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What's in a name? Unravelling the diversity of food policy networks

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ABSTRACT

Ongoing debates on the importance of creating a more inclusive and democratic food governance context have widely emphasised the potential of "food policy councils" as multi-actor alliances that cut across science, policy and society. Building on empirical insights about the variety of initiatives and arrangements designed to include all residents in the governance of food systems, in this paper we use the expression "food policy networks" (FPNs) and focus on their names to explore the linguistic and symbolic dimensions through which different organisations present and legitimate themselves. Data collected through extensive Internet searches and 67 semi-structured interviews with representatives from different types of FPNs globally show that names serve not only as identifiers but also as indicators of organisational identity, values and strategic orientations – and the ways in which these might change over time. As our analysis highlights, embedded in the FPNs' names are not just different levels of formality but also different approaches to stakeholder representation, collaboration and legitimacy. The next phase of research will have to interrogate this diversity, we conclude, to enhance understanding of participatory governance arrangements and, crucially, of their capacity to progress a democratic agenda for food systems.

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Introduction

Academic debates on food system transformation have extensively highlighted the importance of creating a more enabling, inclusive and participatory governance context. Within this literature, three interrelated issues have been discussed as potential catalysts of change: the role of multi-actor alliances that cut across science, policy and society (den Boer et al. 2021; Singh et al. 2023); the integration of grassroot food initiatives

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into policy (Candel 2022; Clark et al. 2021); and the integration of food policy across departments and councils (Candel and Pereira 2017; Edwards, Sonnino, and Lopez-Cifuentes 2024).

In many ways, "food policy councils" (FPCs) – defined as "community-based organisations that work to rejuvenate their respective food systems from the ground up" (Packer 2014, 1) – seem to embody these promises of change. Their multisectoral composition has been described as vital to tackle "wicked problems" that demand boundary-spanning collaboration (Bassarab et al. 2019; Berglund et al. 2021; Scherb et al. 2012). Yet, empirical evidence shows that not all alliances engaging with food policy are formalised into "councils" and that their organisational forms and degrees of institutionalisation vary widely (Gupta et al. 2018). To date, the literature has made little effort to critically engage with this diversity and understand its real and potential implications for food system governance.

To begin to address this gap, in this paper we use the all-encompassing expression of "Food Policy[1] Networks" (FPNs) to expand the empirical scope beyond FPCs and shift the analytic focus towards all multi-sector stakeholder groups that are engaging with policy (directly or indirectly) to respond to social, political and ecological challenges facing food systems. While the expression is not new, so far it has been utilised within studies that aim to capture the range of roles, structures and policy outputs that characterise multi-actor governance mechanisms (see, for example, den Boer et al. 2023). No effort has yet been made to examine the linguistic and symbolic dimensions through which these organisations present and legitimate themselves.

Building on insights from organisational theory and "everyday governance", in this paper we contribute to debates on the identity, positioning and framing processes of different FPNs through a focus on their names. Whether they are symbolic, instrumental, aspirational or categorical, names matter; indeed, existing evidence shows that "some organisational names are better than others in securing perceptions of legitimacy from public audiences" (Glynn and Abzug 2002, 278). At the same time, names are also critical components of an "organisation's identity" – an enduring, distinctive and central characteristic perceived by its members and to which they hold on to in particular at times of change (Albert and Whetten 1985). In response to changes in their own circumstances or changes that might occur within their wider context, organisations can behold to their name; seek to change their focus, remit or affiliations by changing their name (Fox 2011); or work to change the meanings attached to their name, allowing members to interpret their organisational label in a way that maintains or even increases their self-esteem (Gioia et al. 2013). A focus on names can therefore provide unique insights into organisational behaviours, designs and structures (Carr 1997; Moxham and Kauppi 2014; Sarkis, Zhu, and Lai 2011) and how these might change over time – the fluidity, or what Gioia, Schultz, and Corley (2000) call "the adaptive instability", of an organisation's identity.

Drawing on data collected through an extensive Internet search conducted in seven languages and 67 interviews with representatives from different types of FPNs from around the world, in this paper we interrogate the significance of names in relation to the purpose, membership and experience of the organisations. As we will discuss, names provide novel insights into not just the internal diversity of a prominent actor of the global food movement but also into its diverse engagement with food policymaking and, more broadly, into its different needs, formulations and aspirations – and how these might have changed over time. Such diversity, we conclude, raises important questions

that should be placed at the heart of a renewed "participatory" food system governance research and policy agenda.

The diverse world of the global food movement

Research on participatory governance in food systems has extensively focused on the nature, practices and activities of the so-called "FPCs", an expression that emerged in North America and has traditionally been loosely applied to a wide array of multi-actor governance arrangements that seek to transform the food system by acting as "facilitators" (convenors for inclusiveness of viewpoints) and "networkers" (brokers that bring together a diversity of viewpoints, expertise and experience) (Schiff 2008, 216–217).

As a label, "council" carries symbolic weight. It conveys a sense of formality, legitimacy and institutional recognition that fails to capture the variety of functions exercised by existing multi-actor governance arrangements, especially in relation to their policy placement. Indeed, evidence shows that not all FPCs engage directly with food policy, which is often seen as divisive or counterproductive to their inclusive ethos (Gupta et al. 2018, 18). In one of the first comparative studies of FPCs across the U.S.A., for example, Harper et al. (2009, 20) argued that "despite their name, [FPCs] often tackle problems in food systems directly by implementing programs and projects". In an analysis of New England's FPCs, Porter and Ashcraft (2020, 2) confirm that a distinction needs to be made between "those aiming to influence policy and others focusing entirely on programs" (see also Levkoe et al. 2021). In some cases, a shift from a programme-focus (orientated towards one or more specific and fixed-term projects) to a policy-focus (directed at changing food's legislative and regulatory context) has been observed over time, once an organisation acquires the necessary resources and reputation (Schiff 2008).

In addition to differing in their positioning towards policy-makers, existing multi-actor governance configurations also differ in terms of goals, trajectories, scale of operation and membership. Although longitudinal and comparative analyses are lacking in the literature (which is also overwhelmingly concentrated in the Global North), there is scattered evidence of a wide range of goals pursued by different governance arrangements. Generic topical foci include issues as diverse as food and nutritional security, social and economic viability (including ethical marketing, innovation, research and development and fair prices), empowerment, the right to food, food sovereignty, women's health and rights and ecological resilience and social justice, amongst others (Dwiartama, Kelly, and Dixon 2022; Lindberg, Caraher, and Wingrove 2016; Meza 2022; Motta 2021; Sieveking 2019; van Ewijk and Ros-Tonen 2021; Rodríguez et al. 2022; Zerbian et al. 2023).

The scale and membership of these initiatives also vary – from small-scale seed networks in Colombia to national and international alliances such as La Via Campesina (Giordano 2022; Martínez-Torres and Rosset 2010; Shawki and Schnyder 2023). Confirming insights from organisational theory about the dynamic nature of organisations (Gioia et al. 2013; Glynn and Abzug 2002), many initiatives have experienced changing roles throughout their trajectories. Some, such as the Al-Barakah Wheat Project from Amman, Jordan, have stayed relatively specific to their initial cause, while others, such as La Via Campesina, an international network championing the rights of peasant farmers, have developed extensive networks to address diverse yet related issues (Martínez-Torres and Rosset 2010). Finally, existing initiatives also differ in size of membership.

Some, such as standing committees, are small, comprising less than 15 members, while others are large international networks of over 100,000 members. This diversity in purpose, location, scope and span of FPCs has significantly increased from 2008, accelerating even more since 2015, when the Milan Urban Food Policy Pact was launched (Steyaerta, Dessein, and Prove 2023).

Clearly, the expression "FPCs" does not capture this diversity of experiences, agendas and trajectories. The term obscures variation in organisational form, policy engagement (i.e. FPCs' (in-)direct involvement with legislative and regulatory activities around food) and self-definition. The literature now refers to a broader range of entities (e.g. coalitions, partnerships, collaboratives or advisory groups), each reflecting distinct configurations of stakeholders, governance arrangements and strategic focus (Boden and Hoover 2018; Dailey et al. 2022; Godrich et al. 2023; Gold and Harden 2018; Harper et al. 2009), which we have summarised in the first name-based typology (see Table 1). A comparative analysis of these diverse configurations is vital to enhance understanding of the different dimensions of the organisational identity (and associated agendas) of a key actor within the food system governance arena.

To begin to capture the diversity of voices, identities and approaches that have emerged in the realm of food system governance, in this paper we use the expression "FPNs" to orientate attention around the different organisational meanings that are fixed in names (Glynn and Abzug 2002). Existing scholarship has extensively demonstrated that names wield power. Embedded within (and influenced by) a "web of institutionalised practices" (Glynn and Abzug 2002, 277), names have a symbolic function that can help to align the organisation's image with its goals (Gioia et al. 2013) or with well-recognised movements, serving the purpose of enhancing its connectivity and its influence within wider networks (Greenwood and Meyer 2008). In the case of FPNs, for instance, a name that includes words such as "sustainable" or "community" may signal a commitment to connecting food policy with environmental protection or collective action, respectively. A focus on the selection of a name can therefore provide an important response to ongoing calls for more research focused on "everyday governance" – i.e. "the actual practices of how interests are pursued and countered, authority exercised and challenged, and power institutionalised and undermined" (Le Meur and Lund 2001, 1; see also Sonnino and Coulson 2021).

Table 1. A typology of FPN names (own creation).

FPN cluster	Constituent Types	Description of type
Informal and open networks	Networks, Alliances, Coalitions, Groups	They share a relatively flexible structure, voluntary membership and issue-based collaboration. They are often civil society-led and emphasise advocacy, knowledge-exchange and movement building over and above engagement with formal policymaking processes.
Institutionalised governance bodies	Councils, Committees, Tables, Partnerships	All four types are anchored within (or closely linked) to government institutions, especially municipalities. They are policy-oriented, often multi-stakeholder and designed to co-design, coordinate or implement food policy.
Collaborative and experimental spaces	Platforms, Labs	They are multi-actor arenas designed to foster innovation, experimentation and knowledge co-production. They are less about formal governance and more about testing or disseminating new approaches to food system governance.

To explore the relationship between what different FPNs are, seek to be, say and do through their names, we ask: what history, approach and purpose are embedded within the names of FPNs? What do names tell us about the membership, positioning and priorities of different FPNs across the world? More broadly, what insights do names provide about the current and future state of multi-sector and multi-actor configurations and their role within the global food movement?

Methodology

To address these research questions, this study adopted a multi-phase, qualitative research design that entailed three interconnected steps: (1) a structured literature review; (2) an expanded multilingual internet search; and (3) semi-structured interviews with representatives of FPNs. The process was implemented collaboratively by an international research team predominantly based in Europe, with one member based in South Africa, and drew on team members' linguistic and contextual expertise to ensure global breadth and relevance. All procedures performed in the research were in accordance with the ethical standards of the institutional research committee and with the 1964 Helsinki declaration and its later amendments or comparable ethical standards. Informed consent was obtained from all individual participants included in the study.

Step one: structured literature review

The literature review was conducted in line with pre-designed guidelines to ensure consistency within the research team. The review aimed to identify and analyse existing academic and "grey" literature on FPNs, with a particular focus on their names and what these signalled in terms of (a) multi-actor composition (i.e. organisational form); (b) the mechanisms utilised to enhance participation (including of representatives from vulnerable and deprived groups); and (c) engagement (or lack of) with food policy. The review covered literature from the last ten years, though older sources were included when they provided substantial insights into FPNs that have remained active or influential.

Initial searches were conducted using academic databases such as Google Scholar and Web of Science. Building on den Boer et al. (2023), FPNs were broadly defined at the start of the research as all multi-sector stakeholder groups (encompassing actors as diverse as government bodies, non-governmental organisations, academic institutions, community groups and private sector entities) that are engaging with policy (directly or indirectly) to respond to social, political and ecological challenges facing food systems. To account for the specificities of different geographical contexts and policy environments and reflect language variations, key search terms utilised for the mapping exercise were deliberatively left wide.[2] Each researcher conducted the search both in English and in their native language (i.e. Spanish, Italian, Dutch, German, Portuguese and French), adapting the terms utilised to account for regional and linguistic nuances (e.g. "Ernährungsrat" in German or "Consejo alimentario" in Spanish).

Each document was reviewed to determine its relevance according to three predefined criteria: explicit reference to an FPN; a minimum of one paragraph describing the network; and a (direct or indirect) focus on food policy. Data were recorded in a structured Excel

template developed by the research team, which collated details on the FPN's composition, activities, the inclusion of marginalised groups, reference to food policy objectives and the exact terminology used in the organisation's name. Names were coded inductively according to type (e.g. council, alliance, platform), scale (urban, city-regional, national, international) and presence of normative or descriptive adjectives (e.g. "sustainable", "community", "food").

Step two: internet search

To address the limitations of the academic literature – particularly its bias towards English-language and Global North contexts – the review was supplemented by a systematic multilingual internet search. This step aimed to identify additional FPNs not captured in the literature, with particular attention for those operating in non-Anglophone and less-researched settings.

The same set of search terms was used, translated into the working languages of the research team. Searches were conducted via Google, with a focus on identifying websites, news items, reports and online portals describing the formation, goals and activities of predominantly urban or city-regional FPNs. In several cases, researchers relied on their contextual knowledge to expand the search, identify relevant initiatives and trace institutional connections.

All findings were logged in the shared Excel file, alongside comments noting how each FPN aligned – or not – with the working definition utilised by the team. Where applicable, researchers highlighted translation challenges, the use of alternative or locally specific terminology and culturally specific meanings associated with food system governance.

During Steps One and Two, the search process yielded over 100 potential FPNs, spanning North America, Asia, Africa, Europe, Australia and New Zealand. From this sample, the research team excluded initiatives that: (i) do not intersect with policy in any sustained manner, (ii) are inactive, temporary and/or (iii) are solely driven by short-term funding. While this may appear to limit the inclusion of certain grassroots or community-based initiatives, the study explicitly prioritised FPNs that demonstrated ongoing (direct or indirect) policy engagement. This emphasis helped to differentiate FPNs oriented towards food policy objectives from those whose primary focus may lie elsewhere (e.g. sustainable food provision). In total, 30 types were identified based on the exact terminology used in its name (see the Appendix for a list of types with examples).

Step three: semi-structured interviews

To gain deeper insight into the identities, meanings and trajectories of FPNs, semi-structured interviews were conducted with key members of selected initiatives – i.e. coordinators, founders or actively involved members. Interview candidates were drawn from the refined list of 30 types of FPNs, which were selected for their diversity in terms of form, geography and scale (see Table 2). Additional FPNs were identified using snowball sampling during the interview process, since several respondents referred to other relevant initiatives within their networks (Bernard 2006).

A total of 67 interviews were conducted between November 2023 and March 2024. Interviews were led by researchers fluent in the local language and were held online.

Table 2. FPNs interviewed by region, scale and compositional type.

Region	Scale	Name of FPN	Type
Global	Supra-national	Food Systems, C40 Cities Climate Leadership Group	Group
		Nutrition in City Ecosystems (NICE) (Bangladesh, Kenya and Rwanda)	Platform
America – Northern & Canada	National	Food Secure Canada	Network
	Regional	San Diego Food System Alliance (U.S.A.)	Alliance
	City-regional[3]	Healthy Savannah (U.S.A.)	Partnership
		Denver Sustainable Food Policy Council (U.S.A.)	Council
		Chicago Food Policy Action Council (U.S.A.)	Council
America – Central & South	National	La Plataforma Estratégica contra el Sobrepeso y la Obesidad (Mexico)	Platform
		Grupo Interinstitucional de Paisajes Alimentarios Sostenibles (GIPASOS, Nicaragua)	Group
		Network of Agroecological and Peripheral Female Urban Farmers (Brazil)	Network
	Regional	Teia dos Povos Network, southern Bahia (Brazil)	Network
	City-regional	Comité Municipal de Seguridad Alimentaria, La Paz and El Alto (Bolivia)	Committee
		Programa de Sistemas Alimentarios Sostenibles, Plataforma multi-actor, Lima and Huancayo (Peru)	Platform
		Pacto agro-alimentario de Quito (Ecuador)	Platform
Australia & New Zealand	National	Sustain: The Australian Food Network	Network
		Australian Food Sovereignty Alliance (AFSA)	Alliance
		Open Food Network (Australia and New Zealand)	Network
	Regional	Food Fairness Illawarra (Australia)	Coalition
	City-regional	Our Food Network, Ōtepoti/Dunedin (New Zealand)	Network
		Edible Canterbury (New Zealand)	Partnership
UK & Ireland	National	Sustainable Food Places (UK)	Network
		Scottish Food Coalition	Coalition
		Nourish Scotland	Network
	City-regional	Greater Manchester Food Security Action Network (England)	Network
		Good Food Greater Manchester (England)	Partnership
		Sheffield's Food Partnership, ShefFood (England)	Partnership
		Cork Food Policy Council (Ireland)	Council
		Bwyd Abertawe (Wales)	Partnership
	Urban	Islington food partnership, London (England)	Partnership
Asia	National	Good Food Fund China	Network
		Health Promotion Foundation Nonthaburi and Chiang Mai (Thailand)	Council
	City-regional	City Strategic Agenda, Amman (Jordan)	Committee
		Food Smart City, Surakarta (Indonesia)	Platform
Africa	City-regional	Food Liaison Advisory Council (FLAC), Kisumu (Kenya)	Council
		Mbale Good Food Council and Parliament (Uganda)	Council
		Lusaka Food Policy Council (Zambia)	Council
		Comité d'initiatives pour la gouvernance alimentaire (CIGA) de la Commune de Bambilor (Senegal)	Committee
		Uganda Food Change Lab, Fort Portal (Uganda)	Lab
		Arusha Food Safety Committee (Tanzania)	Committee
Europe	Supra-national	Good Food Good Farming (GFGF)	Alliance
		EU Food Policy Coalition	Coalition
Europe – Central	National	Ernährungszukunft Schweiz (Switzerland)	Council
		Biostädte Netzwerk (Germany)	Network
	City-regional	Ernährungsforum Bern (Switzerland)	Network
		Ernährungsforum Zurich (Switzerland)	Council
		Ernährungsrat Wien (Austria)	Council
		Ernährungsrat Oldenburg (Germany)	Council
		Ernährungsrat Freiburg (Germany)	Council
Europe – Mediterranean	National	Red de Municipios por la Agroecología (Spain)	Network
		Rete PunTO al Cibo (Italy)	Network
		Alimentar Cidades Sustentáveis (Portugal)	Network

(*Continued*)

Table 2. Continued.

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

Each interview lasted approximately 45 min and was audio-recorded with the interviewee's consent. Transcriptions were produced either through the dedicated Microsoft Teams feature or via professional services, depending on language and audio quality. The interviews were subsequently analysed thematically using NVivo software, applying an inductive coding approach (Saldana 2009) to identify emergent patterns on the symbolic, strategic and institutional significance of the FPN's name.

As shown by Table 2, the dataset produced from the interviews reflects considerable global and organisational diversity in terms of:

- Name of the initiative: networks (17), councils (17), committees (8), partnerships (6), platforms (5), alliances (4), coalitions (3), Tables (3), groups (2) and labs (2);
- Geography: U.S.A. and Canada (5), Central and South America (7), Australia and New Zealand (6), UK and Ireland (9), Asia (4), Africa (6), Continental Europe (2), Central Europe (7), Mediterranean Europe (12) and Northern Europe (7); and,
- Scale: supra-national (4), national (17), regional (2), city-regional (43) and urban (1).

Findings

Three key trends were revealed from the initial online mapping of the data. First, the broad category of "other networks", which includes all examples except FPNs with the word "network" in the title, is the most popular yet diverse category. As shown in the Appendix, this group encompasses ten different kinds of "alternative food networks" that are engaged with policymaking, as well as more specific types, such as regional, foundation-led or farmer-focused networks. Second, FPCs and FPNs are the two most common specific examples; six cases in our sample utilise the first name, whereas the second applies to five initiatives. This finding is matched by the literature searches, where these two terms dominate. Third, there are 25 additional types of names, each with less than five examples.

To better understand the emerging trends within the different types, we analysed the data collected through the semi-structured interviews focusing on the perceived

significance of names and the two most pervasive themes that were identified by interviewees: the importance of choosing words that reflect an FPN's internal diversity in terms of stakeholder composition and the importance of using names that reveal the type of relationship that FPNs have (or choose to not have) with food policy. The analysis also focused on how names have changed in some FPNs over time, with many interviewees sharing rich stories that reflect a shift in their network's focus, representation and needs.

The salience of the name

Interviewees generally agreed that the names of their FPNs carry meaning. As stated by one interviewee, "there's people in the name. […] It holds an agreement. I guess that's what we want to work towards" (Edible Canterbury, New Zealand). According to another interviewee, "the name describes the essence of the organisation" (Open Food Network, Australia).

Geographical reference plays a crucial role in the naming of many FPNs. More than half of the organisations included in our sample make direct reference to a geographical entity in their name, be it a nation (e.g. Uganda, Canada, Australia), a city (e.g. Savannah, Arusha, Cork) or, in one case, a borough (Islington, in London). At the urban level, FPNs often connect the presence of geography in their name with a desire to define their remit, as two representatives from city-based FPNs explained:

> *ShefFood Partnership plays on the word […], our place. Basically, we represent everything to do with food in the city* (ShefFood – Sheffield's Food Partnership, UK).

> *Chicago provided some geographic definition for what we were focusing on* (Chicago Food Policy Action Council, U.S.A.).

At the regional level, naming conventions are utilised primarily to stress the civil society-led and inclusive nature of the FPN. A salient example in this respect is the use of the term "Ernährungsrat" by FPNs in German-speaking regions. In addition to highlighting a commitment to food, this name helps to situate FPNs within a broader context of civic engagement. Indeed, the use of the term "rat" evokes established civil society councils, such as "Klimarat" (climate council), making the purpose of an FPN clear to the public and enhancing its legitimacy as a platform for dialogue and collaboration in the policy realm. Other examples include the widespread use of "food partnership" in the UK to signal collaborative approaches, whereas in the U.S.A. "food policy council" emphasises policy-focused dialogue. In short, regional naming conventions underscore FPNs' efforts to balance identity, strategic focus and engagement within their specific governance context.

Names are also used to evoke specific models or modus operandi connected with scale. For instance, the term "lab" is used to emphasise "the creation of self-sustaining structures at the local level", as stated by a representative from the Uganda Food Change Lab. In contrast, the term "web" reflects a more collective approach that cuts across local scales, building a collaborative movement that challenges the national government. As articulated by a representative from Brazil:

> *The [Web] is […] an organisation of citizens working together to defend their own territories. […] For us, the State is a three-legged monster that only moves by pushing. So when we want something, we fight, we organise and lobby the State so that it can solve our problem* (Teia dos Povos, Brazil).

At higher governance levels, the relationship between an FPN's name and its scope of activities becomes more complex. Food Secure Canada, for example, embodies a dual purpose, holding both an English name, "Food Secure Canada", and a French name, "Network for Sustainable Food" (Réseau pour une Alimentation Locale Durable). As one interviewee observed:

> *So you can see that there's […] a kind of ambiguity or diversity or richness about how we think about ourselves. […]. If you were going to come up with a name that was, like, unusable but super-descriptive, you could come up with something like "A hub for the Canadian food movement in all of its diversity, with a particular focus on dialogue and advocacy, particularly at the federal level"* (Interviewee, Food Secure Canada).

This imaginary name somewhat embodies the two main priorities identified by interviewees to explain the purpose of their FPNs' names: the need to project to the outside world a message about the compositional diversity of the FPN and the importance of conveying a sense of the external relationship that an FPN has, intends to have or decides not to have with government and policy.

Keeping together a multiplicity of stakeholders and interests

Some names directly reflect sectoral interests of specific communities of stakeholders. For example, terms such as "enterprise" (Singapore) and "interest group" (Zurich, Switzerland) evoke the private sector, whereas expressions such as "task force" (Lima, Peru) and "advisory group" (Nairobi and Kisumu, Kenya) often signal, directly or indirectly, the presence of a government-driven agenda. As for civil society-led FPNs, names such as "movement" (La Via Campesina), "alliance" (New York City, U.S.A.) and "partnership" (Brighton and Hove, UK) emphasise critical mass and large-scale mobilisation; terms such as "table" (Córdoba, Spain) and "roundtable" (Cali, Colombia), in contrast, are utilised to emphasise dialogue amongst different stakeholders.

Regardless of the name chosen, and what such name might signal in terms of represented sectoral interests, all interviewees described their FPNs as "multi-actor" or "multi-stakeholder" initiatives. Multi-stakeholderism is directly conveyed by names such as "multi-actor platforms" (Peru, Indonesia and Nicaragua) or implied by the use of terms such as "network" (e.g. Our Food Network Dunedin, New Zealand), "partnership" (e.g. Islington Food Partnership, UK), "table" (e.g. Mesa de Coordinación del Pacto de Milán de Córdoba, Spain) and "roundtable" (Cali, Colombia). In general, loose terms such as "group" (see example of Kisumu, Kenya) are selected (often during the initial stages of formation of an FPN) to convey a sense of openness and inclusivity. More formal labels – such as, for example, "council" (Kisumu, Kenya) or "association" (Bambilor, Senegal) – are adopted (typically at a later stage) to project a sense of collective commitment by multiple stakeholders and, at the same time, to gain visibility in the food system governance arena.

Some FPNs select governance idioms to represent their internal diversity; in this respect, "committee" was described as a particularly useful term, as shown by the following example:

> *We call ourselves a Committee because we are comprised of many stakeholders. We come together as different actors around the food chain, different organisations: public sector and non-public sector* (Arusha Food Safety Committee, Tanzania).

Other FPNs choose "topical" names that include terms such as "health" (e.g. Health Promotion Foundation, Thailand) or "overweight" (e.g. La Plataforma Estratégica contra el Sobrepeso y la Obesidad, Mexico) to convey a sense of unity and common purpose around a shared agenda. In this context, the expression "good food" is particularly popular, especially in the Global North, as described by one interviewee:

> *The name […] is an attempt to pull together all of the different threads around food so that we're making holistic choices […] the food sustainability work and the food poverty work, for example, have traditionally happened in blissful isolation of each other* (Good Food Greater Manchester, UK).

Finally, there is a range of topical terms that have been chosen for their capacity to create convergence amongst different interests and policy priorities. Notions of "fairness" (e.g. Food Fairness Illawarra, Australia), "nourishing" (e.g. Nourish Scotland), "security" (e.g. Comité Municipal de Seguridad Alimentaria, Bolivia) and "sustainability" (e.g. Programa de Sistemas Alimentarios Sostenibles, Peru) are considered to have convening power, as illustrated by the following quotes:

> *Fair food is kind of being used as a proxy concept or terminology in Australia that would kind of bring together groups that might identify as being food justice organisations, they might identify as food sovereignty, they might identify as being an urban agriculture initiative, they might be an educational coalitional group* (Fair Food Alliance, Australia).

> *Nourishing it's a positive thing. […] Food is often not talked about or it's talked about in siloes. So we're trying to get a conversation on bringing these siloes together. And that food is not just for eating and nutrition, but it's also for mental health and wellbeing and community* (Nourish Scotland).

Another example is the Red de Municipios por la Agroecología in Spain (Network of Municipalities for Agroecology), which utilises the term "agroecology" in its title because it encompasses "many concepts, such as climate change, production, the right to food […] food policies, […] participation".

Gaining recognition and authority

For many FPNs, the selection of a name aims at describing their relationship (or lack of) with policy. The term "council" is one of the most commonly utilised to convey a sense of formalisation (and, hence, status and authority) vis-à-vis (or even within) government. One interviewee explained:

> *Labelling it as a council gives it more legitimacy and formalised relationship with county government* (Food Liaison Advisory Council, Kenya).

In some cases, the term "council" is utilised even if there is no relationship with government. In Turin (Italy), an interviewee reported that the use of "council" was simply the result of borrowing the model from the U.S.A., where historically all FPNs were originally called FPCs. Similarly, as described earlier, in German-speaking countries (Germany, Austria and Switzerland) all FPNs use the name "Ernährungsrat", despite the existence of regional differences in terms of organisational structure, relationships with government and goals.

When engagement with policy is downplayed, FPNs tend to explicitly avoid the use of formal expressions such as "coalition" and "council" in their names, as two interviewees explained:

> *Members would prefer partnership over coalition just because it sounds less counselee* (Islington Food Partnership, UK).

> *We called ourselves Table and not Council because Table refers to a more practical, less formal dimension* (Bergamo Food Policy, Italy).

Predictably, formal expressions do not feature in the names of FPNs that are characterised by defensive tendencies towards the state, as seen in the Brasilian case, or that are limited in their scope by national regulations that prohibit collaboration with state institutions, which is the case of the Nicaragua's Grupo Interinstitucional de Paisajes Alimentarios Sostenibles (Inter-institutional Group for Sustainable Food Landscapes).

Names can change over time, often in response to changing aspirations about policy engagement. Africa provides a particularly dynamic picture in this respect, as two interviewees expressed:

> *The decision to change FLAG [Food Liaison Advisory Group]'s name to FLAC (Food Liaison Advisory Council) was driven by the intention to transform it into a recognised legal entity […]. A committee or council implies greater influence and authority compared to a group, which typically suggests a gathering of individuals with similar interests* (Food Liaison Advisory Council, Kisumu, Kenya).

> *We are currently working on changing this Committee into an Association so that it can be officially recognised by the State (*Comité d'Initiatives pourla Gouvernance Alimentaire, Bambilor, Senegal).

Another interesting example is provided by Chicago, where the term "advisory" was eliminated by the FPN's name to reflect a fundamental change in policy placement, as the following story elucidates:

> *We originally were the Chicago Food Policy Advisory Council […] because well, originally we had thought it was going to be embedded in the city. […] Midstream through the process it was actually pulled back before we finalised our recommendations. […] And so it kind of disappeared into the black hole of city government and then came back out a year and a half later […]. And at that point we decided we're going to be an external policy group […], we want to be more assertive in our statement purpose, in our name, rather than just advising. We're actually going to do things … we're going to be taking changes. And so we moved to action* (Chicago Food Policy Action Council, U.S.A.).

In some cases, the decision to change name originates from changes occurred in the size of an FPN or in its relationship with scale. This is especially common amongst initiatives that emerged at the urban level, as illustrated by the following excerpts:

> *We changed the name from cities to municipalities because there were very big cities and small municipalities so it was very exclusionary for us to call the network "cities"* (Red de Municipios por la Agroecología, Spain).

> *In 2019, we changed our name [from Sustainable Food Cities] to Sustainable Food Places, which was about us thinking of not just cities, but how they're connected to the rural hinterlands, and thinking about […] other scales that the partnership model that we advocate for could work* (Sustainable Food Places, UK).

Sometimes a change in scale is also aspirational:

> *We want to be a movement, but then of course you could ask a lot of questions what that actually means. … We would also say Good Food Good Farming as part of a bigger food movement* (Good Food, Good Farming, Europe).

Discussion

An analytic focus on names helps to see the role of FPNs within the global food movement as far more diverse and fragmented than has been described in the literature. Alongside the most formalised and documented phenomenon of the FPCs, our research has uncovered a more hidden world of councils, alliances, advisory groups, collectives, coalitions, partnerships, fora, labs, platforms, committees and more. In line with insights from organisational theory, which has extensively emphasised the "centrality" of labels in the formation and dynamics of organisational identity (Gioia et al. 2013; see also Gioia, Schultz, and Corley 2000), our data show that names are not accidentally chosen; rather, they are reflective of different compositions, approaches, missions, identities and contexts. Equally different, from a food policy perspective, are the priorities and agendas evoked by names, which signal different levels of engagement with policy objectives. In our interviews, the latter were discussed with reference to three core issues: representation, collaboration and legitimacy.

Regarding *representation*, Glynn and Abzug (2002)'s argument about the importance of choosing names that are understandable to potentially different audiences offers a valuable insight into the analysis of naming practices such as those used by Food Secure Canada, which has to resort to two different names to deal with its "audience plurality" (Glynn and Abzug 2002, 278). In this respect, all FPNs interviewed stressed the importance of mobilising different communities of stakeholders and of being as representative as possible of their different (and potentially conflicting) needs and interests. From a participatory governance perspective, it is important to emphasise that open membership does not necessarily entail equal representation. Notably, our dataset shows a striking absence of references to marginalised groups – such as migrants, racialised communities or low-income populations – in the FPNs' names. This absence is not necessarily just a semantic issue; it may well be reflective of the socio-political hierarchies that continue to shape participation in food governance spaces. Indeed, the predominance of neutral or institutionally-oriented terms (e.g. "council", "committee", "platform") signals a preference for professionalised, policy-facing identities over grassroots or justice-oriented framings. Here, it is probably not accidental that names that explicitly evoke values such as "sovereignty" or "justice" are the exception, rather than the norm. This suggests that, although inclusivity is frequently asserted as a goal, naming practices signal a tendency to prioritise the search for legitimacy through what Glynn and Abzug (2002, 267) call "symbolic isomorphism" – i.e. the resemblance of an organisation's symbolic attributes (such as names) to those of other organisations operating within the same field. From a food system governance perspective, this tendency can in fact reproduce exclusion by defining who is visible, legitimate and entitled to speak.

A key finding of this research is that dialogue for some FPNs is not open to anyone. In the cases of Brazil's Teia de los Poves and Nicaragua's Grupo Inter-institucional de Paisajes

Alimentarios Sostenibles, for example, government bodies are not invited to the table, as described earlier. Topical names, on their part, directly evoke specific agendas and associated target groups. For example, there is a direct correlation between "food sovereignty", which recur three times in the names of the FPNs in our sample, and small-scale farmers, whereas "security", which appears four times, calls into question the needs of deprived (often urban) residents. These insights contradict the celebratory tone of existing scholarship, which has extensively extolled the capacity of multi-actor governance arrangements to attract stakeholders across the private, public and community sectors from both "reformer and radical camps" (Packer 2014, 1) – a feature that, for many, makes them important examples of food democracy (Bassarab et al. 2019; Boden and Hoover 2018; Candel 2022; Hassanein 2003).

Some FPNs do attempt to exercise "the power to convene and create deliberative spaces" (Clark et al. 2021, 187). In this context, the expression "good food" emerges as a particularly powerful descriptor of the intention to overcome sectoral interests and build collective agency in food system governance. There is a striking contrast between the vision of FPNs that utilise such descriptor in their names (i.e. Good Food Good Farming in the EU and Good Food Greater Manchester in the UK) and the experiences of FPNs that need to resort to two names in two different languages (e.g. Food Secure Canada) or exclude non-native terms (Bwyd Abertawe in Wales) in order to engage their targeted communities. Clearly, the notion of *collaboration*, which is often assumed to be an inherent feature of FPNs, needs to be more critically unpacked by future research in this area.

Another key finding of our research is that names (and associated agendas) do not sit in stone. Whereas being held to a name serves as an important reminder of key goals and processes (as illustrated by the quote from the Australian FPN Sustain), which are vital aspects of the "self-image" of an organisation (Gioia et al. 2013, 125), re-naming is often connected with another central feature of organisational identity: its self-reflexivity. As Gioia et al. (2013, 127) explain, a reflexive consideration of the existential question "who-are-we-as-an-organisation?" can motivate members to embrace change. In these cases, a shift in label makes the change in identity (and associated mission) more visible and obvious (as compared to, for example, changing the meanings associated with those labels), helping the organisation to achieve continuity over time (Gioia, Schultz, and Corley 2000).

In this respect, the stories we collected about name changes begin to build an innovative longitudinal perspective on FPNs, pointing to the unfolding of a dynamic history of identity and governance arrangements within the global food movement. As mentioned earlier, FPNs initially tend to select names that conform to dominant institutional or national types – such as "partnership" (in English-speaking countries) or "Ernährungsrat" (in German-speaking regions) – to align with the institutional context within which they are embedded (Gioia et al. 2013; Glynn and Abzug 2002) and gain an immediate *legitimacy*. This "symbolic isomorphism", however, is often confined to the initial phase. Over time, to consolidate their position and make their identity *distinctive* from other similar organisations (Gioia et al. 2013) most FPNs decide to re-name themselves. Our findings add nuance to organisational theory's approach to identity change, which is by and large connected with the notion of "gaps" – that is, a discrepancy between perceptions of "who we are" and "who we want to be" (Gioia et al. 2013, 141) – showing that, in

many cases, a change of name is part of a conscious effort to attract political attention or achieve more financial security. As our interview data show, formalisation efforts can entail adding to the FPN's name terms (such as "council" or "association") that are perceived to be signifiers of authority vis-à-vis government. Others pursue the same goal by dropping "soft" terms (such as "advisory") from their original name to make it more assertive, as in the case of Chicago. In both cases, our findings confirm Gioia et al. (2013)'s point about the importance of thinking about an organisation's identity in terms of "continuity", rather than "enduring"; indeed, most FPNs actively engage with external challenges by strategically re-positioning themselves through a shift in labels.

In general, as the case of the Chicago Food Policy Action Council well illustrates, formalisation is a key component of wider processes of empowerment through which FPNs attempt to play a more pro-active, rather than just reactive, role in the food system governance arena. Our examples show that this may involve a re-thinking of the relationship with government but also (as in the case of the Spanish and UK national FPNs) with scale – a dimension that has not received much empirical attention by organisational theory. Equally relevant from a history of identity perspective are the bold attempts made by some FPNs to disrupt existing siloes and connect food with other priorities (as illustrated by the examples of Fair Food Alliance and Fair Food Illawarra, Australia, Nourish Scotland, the Spanish Red de Municipios por la Agroecologia and the Denver Sustainable Food Policy Council), which signal the recent emergence of a wider and deeper food system transformation agenda within the global food movement.

From a broader theoretical perspective, our findings contribute to debates on networked governance and movement organisation by showing how naming operates as a subtle but consequential practice of "everyday governance" (Le Meur and Lund 2001). In the diversified world of FPNs, names do not merely denote structure or function; they *perform* governance by signalling legitimacy, boundary-making and alignment with dominant institutional or policy discourses. In this sense, naming can be understood as a governance act – a linguistic and symbolic choice that helps to mediate the tensions between grassroots mobilisation and institutional recognition while at the same time shaping the distribution of authority and visibility within a movement. There are important insights emerging here for organisational theorists, who have long been urged to turn their attention to identity processes at the collective level – "identity at the meta-level" (Gioia et al. 2013, 175).

Conclusions

This paper has gone beyond simply recognising *a* name; through this research, we have acknowledged the power of *many* names, which are used to connect communities, legitimise solidarity and, ultimately, wield power. The use of "FPN" as an umbrella term has enabled us to expand the analysis beyond the traditional model of "FPCs" and include other terms used in practice by similar networks. Empirically, an important implication of this analytic focus is the broadening of research on participatory governance to the Global South, which, as Guinto et al. (2024) have recently pointed out, has thus far remained under-explored in the literature.

Theoretically, our attention for the ways in which FPNs across the world choose, adapt and often rebrand their names has started to illuminate the diverse and dynamic needs,

formulations and aspirations of a key actor within the global food movement. As discussed, names tell rich stories about ongoing efforts by FPNs to represent a wide range of stakeholder groups. They also speak about different levels of formality and scalar strategies deployed to legitimise the organisation's role in food system governance. In all, the diversity in naming reflects broader strategies that are devised to either assert authority or emphasise grassroots engagement, highlighting the different ways in which FPNs navigate their relationships with government and other actors and, more broadly, the existence of nuanced and diverse participatory governance pathways and models. In this respect, our typology of FPN names offers an analytical lens to examine how discursive and organisational forms co-evolve within the global food movement – and, potentially, in other policy domains where civil society and state actors co-produce governance.

Future research will need to explore the implications of this plurality across regional and cultural contexts to begin to uncover the potential of FPNs to leverage their own diversity and coalesce into a more unified movement capable of realising a transformative "politics of the possible" (Blay-Palmer, Sonnino, and Custot 2016, 40; see also Ambrose, Siddiki, and Brady 2022). Investigating the real and potential linkages, flows and synergies between different types of FPNs could provide valuable insights into the global food movement's coherence and effectiveness. In other words: are certain organisational types, processes and positionalities more effective than others in initiating or sustaining transformative agendas for food systems? What are the real and potential linkages, flows and synergies between discursive, structural and constitutive powers across governance levels?

Before concluding, it is worth reflecting also on what names do not tell us – or, better, on who and what is excluded from being represented in a name. As mentioned earlier, it is striking in this respect that none of the FPNs' names we came across for this research explicitly acknowledges marginalised groups, be they peasants, homeless citizens, socio-economically deprived communities, ethnic minorities, migrants or refugees. There are important questions emerging here not just about representation, but also, importantly, about FPNs' capacity to embrace a progressive "place-based approach" (Sonnino and Milbourne 2022) that addresses power imbalances and gives visibility to the most powerless.

In conclusion, this study provides an invitation for researchers on participatory food system governance to broaden and deepen understanding of identity-forming processes and discursive power. As a starting point, it would be important to consider whether there are potential new names that could or should emerge within the global food movement to better reflect evolving goals and dynamics of different (and in some cases invisible) stakeholder groups. With food system transformation beginning to enter the global policy agenda, the answer to this question is far more than a purely theoretical exercise; it is a vital step towards the realisation of more just, inclusive and democratic food systems.

Notes

1. Our definition uses "policy" as a loose term, recognising that policy activities can be direct (when FPNs actively engage with formal legislative and regulatory activities) or indirect (e.g. problem identification, food education, etc.) (Dailey et al 2022).

2. In addition to "food policy networks", key search terms utilised included food policy assemblages; urban food policy; urban food strategies; community food system; translocal food governance; food policy council; food security policy; urban food policy; local food network; food innovation network; food safety policies; alternative food network; community food network; urban farming policy/network; urban agriculture policy/network; food waste policy/network; community supported agriculture policy/council/network; food + local environment policy/network/council; public procurement policy/network/council; fair trade policy/network/council; food sharing network/council; sustainable food policy/ network/ council; environmental food policy/council/network; ecological food policy/council/ network; and/or urban food regime.
3. Here a "city-region" refers to a city and its hinterland.

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