justice through their efforts to reshape access to land, infrastructure and food itself (Altieri and Toledo, 2011; Coulson and Milbourne, 2021; McCauley and Heffron, 2018). However, empirical data show that FPNs often fall short of transforming the structural dynamics that sustain injustices in food systems. As many have argued, the potential of FPNs to enact justice is constrained by deep-seated power asymmetries, limited representation and institutional inertia (Harper et al., 2009; Sieveking, 2019; Levkoe et al., 2021; Franzen-Castle et al., 2022; den Boer et al., 2023). Bringing participation into focus as a procedural justice issue further reveals how these dynamics are reproduced. Questions of who is included, how participants are recruited and which roles and interests they are able to pursue fundamentally shape the degree to which participatory spaces such as FPNs can redistribute influence or merely reproduce existing hierarchies (Parzonko et al., 2025).

Recent scholarship underscores such performative contradictions within FPNs: even though equity is often stated as a goal, organisational cultures and governance structures frequently inhibit the participation of marginalised actors (Gold and Harden, 2018; Discetti and Acuti, 2024). The formalisation of FPNs – through bureaucratic procedures, institutional partnerships or professionalised leadership – can reinforce existing hierarchies, weakening their responsiveness to grassroots mobilisations and community-based knowledge (Michel et al., 2022; Mooney, 2022). Indeed, formalisation often prioritises administrative accountability, funding requirements and alignment with institutional norms, which can marginalise more informal, locally embedded forms of knowledge and participation. As a result, FPNs risk becoming vehicles of symbolic inclusion, rather than agents of structural transformation (Schiff, 2008; Schiller-Merkens and Machin, 2023).

In the context of these debates, special attention has been placed on FPNs' tendency to reproduce exclusionary dynamics by privileging dominant actors and perspectives – typically white, middle-class and urban – while failing to meaningfully engage communities most affected by food system inequalities, such as Indigenous peoples, smallholder farmers or ethnic minorities (Packer, 2014; Michel et al., 2022; den Boer et al., 2023; Discetti and Acuti, 2024). In addition to undermining their procedural legitimacy, this disconnect also limits FPNs' capacity to foster recognitional and distributive justice. There are clearly important questions that need to be addressed about the ways in which justice is performed and (re)produced through their everyday practices, actor configurations and institutional arrangements. A procedural justice lens that centres attention on participants, structures and discourses helps illuminate these dynamics by examining not only the formal mechanisms of participation but also the informal and situated processes through which power circulates in participatory governance (Parzonko et al., 2025). From a just sustainability transitions perspective, this means moving beyond abstract commitments to justice and towards a deeper understanding of the dynamics through which FPNs enable or constrain equitable transformations. A just sustainability transitions lens, in other words, calls for more systematic and empirically grounded analysis of how FPNs operate within contested political landscapes and how they navigate the tensions between participation, power and transformation.

Although the literature has extensively discussed both the promises and limitations of FPNs, there is limited empirical insight into how justice is practically negotiated, enacted and transformed within these governance spaces. Existing research tends to assess FPNs against static normative ideals, rather than examining the dynamic, situated processes through which actors define, contest and perform justice. This leaves a critical gap in understanding how the dimensions of justice are intertwined, adapted or even subverted through everyday governance practices. To address this gap, this paper asks: How is justice understood and enacted in the governance practices of FPNs? Whose claims to justice are legitimised or marginalised? And how do political, institutional and cultural contexts shape these evolving negotiations? By posing these questions, the paper aims to advance a more processual and relational account of justice that foregrounds its political and contingent nature within food system transitions.

4. Methods

4.1. Data collection

This study employed a qualitative research design, using semi-structured interviews to explore the roles, structures and justice orientation of FPNs. Focusing on FPNs that engage with policy provides a valuable lens for understanding how participatory governance shapes justice in sustainability transitions.

The selection of interviewees was guided by an extensive mapping of FPNs across diverse geographical and policy contexts, ensuring a broad representation of different compositional types, governance structures and stakeholder involvement. FPNs were initially identified through a review of both scientific and grey literature (using Google Scholar, Web of Science and Scopus), which provided an overview of existing initiatives with distinct policy approaches, structural configurations and geographical locations. To engage with diverse geographical and policy contexts, the mapping exercise used broad search terms that reflected linguistic variations. These included "food policy network" alongside location-specific terms such as "city," "city-region" and "urban," which were chosen based on insights from the academic literature. Recognising that terminology varies by language, regional team members contributed expressions such as "Ernährungsrat" (German) and "consejo alimentario" (Spanish). This approach helped to define core FPN categories and refine research terminology.

A multilingual internet search (in English, Spanish, Italian, Dutch, German, Portuguese and French) was subsequently conducted to identify FPNs that do not feature in the literature. The initial search yielded over 100 cases across North America, Asia, Africa, Europe, Australia and New Zealand. The sample was refined by excluding initiatives that lacked direct policy engagement, were temporary or were not supported by an adequate amount of public data. These FPNs were contacted and invited to participate in an online interview. To identify additional FPNs that met the inclusion criteria but were difficult to locate due to variations in naming, translations or organisational embedding, a snowball sampling method was employed during interviews, wherein interviewees were asked to recommend other relevant FPNs (Bernard, 2006). This approach allowed for the inclusion of lesser-documented FPNs and facilitated access to networks operating in diverse political and cultural contexts (e.g., Rikolto[3]).

In the end, a total of 67 semi-structured online interviews (using Zoom or MS Teams) were conducted between September 2023 and March 2024 with representatives from FPNs worldwide (see Table 1), prioritising individuals with sustained engagement in their organisation, such as founders, coordinators or long-term members. The interviews lasted 45 min on average and were conducted in English, Spanish, Italian, German, Portuguese, Dutch and French.[4] All interviews were audio-recorded with participant consent and subsequently transcribed using the relevant feature on MS Teams or professional transcription services. Where necessary, transcripts were translated into English by researchers to facilitate comparative analysis. The interviews were semi-structured around key themes related to the justice orientation of FPNs: (i) internal organisation, especially in relation to governance structures, decision-making processes and the distribution of responsibilities within the network; (ii) sustainability transformation, or the strategies, initiatives and actions that FPNs undertake to promote equitable and sustainable changes in food systems; and (iii) inclusion and engagement in policy processes – that is, how different stakeholders are involved, the mechanisms utilised to promote participation and tne ways in which marginalised voices are recognised and empowered.

4.2. Data analysis and analytical framework for participation

The pre-exisisting dataset on the experiences of FPNs with forming governance structures, engaging with sustainability transformation and developing strategies of inclusion was analysed using the three dimensional framework on justice post-data collection to tease out relevant issues and connect the analysis to scholarly debates on just food transitions. Interview transcripts were systematically analysed using both deductive and inductive coding approaches (Saldana, 2009). Deductive coding was guided by the dimensions of just sustainability transitions (distributional, procedural and recognitional justice), which provided a structured and integrated framework for examining justice-related issues within FPNs (Table 2). Concurrently, inductive coding was employed to identify emerging themes and patterns that were not captured within the predefined justice framework, ensuring that broad insights could be incorporated into the analysis.

To avoid generalised assumptions and provide a more nuanced understanding of procedural justice within FPNs, the dynamics of participation of diverse social groups were analysed deductively based on Luyet et al.'s (2012) framework of "Degree of Participation"– information, consultation, collaboration, co-decision and empowerment. This framework allowed us to assess how decision-making authority and influence are distributed among stakeholders, highlighting not only whether different stakeholders are included but also what is the level of depth and quality of their participation. Applied to FPNs, the various forms of participation included in Luyet et al.'s framework can be described as follows.

- *Information* represents the lowest level of participation, where FPNs function primarily as knowledge-sharing platforms. At this stage, stakeholders receive information about the FPN and its initiatives but do not have the opportunity to provide input or influence decision-making.
- *Consultation* involves a higher level of engagement, where FPNs present their approaches and goals to stakeholders and collect feedback or suggestions. These inputs may or may not be taken into account when making internal decisions.
- *Collaboration* signifies a deeper participatory role, where stakeholders provide suggestions that are actively considered in the FPN's decision-making processes. This level ensures that external actors influence internal organisational directions, albeit without shared authority over final decisions.
- *Co-decision* represents an even stronger participatory structure, where stakeholders are directly involved in all stages of the decision-making process (development of approaches, goals and initiatives), shaping the FPN's strategic directions in a meaningful way.
- *Empowerment* marks the highest level of participation, in which decision-making authority is delegated to all stakeholders. At this stage, external actors have full control over shaping the FPN's direction, policies and activities.

5. Results

The following subsections examine how justice is negotiated, enacted and transformed through the governance practices of FPNs. Organised around the three interrelated dimensions of just sustainability transitions – distributive, recognitional, and procedural justice, our results highlight both material and symbolic efforts to advance just food systems through diverse forms of governance engagement.

[3] www.rikolto.org

[4] Due to language constraints, regions such as Asia and Eastern Europe remained under-explored.

Table 1
FPNs interviewed by region, scale, type and relation to government.

Region	Scale	Name of FPN	Type*	Relation to government**
Global	Global	Food Systems, C40 Cities Climate Leadership Group	Group	In between
		Nutrition in City Ecosystems (NICE) (Bangladesh, Kenya and Rwanda)	Platform	In between
America - northern & Canada	National	Food Secure Canada	Network	In between
	Regional	San Diego Food System Alliance (USA)	Alliance	In between
	City-regional	Healthy Savannah (USA)	Partnership	In between
		Denver Sustainable Food Policy Council (USA)	Council	Within
		Chicago Food Policy Action Council (USA)	Council	In between
America - central & south	National	La Plataforma Estratégica contra el Sobrepeso y la Obesidad (Mexico)	Platform	Outside
		Grupo Interinstitucional de Paisajes Alimentarios Sostenibles (GIPASOS, Nicaragua)	Group	Outside
		Network of Agroecological and Peripheral Female Urban Farmers (Brazil)	Network	In between
	Regional	Teia dos Povos Network, southern Bahia (Brazil)	Network	Outside
	City-regional	Comité Municipal de Seguridad Alimentaria, La Paz and El Alto (Bolivia)	Committee	In between
		Programa de Sistemas Alimentarios Sostenibles, Plataforma multi- actor, Lima and Huancayo (Peru)	Platform	In between
		Pacto Agro-alimentario de Quito (Ecuador)	Platform	In between
Australia & New Zealand	National	Sustain: The Australian Food Network	Network	In between
		Australian Food Sovereignty Alliance (AFSA)	Alliance	In between
		Open Food Network (Australia and New Zealand)	Network	In between
	Regional	Food Fairness Illawarra (Australia)	Coalition	In between
	City-regional	Our Food Network, Ōtepoti / Dunedin (New Zealand)	Network	In between
		Edible Canterbury (New Zealand)	Partnership	In between
UK & Ireland	National	Sustainable Food Places (UK)	Network	In between
		Scottish Food Coalition	Coalition	In between
		Nourish Scotland	Network	In between
	City-regional	Greater Manchester Food Security Action Network (England)	Network	Within
		Good Food Greater Manchester (England)	Partnership	In between
		Sheffield's Food Partnership, ShefFood (England)	Partnership	In between
		Cork Food Policy Council (Ireland)	Council	In between
		Bwyd Abertawe (Wales)	Partnership	In between
	Urban	Islington food partnership, London (England)	Partnership	In between
Asia	National	Good Food Fund China	Network	In between
		Health Promotion Foundation Nonthaburi and Chiang Mai (Thailand)	Council	In between
	City-regional	City Strategic Agenda, Amman (Jordan)	Committee	In between
		Food Smart City, Surakarta (Indonesia)	Platform	In between
Africa	City-regional	Food Liaison Advisory Council (FLAC), Kisumu (Kenya)	Council	In between
		Mbale Good Food Council and Parliament (Uganda)	Council	In between
		Lusaka Food Policy Council (Zambia)	Council	Within
		Comité d'initiatives pour la gouvernance alimentaire (CIGA) de la Commune de Bambilor (Senegal)	Committee	In between
		Uganda Food Change Lab, Fort Portal (Uganda)	Lab	In between
		Arusha Food Safety Committee (Tanzania)	Committee	Within
Europe	Continental	Good Food Good Farming (GFGF)	Alliance	In between
		EU Food Policy Coalition	Coalition	In between
Europe - central	National	Ernährungszukunft Schweiz (Switzerland)	Council	In between
		Biostädte Netzwerk (Germany)	Network	Within
	City-regional	Ernährungsforum Bern (Switzerland)	Network	Outside
		Ernährungsforum Zurich (Switzerland)	Council	In between
		Ernährungsrat Wien (Austria)	Council	In between
		Ernährungsrat Oldenburg (Germany)	Council	In between
		Ernährungsrat Freiburg (Germany)	Council	In between
Europe - Mediterranean	National	Red de Municipios por la Agroecología (Spain)	Network	In between
		Rete PunTO al Cibo (Italy)	Network	In between
		Alimentar Cidades Sustentáveis (Portugal)	Network	In between
	City-regional	Mesa de Coordinación del Pacto de Milán, Córdoba (Spain)	Table	In between
		Consell Alimentari Municipal de València (Spain)	Council	Within

(*continued on next page*)

Table 1 (*continued*)

Region	Scale	Name of FPN	Type*	Relation to government**
		Consejo Alimentario Municipal de Zaragoza (Spain)	Council	Within
		Nutrire Trento - Food Policy di Trento (Italy)	Table	Within
		Comitato promotore per una food policy di Roma (Italy)	Committee	In between
		Bergamo Food Policy (Italy)	Table	In between
		Politique Agricole et Alimentaire Comunale (PAC, comité) de Plessé (France)	Committee	Within
		Projet Alimentaire Territoiral (PAT) de la Métropole Aix-Marseille-Provence et du Pays d'Arles (France)	Committee	Within
		Projet Alimentaire Territorial (PAT) de Nantes Métropole (France)	Committee	Within
Europe - northern	City-regional	Bruges Food Lab (Belgium)	Lab	In between
		Ceinture Aliment-Terre Liègeoise (Belgium)	Network	In between
		Ghent Food Policy Council (Belgium)	Council	In between
		Voedsel Anders (The Netherlands)	Network	In between
		Ede Food Council (The Netherlands)	Council	In between
		Haarlem Food Future (The Netherlands)	Alliance	In between
		Ons Eten Den Haag (The Netherlands)	Council	In between

* Type refers to the self-defined organisational form of each FPN. Types, which were identified through names, websites or interviews, encompass various structures such as networks, councils, committees, partnerships, and others.

** Relation to government refers to the degree of connection between the FPN and local government or administration, ranging from "within" (co-led by government bodies), "in between" (partially connected through initiatives, formal recognition, membership, consultation, monitoring or funding), to "outside" (operating independently without any governmental association or reliance).

Table 2
Justice dimensions for food systems sustainability transitions and key guiding questions for examining FPNs' contributions (based on Bennett et al., 2019; Huttunen et al., 2022; Avelino et al., 2024; McCauley et al., 2024).

Form of justice	Definition	Key guiding questions
Distributive justice	Ensures the fair allocation of resources, benefits and burdens in sustainability transitions, preventing marginalised groups from bearing disproportionate costs.	Which benefits and harms are distributed? How do FPNs distribute benefits and harms?
Recognitive justice	Acknowledges and respects the diverse identities, cultures and knowledge systems of all groups, particularly those historically marginalised.	Who is valued and respected? What marginalised communities and vulnerable groups are valued by FPNs? How are these groups valued?
Procedural justice	Ensures fair, transparent and inclusive decision-making processes where all stakeholders have a meaningful voice.	How can different stakeholders influence decisions? How are different modes of participation used in decision-making? How are marginalised communities and vulnerable groups integrated in FPNs' activities and decision-making processes?

5.1. Ensuring a fair distribution of resources and benefits

In general, participants recognise that the right to food is a fundamental human right; however, securing nutritious food for all is mostly a work in progress, which is negotiated and enacted around four thematic areas: (i) access to food/right to food; (ii) school food programmes; (iii) urban and peri-urban agriculture; and (iv) community food-related events.

First, some FPNs adopt a distribution role and deliver nutritious food baskets to low-income families (e.g., Rede de Agricultoras Paulistanas Periféricas Agroecológicas in Brazil and Nourish Scotland). Others adopt a funding role to enable vulnerable families to purchase more nutritious and local foods, for example, through solidarity vouchers (Nutrire Trento, in Italy). FPNs can also play a provisioning role and arrange meals at lower prices or entirely free for vulnerable populations (Fairness Illawarra, in Australia). In addition to enhancing access to food, these initiatives enable individuals and communities to make healthier food choices, as explained by an interviewee:

> *"There is also, for example, the Federation of Neighbourhood Associations, which at first did not have much connection with the agri-food issue; however, they have entered quite strongly with the issue of the right to food. Above all, in inclusive neighbourhoods, there have been community cooking workshops"* (Mesa de Coordinación del Pacto de Milán, Spain).

Second, recognising the crucial role of schools in shaping children's dietary habits, food preferences and awareness, FPNs emphasise the importance of school meals. In New Zealand, Edible Canterbury and Our Food Network Dunedin target interventions in lower-decile schools to engage students who are vulnerable to food insecurity in food literacy. PAC Comité de Plessé (France) connects schools with local small-scale producers to provide locally produced and healthy meals in school canteens, showcasing school meals as a strategic lever to support local agriculture and create economic opportunities for small-scale producers. ContraPESO (Mexico) is a

notable example of how FPNs can collaborate with schools to develop policy interventions that support children's healthy diets:

> *"We work or collaborate with research institutes that have been analysing how the food supply around schools is, how it can be facilitated or where there are areas of greatest need, what positive things are already being done. For example, if fresh food, regional fruit and vegetables, etc. are already being sold. So, we are also looking for evidence of how schools are doing in this regard in certain municipalities, and how we can use this evidence to facilitate the adoption of these provisions"* (ContraPESO, Mexico).

Third, in cities with scarce public land, FPNs turn to private spaces and homes to promote urban agriculture. In Thailand, for example, the Health Promotion Foundation collaborates with municipal authorities to allocate land for urban gardening, helping urban residents to grow their own food and connect with nature. The City Strategic Agenda (Jordan) encourages low-income residents and refugees to grow food on balconies, rooftops and backyards, generating income and expanding urban green spaces. In contrast, peri-urban agriculture initiatives often target small producers: the Comité Municipal de Seguridad Alimentaria (Bolivia) connects family farms to city markets, while the Food Liaison Advisory Council (Kenya) addresses land tenure challenges for small-scale farmers and promotes youth engagement in farming.

Finally, another example of the ways in which FPNS enact distributive justice is provided by the organisation of events that extend the reach of food-related governance beyond institutions and into community practices. For example, Edible Canterbury's (New Zealand) community feast brings together over 300 people, including homeless individuals, to share a meal and build connections. The San Diego Food System Alliance (USA) and Teia dos Povos (Brazil) prioritise community outreach, creating opportunities for individuals and communities to unite, raise awareness of food insecurity and promote collective action. Similarly, the Chicago Food Policy Action Council (USA) facilitates collaboration and knowledge-sharing between stakeholders, with particular attention to inclusivity and farmers' availability:

> *"We do it [event] in mid-February, usually when it's kind of a soft time in the food system work, particularly for producers. Because of midwinter. You know, the folks have had a chance to recover after the season, and it's just before planting season really kicks in So, it's a good kind of gap also in other conferences and events for folks to come together"* (Chicago Food Policy Action Council, USA).

These findings show how FPNs realise distributive justice not only through resource delivery but also by negotiating the boundaries between charity-based responses and systemic change within governance frameworks. Most initiatives adopt distribution, funding or provisioning roles to meet immediate local needs. Some FPNs, by contrast, adopt a more systemic approach, fostering sustainable and long-term resource allocation through policy or multilateral and integrative projects, as exemplified by their focus on place-based food procurement as well as the creation of spaces for collaborations, knowledge-sharing and solidarity among actors across the food system.

5.2. Recognising marginalised communities in FPNs

Even though most FPNs define themselves as inclusive and often employ terms such as "disadvantaged populations" or "vulnerable groups" in their narratives, only a few explicitly define which groups they prioritise. Among these cases, seven groups emerged as the most frequently recognised: (i) food insecure citizens; (ii) small-scale farmers and rural communities; (iii) children; (iv) women; (v) migrants and ethnic communities; (vi) First Peoples (Indigenous communities); and (vii) residents of vulnerable neighbourhoods.

FPNs frequently support *food insecure citizens* (low-income families, homeless individuals and people with long-term unemployment) as part of their commitment to addressing food poverty. By targeting these groups, FPNs bring to the surface the discourses and practices that have contributed to their marginalisation. For instance, members of the Chicago Food Policy Action Council (USA) approach food poverty through an intersectionality perspective of class and race to identify the main barriers faced by low-income Black families. Developing such critical awareness helps FPNs to design inclusive strategies to combat food poverty. To alleviate individual responsibility and foster collective accountability for access to healthy food, the Ghent Food Policy Council (Belgium) has developed a solidarity restaurant with sliding-scale payment. In Ireland, the Cork Food Policy Council welcomes economically vulnerable individuals to their community gardens by adopting a language that focuses on capacities (rather than identities) to avoid stigma and foster participation, as mentioned by one interviewee:

> "People who are lonely and isolated but didn't want to identify as such or didn't necessarily present themselves to [social] *services are coming in […] There's no pressure. And the approach with the community gardens isn't that there's a defined format and everyone has to do whatever. There's a list of jobs. If you have the capacity to take one on, great."* (Cork Food Policy Council, Ireland)

Governance practices aimed at recognitional justice often involve targeted engagement with *small-scale farmers and rural communities*, particularly those historically marginalised. For instance, the EU Food Policy Coalition targets young farmers, the Comité Municipal de Seguridad Alimentaria (Bolivia) focuses on peri-urban farming families and the Rede de Agricultoras Paulistanas Periféricas Agroecológicas (Brazil) engages women in urban and peri-urban farming.

Efforts to promote *children*'s food security and nutrition are evident in FPNs across various regions. Schools are food environments where FPNs often carry interventions, mainly through food literacy initiatives and the provisioning of nutritious meals. The Comité d'initiatives pour la gouvernance alimentaire (Senegal), for example, implements food training initiatives and builds agroecological gardens in elementary schools to reconnect children with local food cultures. While some FPNs focus on translating scientific knowledge on local and nutritious food to school children, others incorporate children's experiences with school food environments to advocate for policy and regulation change. In Mexico, for instance, ContraPESO contests failures in national food safety regulations that directly affect school students and advocates for regulatory reforms to improve food environments around schools, as explained by

an interviewee:

> *"In Mexico, there are mainly shops inside the schools, and there are concessions inside the schools, which are the ones that the government is obliged to regulate. Well, it has failed a bit in its role in this sense. We have bet that these proposals include that the shops that operate inside schools should at least have healthy food, provide free drinking water for children to consume inside the school, and prohibit these foods with warning labels"* (ContraPESO, Mexico).

Gender issues (particularly *women*'s empowerment) are a cross-cutting concern across regions. Explicit gender-focused programs were described by FPNs interviewed in Zambia, Uganda, Brazil, Jordan, the USA and Senegal. For example, the San Diego Food System Alliance (USA) and the Lusaka Food Policy Council (Zambia) give prominence to women's voices in their governance and leadership structure – notably through a Gender Social Inclusion Policy for internal decision-making in the case of the Zambian FPN.

FPNs in North America (Healthy Savannah, San Diego Food System Alliance, Chicago Food Policy Action Council, Denver Sustainable Food Policy Council), Germany (Oldenburg Food Policy Council), Wales (Bwyd Abertawe) and New Zealand (Our Food Network) recognise the specific challenges faced by *migrant and ethnic communities*, with efforts directed towards inclusion and cultural sensitivity in food policies and programmes. For instance, Healthy Savannah (USA) prioritises supporting Black and Hispanic populations to reflect local demographics. In Germany, the Oldenburg Food Policy Council implements projects in vulnerable districts and partners with migrant associations and refugee aid organisations.

Indigenous communities are particularly relevant for FPNs in North America, South America, New Zealand and Australia. For example, the Teia dos Povos Network (Brazil) prioritises defending Indigenous communities' rights to land and natural resources. Food Secure Canada emphasises the importance of cultural sensitivity and positionality when engaging with representatives of Indigenous communities, as explained by an interviewee:

> *"We've had like 18 months of financing for a Black caucus and an indigenous caucus on food systems. And they have both worked separately and together… Recognising that, you know, our priorities are not always their priorities"* (Food Secure Canada).

Some FPNs target spatial inequalities, tailoring support to address localised food insecurity and socio-economic challenges in *vulnerable neighbourhoods.* For example, the Consejo Alimentario Municipal de Zaragoza (Spain) provides capacity-building training on healthy and sustainable food for an informal network of residents in a deprived urban area. Similarly, the Comité Municipal de Seguridad Alimentaria in La Paz (Bolivia) funds gastronomy studies for residents of vulnerable peri-urban areas. An interviewee explained how they include residents from vulnerable neighbourhoods:

> *"So, engagement is achieved through targeting the right spatial areas and hence the right target demographic, listening to what they say through the annual survey, and employing people from the community to work for Healthy Savannah"* (Healthy Savannah, USA).

In sum, by translating community experiences of exclusion into policy-relevant actions, FPNs actively negotiate recognitional justice through inclusive and culturally sensitive governance strategies. Furthermore, they unpack the situated experiences of marginalisation in local food systems, enacting recognitive justice through multiple strategies: they address linguistic and practical drivers of exclusion, adopt intersectional approaches to marginalisation, translate community priorities into policy agendas, demonstrate cultural sensitivity and engage with the spatial dimensions of food poverty in urban contexts.

5.3. Integration of marginalised communities in FPNs' decision-making

FPNs employ multiple strategies to integrate marginalised communities and vulnerable groups in internal processes and procedures, entailing varying degrees of participation. Based on Luyet et al. (2012), we distinguish five degrees of participation: (i) information, (ii) consultation, (iii) collaboration, (iv) co-decision and (v) empowerment.

Information-sharing and consultations are common entry points. Through a webinar series, Alimentar Cidades Sustentáveis (Portugal) explores food systems challenges and invites feedback from diverse stakeholders. In Uganda, the Food Change Lab hosts quarterly meetings with community associations to share ideas and discuss challenges and solutions. Knowledge-sharing also becomes a tool for politicisation in the case of the Australian Food Sovereignty Alliance, which provides information about pro bono memberships and democratic engagement opportunities for First Peoples. To broaden outreach and engage with underrepresented groups, some FPNs address ideological and language barriers. In Switzerland, Ernährungsforum Bern uses the "Food Talks" series to foster dialogue among stakeholders from across the political spectrum, while the Denver Sustainable Food Policy Council (USA) ensures inclusivity by translating key materials into Spanish, which increases accessibility for Hispanic communities.

FPNs also engage in *consultation* processes to include diverse stakeholders' input and suggestions in food governance. For instance, Nourish Scotland emphasises meaningful participation, offering consultation services, workshops and funding for "dignity projects" that support communities in articulating and addressing their own needs, for instance by increasing people' sense of control and choice over their food, their ability to take part in community life, feel nourished and supported, engage in decision-making and valued as contributeors to the community's wellbeing.

Collaboration with external partners is the most frequent strategy for inclusive governance. Some FPNs prioritise the inclusion of (representatives of) farming and rural communities. For example, Good Food Good Farming (Europe) engages with small-scale and agroecological farmers to ensure that their concerns and perspectives are considered in food policy discourses:

> *"We try to strengthen their [farmers'] voices in the discourse […] and include their perspectives and make sure that our messaging also appeals to them"* (Good Food Good Farming, Europe).

Collaboration also helps FPNs to identify the needs of marginalised groups and design relevant interventions. Food Fairness Illawarra (Australia) collaborates with food-relief agencies and Islington Food Partnership (England) partners with representatives of community organisations, such as food banks and cultural associations, to incorporate the lived experiences of deprived citizens into decision-making processes. Through collaboration, FPNs reach different target groups. For instance, the Consejo Alimentario Municipal de Zaragoza (Spain) works with city council technicians to promote the right to food among vulnerable populations; Nourish Scotland strives to represent a diverse range of farmers and engages with industry organisations and civil society to ensure that constituent groups are adequately represented.

Although less common, *co-decision* enables FPNs to engage with marginalised communities in the development of approaches, goals, initiatives and decision-making. The Ernährungszukunf network in Switzerland stands out for actively pursuing the inclusion of various groups in co-decision processes. This FPN prioritises representative and inclusive recruitment. Outsourcing recruitment to a survey organisation ensures a broad spectrum of participants from different regions, genders, educational backgrounds and political views.

Only a few FPNs aims at the *empowerment* of marginalised communities by delegating decision-making. The Nutrition in City Ecosystems Network (NICE) conducts vulnerability assessments and maps vulnerable female and youth groups in urban areas to ensure gender and age diversity. Capacity-building sessions are organised to empower these groups, enabling them to actively engage in the initiatives and activities of the FPN. The San Diego Food System Alliance (USA), in particular, focuses on building relationships with targeted communities and balancing the leadership ratio to better represent farmers, food business owners and historically disadvantaged communities, as explained by their representative:

> *"Our focus is really on building relationships with priority communities and then bringing them kind of into the fold […] ensuring that kind of shifting the ratio within this community and bringing in more farmers, more food business owners, more folks […] elevating the voices of people most impacted by inequities in the food system […] like farm workers and farmers, food business owners, fishermen, ranchers and communities of colour […] We're primary a women of colour-led organization as well as our Board of Directors. So, it's very foundational to our work and in terms of who we're serving"* (San Diego Food System Alliance, USA).

Despite these achievements, many FPNs mentioned that inclusivity and equity in internal decision-making remain work in progress. In this respect, three strategies to enhance participation of marginalised groups are commonly utilised. First, some FPNs partner with trusted community organisations and leaders to mobilise local knowledge and develop meaningful relationships with disadvantaged communities. ShefFood (England), for example, collaborates with community leaders to develop approaches that resonate with vulnerable groups, ensuring that engagement efforts are driven by community needs rather than by preconceived notions.

Second, other FPNs focus on expanding the representation of various social groups in decision-making processes. Mbale Good Food Council and Parliament (Uganda) explicitly target historically disadvantaged groups to broaden its membership while ensuring their participation in strategic meetings. However, engaging underrepresented groups does not necessarily lead to active participation in decision-making. Chicago Food Policy Action Council (USA) highlighted that recognising the power dynamics at play is essential:

> *"Being incredibly deliberate about who and how we're recruiting and bringing new folks in as staff, but also as interns and fellows. And then really leaning into who we're trying to provide resources and access to"* (Chicago Food Policy Action Council, USA).

Finally, a few FPNs establish feedback mechanisms and space for dialogue. City Strategic Agenda (Jordan) conducted annual surveys with Amman's residents to understand their needs and develop an effective communication channel between the local government and their citizens. Bwyd Abertawe (Wales) emphasises dialogue to develop trust and relationships with farmers, recognising their critical role in shaping sustainable food systems.

In short, although co-decision and empowerment remain aspirational in many contexts, our data show that procedural justice is progressively negotiated through iterative governance strategies that aim to share information, consult, co-decide and empower actors from vulnerable communities, often developing relationships of collaboration with external organisations representing the interests of those communities, rather than with marginalised members themselves.

5.4. Challenges for enacting justice in participatory food governance

Interviewees identified three specific challenges that FPNs often face to enact justice in food governance: breaking out of insular bubbles; resource (e.g., financial, time, human) constraints; and ensuring representation and accessibility.

With regard to the first, FPN membership and organisational structures at times create insular bubbles. While connecting members with similar values and perspectives has clear benefits, respondents raised concerns about their (in)capacity to represent diversity. Ernährungsforum Bern (Switzerland) highlighted the need to transcend existing networks and connect with people outside traditional spheres. The notion of "getting out of the bubble" used by some respondents underscores this challenge. The Mesa de Coordinación del Pacto de Milán de Córdoba (Spain) noted that formal, professionalised settings where policy-related decision-making often occurs may discourage participation.

> *"I believe that one of the things that improves inclusion is when people feel that they are actually doing things and that there are possibilities for improvement. I mean, I think that many of these meeting spaces often end up being quite professionalised, in the sense that there are the local council technicians, ourselves even — as researchers — and we also work in this area. Like, various organisations that, as part of their work, already have this aspect of political engagement built in So, of course, when things aren't producing results, it's easy*

> *for people to drop out and say, "I'm not getting anything out of this, they're not going to give me any resources. So why should I bother coming?"* (Mesa de Coordinación del Pacto de Milán de Córdoba, Spain).

In terms of resource constraints, limited funding may perpetuate existing inequities within FPNs. For instance, Ernährungsrat Oldenburg (Germany) struggles to offer free activities and promote accessibility for all, while FLAC (Kenya) identified financial constraints as a key barrier to participation, particularly for rural communities who often need support to cover the costs of transportation.

Finally, FPNs often struggle to balance the efforts to ensure diverse representation with the logistical challenges associated with inclusive participation. An interviewee from Food Secure Canada emphasised the need to avoid tokenism and ensure genuine representation:

> *"We need a black food movement. We need an Indigenous food movement. […] When we say indigenous, I mean, that's First Nations which, you know, is hundreds of different nations from different backgrounds and ways of eating and foraging and hunting. […] generalising is also like really problematic*" (Food Secure Canada).

However, achieving this balance proves challenging, as illustrated by Food Fairness Illawarra's (Australia) struggle to create a supportive environment for individuals amidst the dominance of organisational representatives. In general, as mentioned earlier, FPNs primarily engage with intermediary organisations that represent marginalised communities, rather than with the communities themselves. As ShefFood (England) interviewee stated: *"We're often speaking to the people representing their community rather than those on the ground."*

6. Discussion

The findings from this study illuminate the complex role that participatory governance mechanisms play in enacting justice within just sustainability transitions. Indeed, although FPNs in general demonstrate a strong normative commitment to inclusivity and transformation, their contributions to distributive, recognitive and procedural justice remain uneven.

In relation to distributive justice, the results suggest that FPNs largely operate within a charity-based or solidarity-driven paradigm, focusing on interventions such as school feeding programmes, free meal distributions and awareness campaigns for healthy food choices. While these initiatives offer critical short-term relief and embody moral responsiveness to food insecurity, they tend to fall short of challenging or restructuring the systemic economic and political conditions that reproduce inequality (Coulson and Milbourne, 2021; López Cifuentes and Sonnino, 2024). Although many FPNs aspire to bring about deep change, their efforts are often confined to the level of advocacy, since limited capacity and political influence constrain their ability to implement structural reforms or redistributive policies – a finding that aligns with previous critiques of the limitations of FPNs as agents of change (den Boer et al., 2023; Schiff et al., 2022).

Distribution itself – a core component of justice – tends to remain a goal, rather than an integral part of participatory governance processes. This disjunction matters not only because redistributive mechanisms are essential to addressing material inequality, but also because they shape who is able to participate in food governance in the first place. Without tackling unequal access to time, resources and capacity, participatory spaces risk reinforcing exclusion or tokenism. In this sense, distributive justice should be understood not only as an outcome but as a condition for meaningful and equitable participation, challenging the often narrow procedural focus of participatory governance models (López Cifuentes and Sonnino, 2024).

This tension between intention and structural constraint flows into the domain of recognitive justice, where FPNs show varying degrees of engagement. Many FPNs acknowledge and respond to the needs of marginalised groups, with commonly valued groups across different contexts including women, children and marginalised neighbourhoods. More specific groups, such as migrants in the Global North or First Peoples in North America, New Zealand, Australia and Latin America, are recognised in certain regions. This diversity in focus suggests that FPNs are responsive to local socio-political dynamics and prioritise groups that are perceived to be at the greatest disadvantage within their respective contexts. However, particularly in western contexts, FPNs are frequently shaped by the logics of alternative food networks, which tend to reflect the perspectives and priorities of white, middle-class and educated actors (Alkon and Agyeman, 2011; Packer, 2014; Hoffmann et al., 2019). Indeed, this paper illustrates that, while there is clear intent to 'include' marginalised voices, this often risks essentialising these communities or limiting engagement to superficial consultation phases.

This study highlights that recognitive justice cannot be presumed from inclusive intentions alone; it requires deeper shifts in power, representation and accountability also within the models of participatory governance themselves. This responds directly to the question concerning whose claims to justice are legitimised or marginalised: while some groups gain visibility and voice, others – especially those that are already disregarded within dominant governance logics – remain peripheral or instrumentalised. These differences in recognitive justice reflect the responsiveness of FPNs to local socio-political dynamics, where the identification of marginalised groups tends to align with those already recognised as disadvantaged within a given context. Rather than reflecting sharply divergent governance logics across regions, the variation appears more related to local priorities, institutional relationships and histories of engagement. This influences which justice claims gain visibility, which actors are invited into governance processes and how recognition is operationalised in practice.

The findings also show that some FPNs are beginning to rethink their internal politics of recognition and representation. Particularly in North American contexts, several initiatives are engaging in deliberate processes of institutional transformation, attempting to redistribute leadership and authority to historically marginalised actors. In this respect, the San Diego case illustrates how shifts in

representation and governance can provoke both resistance and renewal – with justice increasingly framed not as a fixed goal, but as a contested and evolving process. This dynamic reveals the growing salience of procedural justice, not only in formal participatory mechanisms, but in how justice is interpreted, negotiated and reconfigured within governance spaces themselves.

Although FPNs employ a range of participatory strategies – including transparency, open dialogue and collaborative structures – challenges to genuine procedural inclusion persist. In many cases, participation is mediated through organisational representatives, which may inadvertently dilute the voices of affected communities. This risks reproducing elite framing and undermining the legitimacy of decisions, especially when local knowledges or lived experiences are not prioritised. Nevertheless, the study finds that procedural justice within FPNs is not static but in motion, with several networks transitioning from consultative practices to co-governance and shared leadership. The internal restructuring of organisations such as Food Secure Canada reflects efforts to embed deeper democratic accountability and leadership from under-represented groups – aligning more closely with the principles of just sustainability transitions (Elliott et al., 2023; Avelino et al., 2024).

This study supports the argument made by Smaal et al. (2021) that many urban food strategies – and by extension, food governance initiatives – are vision-oriented and tend to focus on best practices, positive impacts and aspirational goals. While such orientations help articulate a hopeful agenda, they often underplay or omit the structural barriers, entrenched inequalities and power struggles that shape food systems. This can result in a justice framing that is externalised – justice as something to be achieved in the future or for others – rather than internalised as a set of ongoing practices, tensions and accountabilities within governance processes themselves. Moreover, the tendency to focus on specific individuals – even when barriers are acknowledged –limits attention to systemic change (Middlemiss, 2010).

While the data set mainly captured FPN's experiences with forming governance structures, developing strategies of inclusion and engaging in policy processes, the just transition framework provided a lens to carve out how these networks deal with justice dimensions in practice. In doing so, this study demonstrates that FPNs are not merely sites of inclusion but also arenas where justice is actively interpreted, contested and transformed. Returning to the research gap identified in the introduction – namely, the lack of processual understandings of justice in both food systems and sustainability transitions research –, in this study justice emerges not as a normative end-state but as a relational, situated and dynamic practice as Bruin et al. (2024) argue in their critical literature review. In this respect, this paper contributes to a more integrated account of justice by showing how distributive, recognitive and procedural dimensions interact (Bennett et al., 2019), how they are constrained by existing power relations and how they may be reimagined through practice.

There are of course important limitations of this research, which is based primarily on individual interviews. While these provided rich, in-depth insights into the experiences and perspectives of FPN actors, they did not fully capture the negotiation and processual aspects of justice as they occur collectively within networks. Group dynamics, internal deliberations and informal interactions – all critical for understanding how justice is enacted and contested in practice – have not received sufficient attention in our research, which should be complemented by studies based on methods, such as participant observation and focus groups, which are specifically designed to capture collective processes and informal group dynamics. Building on this approach, future studies could deepen the analysis on processual justice by identifying and unpacking the diverse understandings of this concept and examining their implications for FPNs' collective approaches to transformative change, inclusivity and participation.

This dynamic orientation invites further expansion of the justice repertoire in food system governance. In addition to the three core dimensions, emerging justice frames – including restorative, intergenerational, multispecies and epistemic justice – offer valuable lenses for understanding harm, responsibility and inclusion in more-than-human and long-term contexts (McCauley and Heffron, 2018; Heidenreich et al., 2024; McCauley et al., 2024). These frames are challenging both food governance and sustainability transition literatures to account for justice in deeper and more pluralistic terms – not only as a goal to be achieved, but as a horizon of struggle, transformation and collective meaning-making.

7. Conclusions

This paper has explored how FPNs, as participatory governance mechanisms, engage with and enact justice within the context of just sustainability transitions. By applying a multidimensional justice lens, it has shown that, even though FPNs exhibit a normative commitment to equity and inclusion, their practices often fall short of structurally transformative change. Distributive justice tends to be framed as an aspirational goal rather than being embedded in participatory processes, limiting the extent to which material inequalities are addressed. Likewise, recognitive and procedural justice are pursued unevenly across different socio-political contexts, where local institutional cultures and resource asymmetries can act as barriers.

At the same time, however, this study also reveals emergent transformations, with some FPNs reconfiguring leadership structures and participatory models in ways that redistribute power and deepen democratic engagement. By conceptualising justice not as a static end-state but as a dynamic and contested process, the paper contributes to bridging the fragmented justice discourses that characterise food systems research. It argues that FPNs are not only vehicles for policy innovation, but also sites of justice-in-the-making, where normative ideals are negotiated through everyday practices of governance. This processual understanding offers a valuable contribution to the dominant focus on outcomes, enabling a more grounded, plural and evolving vision of what justice might mean in sustainability transitions. Future research should continue to interrogate these lived dimensions of justice – including how redistribution can be integrated more directly into governance processes, capture their more informal and collective dynamics and explore how emerging frameworks such as restorative, intergenerational or epistemic justice can further inform the food system transformation agenda. It would also be valuable to critically examine how notions of sustainability and justice are delimited within FPNs, including what is considered not to constitute justice and the implications of these boundaries for transformative action.

CRediT authorship contribution statement

Marta López Cifuentes: Writing – original draft, Methodology, Formal analysis, Conceptualization. **Guilherme Raj:** Writing – original draft, Formal analysis, Conceptualization. **Roberta Sonnino:** Writing – original draft, Project administration, Funding acquisition. **Ferne Edwards:** Writing – original draft, Methodology.

Declaration of competing interest

The authors declare the following financial interests/personal relationships which may be considered as potential competing interests:

Marta Lopez Cifuentes, Ferne Edwards, Guilherme Raj reports financial support was provided by European Union. Marta Lopez Cifuentes reports financial support was provided by Austrian Science Fund. If there are other authors, they declare that they have no known competing financial interests or personal relationships that could have appeared to influence the work reported in this paper.

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Data availability

Data will be made available on request.

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