

## Scaling food systems transitions

Part of the Collection: Findings and Recommendations from the SHARED GREEN DEAL Social Experiments



June 2025

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### **Executive summary of recommendations**

The SHARED GREEN DEAL project aims to drive behavioural, social, and cultural change across Europe in alignment with the Green Deal. This report focuses on transforming industrial food systems that contribute to various crises, including hunger, poverty, obesity, environmental degradation, and biodiversity loss. Through 'experiments' in four different European regions, the study explores the potential of the transition management arena approach in finding pathways to more sustainable and just food systems. The arena approach is a collaborative, multi-actor process designed to develop transition narratives that link systemic challenges with local actions, fostering sustainability transitions.

Based on these experiments, our findings suggest the following recommendations:

#### 1. Take stock of local experiences and learn from them about existing institutional barriers

We recommend that EU and national policymakers take stock of the lessons from local initiatives to better understand and act upon the institutional barriers they face. These initiatives provide valuable insights into challenges like restrictive policies, funding gaps, and market conditions that hinder sustainable food systems. By learning from these experiences, policymakers can design more effective strategies to overcome these obstacles, creating a supportive environment for local initiatives and broader systemic change.

#### 2. Strengthen coordination across local initiatives and strengthen the lobbying positions of cross-local coordination initiatives

To maximise the impact of local initiatives, stronger cross-regional coordination and a unified lobbying voice are essential. Networks like European Coordination Via Campesina and the Slow Food Youth Network can amplify local efforts, advocating for policy changes at regional, national, and EU levels. Local actors often underestimate their ability to influence systemic change beyond their immediate contexts, but fostering trans-local networks can bolster their impact and equip them to engage more effectively with policymakers. Strengthening these connections can help overcome barriers and create a more favourable environment for sustainable and fair food systems.

#### 3. Invest in market conditions that favour local producers

Market conditions currently favour multinational corporations, leaving local producers at a disadvantage. Policies should be designed to support local, sustainable agriculture by promoting fair trade, offering financial incentives for agroecology, and ensuring that food procurement laws favour local over non-local suppliers. This would help local producers thrive and counter the dominance of industrial agriculture.

#### 4. Address structural barriers to healthy and sustainable food choices

Unhealthy food consumption is shaped not just by preferences and literacy, but also by affordability, marketing, and food availability. Structural factors like fast-food dominance, aggressive advertising, and procurement policies favouring large-scale producers limit healthy choices, especially in vulnerable communities. Policymakers should enhance food literacy while prioritising affordability and access to nutritious food. This includes revising procurement systems to support local, seasonal produce in canteens, addressing regulatory barriers to sustainable food initiatives, and extending advertising restrictions on unhealthy food.

For those applying the arena approach, we recommend giving equal importance to social activities and narrative-oriented exercises. Our findings highlight the strong sense of belonging and shared purpose that can emerge through social activities such as eating together. We suggest that future implementation of, and research related to, arena processes explicitly incorporates and assesses these social elements.

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## **1.** Introduction

#### 1.1. The SHARED GREEN DEAL project

This report presents findings on Sustainable Food as part of the Horizon 2020 project "Social sciences and Humanities for Achieving a Responsible, Equitable and Desirable Green Deal" (SHARED GREEN DEAL). The EU Green Deal is a programme of policies aimed at overcoming climate change and environmental degradation by transforming the EU into a modern, resource-efficient and competitive economy. The goal of SHARED GREEN DEAL is to stimulate behavioural, social and cultural change across Europe, aligned with the policy priorities of the Green Deal.

SHARED GREEN DEAL provides Social Sciences and Humanities (SSH) tools to support the implementation of the Green Deal programme. In the past, SSH research on green transitions has focussed on changes to either individuals ('micro' phenomena) or systems and collectives ('macro' phenomena). In contrast, SHARED GREEN DEAL focuses on 'middle range' ('meso') changes to bridge these two sets of understandings and priorities (Foulds et al., 2025). Using this innovative 'meso' approach, the project links societal actors to foster knowledge sharing, learn from collective experiences, and feed back into 'macro' policies and governance.

The SHARED GREEN DEAL consortium brings together 22 leading organisations from across Europe, including universities, research institutions, network organisations and businesses. The project is structured around six priority Green Deal topics: Clean Energy, Circular Economy, Efficient Renovations, Sustainable Mobility, Sustainable Food, and Preserving Biodiversity. Within these six themes, a total of 24 social experiments have been delivered across different EU member states and affiliated countries, working with local municipalities and not-for-profit organisations. Alongside this report on Sustainable Food, there are five further reports, on the other five priority Green Deal topics of the project. Other resources related to the running of and impacts from the social experiments can also be found via <u>www.sharedgreendeal.eu</u>.

#### **1.2. Food systems transition**

Current industrial food systems significantly contribute to various ecological, social, and economic crises (Anderson et al., 2021; Zurek et al. 2022). Within the current food system these crises manifest in hunger, poverty, and obesity, alongside the harmful environmental effects of industrial farming, overdependence on chemical fertilisers and pesticides, poor-quality (if not unsafe) food, environmental degradation, biodiversity loss, exploitative labour practices, animal welfare concerns, corporate dominance, and a lack of resilience (Giller et al., 2021).

Many types of more sustainable agriculture and ways to organise food systems have been sought in response, such as organic agriculture, agroecology (Wezel et al., 2009), fair trade, protein transition (Peeters et al., 2024; Bulah et al., 2024) and regenerative agriculture (Newton et al., 2020). Some of these alternatives can be considered established in the food system, with their own certification systems and market segments, while others remain niche-oriented and have not been able



to compete with the conventional ways of food provisioning. While there are many, diverse local initiatives, breakthroughs towards sustainable food systems are still lacking.

We see food systems as an example of sociotechnical systems, which means that we apply transitions thinking about sociotechnical systems to the food system. Establishing sustainable food systems is a *sustainability transition challenge* and entails dealing with complex dynamics of societal change. A sustainability transition can be defined as the process of radical change in a sociotechnical system that results in the fundamental change of its constituent practices, cultures, and structures. As a sociotechnical system, the food system is not solely about agriculture and food security, but also includes identity, culture, health, and well-being. Triggering sociotechnical transition thus goes beyond implementing single technological or social innovations, and includes challenging the persistent practices, cultures and structures that shape the current food system. In other words, food system transition initiatives should not only work towards their own immediate goals, but they should also consider, and even aim to change, wider societal elements; these elements include social norms and the policies and practices of institutions (Beers & Van Mierlo, 2017).

Transition management (Loorbach, 2010) is an approach of explorative transition governance that recognises the limitations of more 'traditional' governance approaches vis-a-vis sustainability challenges (Hebinck and Loorbach, 2025). It aims to address the complexity, non-linearity and uncertainty inherent in sustainability challenges by engaging people in a collective process of understanding, learning, visioning, and experimenting around specific societal transition challenges (Loorbach, 2010). This is called the arena approach. Transition management emphasises the importance of experimentation with innovative practices and advocates for an awareness of external developments and the potential opportunities and trade-offs that sustainability transitions present.

The transition management arena approach results in a *narrative* of change that creates direct and actionable connections between a group of innovators and the wider societal system (see section 1.5 for an explanation of narratives of change). In the SHARED GREEN DEAL food experiments, we applied the transition management arena approach with the aim of fostering transitions to sustainable and fair food systems with four local food initiatives. Our goal was to strengthen the transformative potential of these initiatives to foster the transformation towards just and sustainable local food systems, based on the critical reflection and co-creation of food transition narratives in relation to specific regional contexts, and to better understand the barriers for food system sustainability transitions.

Our research was guided by two main questions:

- 1. How can we foster food system transitions to sustainable agriculture?
- 2. What are the benefits of the transition arena approach to transition governance for fostering food system transitions to sustainable agriculture?

In this context, this report on the experiences of four local initiatives implementing the transition arena approach over a period of a year, analysing their challenges, strategies, and outcomes to identify key lessons for policy and governance in sustainable food systems.



## 1.3. Food systems transition challenges: the policy context

The transition to sustainable agriculture on the regional scale faces multiple challenges across the food system. There are important policies at the European scale that attempt to respond to such challenges. For example, the European Green Deal sets out to achieve carbon neutrality in Europe by 2050 and with its various policy strategies aims at reducing carbon emissions by 50-55% (compared to 1990s) by 2030. Food and agriculture are a core part of these efforts of climate change mitigation and biodiversity protection, namely through the Green Deal's Farm to Fork Strategy (F2F). F2F was launched in May 2020, and aims to promote the transition to fair, healthy and environmentally sustainable food systems. Its key targets for 2030 include a commitment to reach at least 25% of agricultural land under organic farming, cut pesticide use by 50%, and reduce fertiliser use by 20% (European Commission, 2020).

It is important to emphasise the new Common Agricultural Policy (CAP) for the period 2023-2027, which sets out ten fundamental objectives that are closely aligned with the European Green Deal and the EU's sustainability ambitions for agriculture and rural development (Boix-Fayos and Vente, 2023).

However, despite the EU aims for sustainability through all these policies it still favours the current system, where large-scale, industrial farming benefits from subsidies, and real transformations are not taking off. The policies largely maintain the status quo, lacking instrumentation that fosters the food system transition. Additionally, conflicting land uses, and nature conservation policies hinder the integration of sustainable farming practices and local and small-scale farmers face challenges competing with larger producers. The challenges extend beyond farming, affecting everyday life through health inequalities and unhealthy food environments. Many food choices are based on convenience and price (IPES-Food, 2016) over nutrition, with advertising reinforcing these choices. Urban design, including fast-food outlets and limited access to fresh produce, shapes food choices, especially in marginalised communities. School and company meals often lack seasonality, locality and sustainability. The high cost of organic food and issues of food waste further complicate matters.

While there is a desire for long-term solutions, the temptation for quick-fix measures (IPES-Food, 2016) often leads to approaches that are unsustainable in the long run. Moreover, the emphasis on tech-based solutions has overshadowed discussions on the role of alternative, innovative approaches as food system transition pathways, which are more locally grounded and better suited to the scale of small-scale farmers (Nightingale et al., 2020). A profound shift is needed in how we produce, consume, market, and distribute food to build a more sustainable and equitable food system.

Addressing these challenges requires more than simply mitigating the symptoms through sustainable innovations within the current system. A fundamental transition is needed to create a food system that is not just 'less harmful' but 'net positive' for the health of people, animals, and the planet. This necessitates adopting a systems perspective to explore behavioural patterns, structural dynamics, and cultural values that shape our food systems.



#### 1.4. Agroecology as a food system transition pathway

Sustainability transitions do not have clear-cut solution trajectories. Rather, multiple, different pathways of promising change may co-exist and mutually reinforce each other over longer time periods, such as organic agriculture, or regenerative practices which focus on building soil health. Agroecology is one such promising transition pathway for food system transition. Agroecology has been put forward as a transition pathway in the debates regarding the future of food and farming; agroecology includes both the application of ecological principles to agriculture as well as the social, cultural, and political perspectives that explore the dynamics of the food system (Wezel et al., 2009). As a social movement, agroecology enhances justice, relationships, access, resilience, resistance, and sustainability (Gliessman, 2013). This holistic approach seeks to address the entire food system, from soil health to societal organisation, and is rooted in core values that prioritise participatory methods and the integration of diverse knowledge systems (Migliorini and Wezel, 2017). This report will refer to the term agroecology as defined by Wezel et al. (2009) with its three constitutive elements: a movement, a scientific discipline, and a set of practices.

What could a future food system look like, if an agroecological transition pathway would further develop? Concepts informing future food systems include solidarity economies (Gaiger, 2017) such as shared kitchens, seed-sharing, models of Community Supported Agriculture (CSA), and other forms of collective ownership and working of land (Carolan, 2018). Returning food and agriculture to the commons and removing food from the market economy are other ideas that inform food visions with an agroecological perspective (Bollier & Helfrich, 2019; Vivero-Pol, Ferrando, De Schutter & Mattei, 2018). For some communities, including some indigenous communities, agroecology relates to ideas about sustaining life on our planet, emphasising harmony and interdependence with nature, reciprocity, sufficiency, gratitude, the sacredness of Mother Earth, and respecting knowledge systems beyond science (see Wall Kimmerer, 2014, for further exploration of these ideas).

Within peasant movements like La Via Campesina, food sovereignty is central to the vision of agroecology. Based on the Nyéléni Declaration in 2007, this vision prioritises the right to healthy, culturally appropriate food, supports food providers, localises food systems, and places control of resources in local hands. It emphasises building local knowledge, working with nature, and rejecting practices that commodify food or harm ecosystems (La Via Campesina, 2018). In Europe, food sovereignty aims to create sustainable farming models that support farmers, ensure quality food, counter harmful trade policies, and prioritise agroecology while challenging corporate dominance (La Via Campesina, 2018). The organisation European Coordination Via Campesina sees agroecology as a holistic approach to food production, fostering peasant autonomy, biodiversity, traditional knowledge, community, and social struggle, while opposing industrial agriculture and promoting sustainable, locally adapted practices (ECVC, 2014). A similar approach to agroecology is promoted by the movement of Slow Food, for which agroecology re-establishes the relationship between culture and nature, human beings, animals and landscape by strengthening the physical and cognitive connections between producers, retailers, consumers, and the environment (Slow Food, 2024).



#### 1.5. The narrative as analytical lens

Many people, initiatives, and organisations strive to enable change towards more sustainable and just societies. They do so based on ideas of what transformation entails and underlying ideas of how change unfolds. These underlying ideas and theories of transformation are called 'narratives of change' and are key to informing and shaping transformative action (Wittmayer et al., 2019).

Used to collectively make sense of, negotiate, and shape reality, narratives of change are at the core of the identity of social groups, innovations, or initiatives. We can recognise these narratives in the stories, symbols and other traditions of communication that groups of people use to communicate with other and how they speak about and further develop their ideas of desired change (Davies, 2002). Multiple, different narratives can co-exist, based on different personal experiences, contexts and underlying values (Wittmayer et al., 2019).

Narratives of change that challenge the dominant system can become a precursor for transformative change (Janssen et al., 2022). That is why narratives are important for transitions. And as transitions develop, distinct local narratives may become increasingly aligned and have an accelerating effect on sustainability transitions. Through the spread and translation of these narratives of change by niche actors, certain transition pathways gain legitimacy and put pressure on the status quo (Janssen et al., 2022). This means that narratives can be precursors to transformative change.

We examine whether local food initiatives can drive food system transitions (or at least lay groundwork for this) by creating and operationalising narratives of change. Building on Wittmayer et al. (2019) we understand narratives of change to include: "a *rationale* (problem description and desired future), relevant *actors* (those working towards, those opposing or counteracting and those ignorant of the desired future) and a *plot* (the contextualised activities and developments leading to the desired future." (Wittmayer et al.; 2019, p.3).

In this study, combining this concept of narratives of change with the transition management approach, four different food system transition initiatives generated their own 'transition narratives' (explained further in section 2.1, Box 1). By investigating how four different food system initiatives approach, negotiate, and conceptualise the different components that make up a narrative of change, we can explore to what extent narratives of change can be a precursor to transformative change and whether they can foster food system transitions.

The rest of the report is structured as follows: Section 2 outlines the social experiment, detailing the arena approach, cases and procedural steps, data collection and analysis. Section 3 discusses the transition narratives generated, including key challenges, future images, transition dynamics and participants' experiences. Section 4 presents key lessons and policy recommendations for promoting food system transitions and improving governance. Finally, section 5 concludes with a summary of findings and recommendations for strengthening local food systems and promoting systemic change.

## 2. The social experiments

#### **2.1.** The arena approach

The transition management arena approach (hereafter: the arena approach) functions as a collaborative process for developing a transition narrative, shaping shared future visions and a common understanding of sustainability transitions. The 'transition arena' is a multi-actor co-creative setting that brings diverse societal actors together to explore and create actionable, transformative insights to accelerate sustainability transitions. The arena approach builds on sustainability transitions theory, but also has a practical aspect and is intended to empower and facilitate individuals and groups of people to co-create a transition agenda and develop a common language.

The arena approach involves a series of meetings that lead to the emergence of a 'transition narrative', linking systemic challenges (macro) with local actors, initiatives and action (micro). The different meetings are dedicated to the development of parts of the transition narrative, for instance, with one meeting dedicated to problem analysis and analysis of transition dynamics, and another dedicated to deriving concrete opportunities for action.

#### **Box 1. Transition narratives**

In this research, we use a specific definition of a 'transition narrative' which includes five components: (1) transition challenges, (2) future images, (3) transition dynamics, (4) transition pathways, and (5) transition agendas. Through our analysis, we examine how local food initiatives identify and engage with these components, shaping their understanding of the broader transition process to foster transformative change.

The multi-actor orientation of the arena is key: all participants bring diverse insights on how the system operates to the table, enriching the understanding of how the complex system operates, allowing for a mutual understanding to surface. However - when it comes to participant selection - transition management applies selective engagement, focusing on frontrunners and innovative actors to form a 'coalition of the willing.' These pioneers help shape the radical new narratives, strategies, and initiatives that are needed to accelerate systemic change. While inclusivity is valued, transition management prioritises the willing and those that can act, ensuring momentum and actionable progress.

In sum, the arena approach serves to generate the transition narratives that we study as the meso unit of analysis in the Food Stream of the SHARED GREEN DEAL project – see Box 1 'Transition narratives'.

SHARED GREEN



#### 2.2. Procedure

In 2023, the SHARED GREEN DEAL consortium launched a call offering local and regional authorities and not-for-profit organisations across Europe the opportunity to run year-long social experiments. For the Sustainable Food experiment stream, we received 85 applications for four spaces. The selected initiatives each represent the local food systems in their own specific way:

- ASFODELO (Associazione Fondiaria Difesa Ecologica Locale), from Cella Monte (Italy) is an initiative that wants to reduce pesticide use by engaging with local food producers and farmers;
- Klima t'a Potrebuje, from Kosiçe (Slovakia) is an initiative that wants to connect local farmers and healthy food through localising food procurement in schools;
- **Reformaten, from Stockholm (Sweden)** is an initiative that wants to make the right food choices easy to make;
- **Streekwaar / Municipality of Wageningen (The Netherlands)** is an initiative to strengthen an agroecological bioregion around the city of Wageningen.

Under our direction, each initiative carried out their own transition arena approach, with their own facilitators and resources. The initiatives had agreed to host and facilitate a transition arena process of three assemblies (meetings that are part of the initiatives' arena approaches). Each assembly was devoted to specific elements of creating a transition narrative and associated questions (see Figure 2.2)



Figure 2.2. Applying the transition arena approach.

For some of these steps we suggested specific methods and tools to be used. For instance, for Assembly 1 we supplied the initiatives with a tool called the X-curve framework (Hebinck et al., 2022), which is intended to analyse transition dynamics. For Assembly 2, we advocated a back-casting approach (Quist et al., 2011), that is, beginning with future images and then deriving a transition pathway by reasoning back to the present. For the other process steps we did not supply specific tools or instruments.

To ensure a common base of departure and set of working methods, we closely supported each of the initiatives in carrying out their arena approach, while keeping sufficient space for their own considerations. We gave a face-to-face one-day training about the basics of transition management and the arena approach with an additional social programme for representatives of each of the initiatives. In advance of every arena approach assembly, we prepared a written document with that assembly meeting's intended purpose as well as suggested meeting scripts and associated methods and activities. We held periodic meetings with the initiatives to give additional support for organising their arena assemblies. In other respects, initiatives were invited to conduct their assemblies the way they saw fit, for instance with adding purely social programme elements, choice and flavour of location, duration of the meetings and specific exercises to foster the generation of the local narrative. Streekwaar, for instance, added elements of local story telling and local history, and many initiatives used shared eating as a communal activity.

All four sites conducted the three assemblies of the arena approach but with different lengths of time between the first and third event (2 months in Slovakia, 6 months in Italy and Sweden, and 8 months in the Netherlands).

Additionally, we organised a final online event in which all four local initiatives participated and invited their most active assembly participants. In this online event they presented their transition agenda plans and shared their learnings about the arena approach. Finally, all initiatives organised their own local closing events with their assemblies' participants and newfound local networks (e.g. a community dinner was set up by the Slovakian partner).

We helped the initiatives prepare their arena process by assisting them with actor analysis and participant selection. We suggested to invite a diverse range of participants in terms of age<sup>1</sup> and gender<sup>2</sup> and in terms of perspective and role (e.g. farmer, policymaker, environmental organisation). Finally, we advised the initiatives to keep their own goals in mind while inviting participants. Table 2.2 shows the number, gender and age of participants in the assemblies across all sites.

	ASFODELO (Italy)			Klima	Klima t'a Potr	Klima t'a Potrebuje (Slo		
	Total	Men	Women	Aged 18-35		Total	Total Men	Total Men Women
Assembly 1	12	8 67%	4 33%	7 58%	Assembly 1	Assembly 1 9	Assembly 1 9 1 11%	Assembly 1 9 1 8 11% 89%
Assembly 2	18	13 72%	5 28%	13 72%	Assembly 2	Assembly 2 8	Assembly 2 8 1 13%	Assembly 2 8 1 7 13% 88%
Assembly 3	17	11 65%	6 35%	10 59%	Assembly 3	Assembly 3 8	Assembly 3 8 2 25%	Assembly 3 8 2 6 25% 75%

Table 2.2. Number of men, women and 18-35 year olds participating in the assemblies across the four sites.

Aged

18-35 6

67%

63%

75%

<sup>1</sup> Involvement of 18-35 year olds was a priority within this experiment stream, but is not a main focus for this report.

When collecting data on participants' genders, we asked them to self-identify. We report genders using the terms "man", 2 "woman" and "non-binary", in accordance with World Health Organisation guidance on sex and gender terminology. See: https://www.who.int/health-topics/gender

	Reformaten (Sweden)				
	Total	Men	Women	Aged 18-35	
Accombly 1	10	10	3	6	
Assembly I	15	77%	23%	46%	
Assembly 0	19	9	10	14	
Assembly 2		47%	53%	74%	
A	21	10	11	8	
Assembly 3		48%	52%	38%	

		Streekwaar (Netherlands)				
		Total	Men	Women	Aged 18-35	
		<b>F</b> 4	26	28	15	
ASS	Assembly I	54	48%	52%	28%	
Assembly 2 Assembly 3	60	30	38	19		
	Assembly 2	68	44%	56%	28%	
	A ag aga h ha Q	28	15	13	11	
	Assembly 3		54%	46%	39%	



(a) Asfodelo's first assembly and the X curve.
(b) Klima t'a potrebuje's community dinner.
(c) Reformaten's second assembly.
(d) Wageningen community lunch.









#### 2.3. Data collection

We collected two sets of data from each initiative which are used in this report: 1) A set of field notes describing the proceedings of each of the assemblies; and 2) A set of post-hoc interviews with 10 arena participants per initiative (see Appendix for more details).

For the field notes, we prepared a field note template specific for each of the assemblies, so that the proceedings would be captured relatively completely and succinctly. In so doing, we ensured that the combined field notes for one initiative provided a faithful representation of the narrative that emerged throughout the arena process.

In that sense, each initiative's collection of field notes served as an embodiment of its transition narrative. To support this, we pre-structured the field notes so that, for instance, the first assembly field note would include the transition dynamics mentioned during the first assembly meeting.

The participant interviews were focused on the arena process itself (the steps of the arena approach, the methods and the facilitation) and the outcomes of the arena process, in terms of lessons learned and local empowerment.

#### 2.4. Analysis

We used the field note data to analyse the narratives and we used the interview data to analyse the arena process. The field notes were analysed using a semi-open coding approach using four elements of the transition narrative as main codes, that is, sustainability / transition challenge, future images, transition dynamics, and transition agenda (actions). Since each initiative resulted in one overarching pathway, we did not need to analyse multiple pathways per experiment. Through this analysis, we could characterise each initiative's narrative. As a second step, we analysed whether specific parts of the narrative played out at a local level or beyond, that is, at regional, national or even international levels. We did this for two reasons: first, we wanted to know to what extent the initiatives had considered their wider systemic context, and second, we wanted to know whether specific actions on the initiative' transition agendas were focused on effecting local change, including change within the initiative, or change in the wider systemic context. We treated actions on the transition agenda as 'transformative' when it was clear that they were related to other parts of the narrative, such as transition dynamics, future images, or the sustainability challenge.

The analysis of the interviews used a semi-open coding approach to analyse the arena process. We were interested both in how the process gave rise to the narrative, and how it affected the participants. For the former, we analysed how participant had experienced the process in terms of how knowledge was co-created and how it was facilitated. We included the methods that were used in the arena process in our analysis as well. With regard to how the process affected the participants, we analysed the interview data from the perspective of empowerment and capacity building (cf. Avelino et al., 2019; Thomas & Velthouse, 1990; Ryan & Desi, 2000).

When quoting from our interview transcripts, we use a reference code to protect participant identities, including a country code (SE for Sweden, SK for Slovakia, IT for Italy and NL for Netherlands). Each interview has been allocated a number, with this acting as a unique marker for each participant in that location. We have also chosen to include the participant's gender and age group, as these are important characteristics for us in contextualising our data and claims. Where we quote from field notes, we give a field note number and the organisation's name and country code.

#### SHARED GREEN DEAL

## **3.** Transformations through sustainable food narratives

This section explores the transition narratives (made up of challenges, future images, transition dynamics, pathways and agendas) within the four initiatives, and has four sub-sections. First (in section 3.1), we outline the key transition challenges, highlighting socio-economic and environmental barriers, including systemic policy conflicts, consumption patterns, and social inequalities. Next (in section 3.2), we address the future images developed in the assemblies, emphasising themes such as community engagement, economic resilience for local producers, and the importance of education and consumer awareness. Then (in section 3.3) we examine the transition dynamics and transition agenda, analysing enabling factors, barriers, and the nature of actions taken at local and translocal levels. Together, all these elements describe the transition narratives, which are summarised in section 3.4. The final section (3.5) encompasses participants' experiences with the transition arena approach, focusing on co-creation, facilitation, lessons learned, and the impact on empowerment and capacity building, which is based on the data from the interviews.

#### **3.1. Transition challenges identified within the initiatives**

Every food initiative appeared to share similar transition challenges towards just and sustainable food systems, echoing those described in the introduction (section 1.2), albeit each in their own way, with every initiative stressing both socio-economic, sociotechnical and environmental challenges.

All initiatives mentioned systemic policy conflicts. The field notes from StreekWaar mentioned challenges related to high land prices and how independent land-use policies conflict with nature conservation laws. Reformaten's field notes mentioned struggling with the lack of policies on advertising and the region's unhealthy and unsustainable food environment embedded in the city locked-in sociotechnical arrangements of food provision (e.g. shops and restaurants that sell food with excess salt, sugar and fats sourced from environmentally damaging food system production systems). For the Klima t'a Potrebuje arena, the existing centralised procurement system favours large-scale producers, and the ASFODELO Arena stressed that local authorities encounter legal obstacles for sustainable initiatives.

Some systemic barriers are connected to policies while others concern ingrained norms, values, and behaviours. Reformaten's assembly discussions focused on deeply rooted unhealthy consumer behaviours. The Klima t'a Potrebuje case discussed a declining student interest in agriculture and gastronomy, and the ASFODELO initiative mentioned a general sense of pessimism about the possibility of driving substantial change, with conventional farmers perceived as resistant to accepting new approaches. These issues are deeply embedded in the sociotechnical evolution of food systems and reflect the entrenched prioritisation of large-scale practices over more sustainable, localised alternatives, making it hard to effect meaningful change.

Challenges related to consumption patterns, for example eating as quickly, easily and cheaply as possible, are a concern in the cases of Reformaten, Klima t'a Potrebuje and ASFODELO, where local food habits are perceived as unhealthy and environmentally unsustainable. Additionally, both the

Reformaten and Klima t'a Potrebuje cases highlighted challenges within school canteens, particularly related to food quality and sustainability. The StreekWaar and ASFODELO initiatives both addressed farm-level issues, such as soil degradation due to pesticide overuse and unsuccessful application of national agricultural policies on the regional scale.

"For schools, it is very complicated to search for a local farmer who can supply their school canteens. Even if they would decide to change the way they purchase food for the canteen, they would have a problem to identify which farmers they can ask..." [Field note 3, Klima t'a Potrebuje, SK]

All initiatives mentioned challenges related to inequality and injustice. Field notes from the Streekwaar initiative mentioned how systemic barriers and conflicting policies create inequalities for organic farmers, and young farmers in particular, by hindering their ability to adopt sustainable practices and enter the agricultural sector. Reformaten highlighted how health inequalities and a sociotechnical environment promoting unhealthy food choices disproportionately affect marginalised communities, especially children, making it harder for them to access nutritious options and develop healthy eating habits. Field notes from Klima t'a Potrebuje mentioned under-appreciation and underpayment of school canteen staff. ASFODELO participants mentioned the lack of rules and regulations to properly manage funding for agriculture, and that some farmers use dishonest methods to get money. All initiatives mentioned how this is complicating and hindering the transition to sustainable and just food systems. Across all contexts, a shared emphasis on the need for long-term solutions to overcome these barriers was found.

#### **3.2. Future images of the initiatives**

Various common themes emerged among the images of desired futures that were created by the four initiatives. First, all initiatives value community formation and local engagement. For example, StreekWaar's arena mentioned a shared community identity and collective responsibility for the environment, and Reformaten reported that their participants want a future where community well-being is prioritised, with caring citizenship within food communities.

A second feature common to all initiatives' future images is economic resilience for local producers. For example, Klima t'a Potrebuje's participants mentioned partnerships and an online platform that connect local producers and public canteens to facilitate food distribution and reduce administrative burdens. Meanwhile, ASFODELO mentioned safeguarding systems provided by public institutions or insurance companies, coordination among small farmers to help stabilise food prices, and having more places for farmer-to-consumer sales. One of their field notes highlighted this future image:

"Repopulation of farmed areas: there will be incentives to move out from the cities back to farmed areas. Farmed areas will be not only areas where the food is produced but they will be seen and cared for as a place where to live with high life-quality-standard, communities where people know each other and care for the land and nature around them. Abandoned buildings will be redeveloped and live again." [Field note 2, ASFODELO, IT]

Third, all initiatives took a broad perspective on future food systems, mentioning that they need to be accessible, healthy, and restoring / preserving biodiversity. Fourth, all initiatives mentioned the importance and opportunity of education, the role of schools and general consumer awareness.

Notably, these four themes all represent main agroecological principles and future images (ECVC, 2014). So, although the four local initiatives were not selected based on them seeing agroecology

as a food system transition pathway, all initiatives do represent agroecological principles in their future images and the StreekWaar and ASFODELO initiatives also used the term agroecology.

All initiatives have their own specific points of attention, and this also become clear within their future images. The focus of StreekWaar is on the deep connection between people and land, promoting a regional identity, with emphasis on sustainable living guided by diverse knowledge, flourishing young farmers, shared rituals, and preserving wilderness, as indicated in this future image:

"Many young farmers in the region have access to land and are flourishing." [Field note 3, StreekWaar, NL]

The Reformaten initiative has a strong urban dimension, with innovations like Neighbourhood Kitchens and a Food Environment Mayor, reflecting an organised, city-wide and food environment approach. It also incorporates reversing environmental degradation, such as restoring marine life. Klima t'a Potrebuje's future image centred around the school food system, aiming for locally sourced meals, waste reduction, and educational initiatives to foster a prestigious view of farming and agriculture among students. The ASFODELO case highlighted consumer awareness of product origins and the environmental and health impacts, the return to rural living, and the adoption of agroecological practices. In other words, the four cases shared common agroecological principles, but expressed these according to their specific local contexts, reflecting a holistic approach to reimagining food systems that are sustainable, equitable, and sensitive to local cultural and ecological landscapes.

#### **3.3.Transition dynamics and transition agenda**

The theme of transition dynamics asks questions such as: How is the 'state of transition' of the current system featured in the narrative? To what extent are elements of the future images already embedded in the current system? Meanwhile, the transition agenda theme asks: What concrete and actionable steps are linked to the narrative? What activities can (a combination of) groups of people implement to accelerate the food system transition?

Several transition dynamics and actions for a transition agenda emerged from the analysis of the four initiatives. We first consider the transition dynamics for each initiative, looking at 'enabling dynamics' and 'transition barriers', which can be identified at both the local and beyond-local level.

Various enabling dynamics and transition barriers were identified during the experiments, both at the local level and beyond. Reformaten appears to have focussed more at the beyond-local level, for example bringing up the potential enabler of tighter regulation of food advertising and improving current food labelling:

"Extend the Traffic Board's decision to ban advertising of online casinos and fossil fuel products to include empty calories and non-nutritious or harmful food." [Field note 4, Reformaten, SE]

An example of a local-level enabler from the Klima t'a Potrebuje initiative is the model farm (Agrokruhy) that supplies vegetables to the Pribeník Secondary School canteen. From Streekwaar, a local-level barrier is the disappearance of the artisanal processing sector, like malt houses, bakeries, and mills from the region due to scale enlargement and specialisation. An example of a transition barrier beyond the local level in the ASFODELO initiative is the dominance of the agro-industrial model and large corporations that prioritise monoculture practices which challenge efforts to implement change.

Turning now to the desirable actions that were formulated by each initiative, we separate these into three different levels: 1) local actions within the initiative; 2) local actions directed at the local context; and 3) actions beyond the local level. We understand the latter two levels as being of a transformative nature.

With regard to the transition agenda and the formulated actions, all but one actions identified were directed at the local context. The field note data suggests that some of these actions were focused on the initiative itself, meaning that they were not intended to have a broader (transformative) impact at the present time. Examples from StreekWaar include 1) an initiative to create a manifesto that clarifies the Streekwaar community; 2) having more frequent follow-up meetings; and 3) collaboratively documenting and sharing the journey of the group. However, the majority of actions seems to be directed at changing the initiatives' local contexts. An example of such an action from Reformaten was for the city of Stockholm to support finding land and starting up cultivation for a neighbourhood kitchen. We see this as an example of transformative action, because it originates from within the initiative, but its impact goes beyond the initiative itself and its direct members.

We found only one transformative action that addressed the beyond-local level. From the Klima t'a Potrebuje case, this was an action for making school canteen policy a national matter at the Ministry of Education and advocating for the creation of a state action plan for renovating and building school canteens, which should include statewide standards, recommended facilities, timeline, starter package for schools, manual, testing phase, field trips, etc. What stands out is that although many beyond-local level enablers and barriers were identified by the initiatives, the developed actions concern mostly the local level. The initiatives were successful in identifying wide-scale transition dynamics; however, the agendas that they developed addressed mainly their own local contexts.

#### **3.4. Transition pathways and narratives**

As noted above, transition pathways refer to the combination of initiatives and social/technical innovations that can address the transition dynamics and provide a 'solution space' for the transition challenge, linking to desired future images. While we did not conduct an exhaustive analysis of transition pathways, one key observation is that nearly all actions formulated by the initiatives are directly linked to their future images: the initiatives did envision pathways of action targeted toward their desired futures.

However, we also concluded that the actions remained focused on the scale of the initiative or its immediate local context, whereas the future images extended beyond the local level. This suggests that while the initiatives are actively working toward their envisioned transitions, their pathways remain largely confined to localised efforts. As a result, the transition pathway reflected in their actions is relatively narrow, lacking diversification or connections to broader systemic changes. This indicates that the initiatives may need to engage with actors beyond their immediate contexts to bridge the gap between local action and larger-scale transformation.

Table 3.4 summarises the common elements of the transition narratives across the four initiatives, providing an overview of the key themes identified in relation to transition challenge, future images, transition dynamics, transition pathways, and transition agendas. It offers insights into the overarching trends, shared perspectives and focus areas of the initiatives within the transition process.

Table 3.4. Common elements within transition narratives across the four initiatives.

Transition challenge	The transition challenges of the initiatives all mentioned systemic policy conflicts, entrenched norms, and values in food systems that prioritise large-scale practices over sustainable, localised alternatives, making change difficult. Additionally, challenges related to inequality and justice hinder the transition to sustainable and just food systems.
Future images	The future images highlight the importance of community formation and local engagement, economic resilience for local producers, and a broad perspective on future food systems that are accessible, healthy, and restore biodiversity. Education, particularly through schools, and increased consumer awareness play key roles in shaping these sustainable food systems.
Transition dynamics	The initiatives identified more transition enablers than transition barriers. Most transition dynamics were identified beyond the local level.
Transition pathway	Although nearly all actions of the four initiatives align with their future images, they lack broader systemic connections. The results suggest that while the initiatives are actively working toward their envisioned futures, their transition pathways remain mostly localised.
Transition agenda	All but one action that were formulated for the transition agenda were directed at the local context, so focusing on the initiative itself but mostly on the initiative's local context.

#### 3.5. Experiences with the arena process

In this subsection we discuss how the transition arena approach was experienced by participants of the arena assemblies, using the data from the interviews, to give an insight into the benefits of the transition arena approach to transition governance for fostering food system transitions to sustainable agriculture.

#### **Co-creation of the narrative**

The interview data suggest that participants appreciated the broad perspective of the process, considering not only their individual sector barriers but also the landscape, environment, and larger interconnected issues. Realising the interconnectedness of themes like farming, education, health, and the environment was seen as beneficial. Interviewees mentioned experiencing this breadth and interconnectedness as a shift in, or rather broadening of, their own perspective and that it opened their minds and left a lasting impact. Interviewees additionally valued the collaborative nature of the process, allowing for shared knowledge building and co-creation. Indeed, in our arena approach training to the initiatives we had mentioned the importance of inviting participants to voice different viewpoints where applicable and not force consensus. These results suggest that initiatives took efforts to put these suggestions in practice.

Interviewees mentioned seeing co-creation as a key opportunity and something they would take forward to apply in other contexts. The sessions and assignments were appreciated for not

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feeling like typical meetings or dry tasks; they were designed to be more creative and inspiring. Interviewees liked the structure and build-up of the meetings with a variety of group and plenary sessions, and having time for content-sharing and more individual connections. These results underscore the co-creative nature of the arena approach, and they speak to the coherence of the different elements of the narratives.

"Part of what I like about Reformaten in general too [is] that you talk about transition on a large scale - even if it feels difficult sometimes, it is what we need, and to meet people from different silos." [SE05, Woman, 40-49]

Interviewees found the applied methods and tools, such as backcasting and the X-curve, useful and enjoyed working with them. Some mentioned they might use some of the tools and methods themselves in the future, especially the visioning and backcasting methods. These were seen as a turning point that created valuable outcomes, using creativity and out-of-the-box thinking that improved group dynamics. Interviewees emphasised the importance of the process culminating in actionable and tangible outputs that eventually can be implemented: this made the process feel purposeful and impactful which motivated the participants. These results highlight that the content of the approach was appreciated, but they also show that the approach itself had important social outcomes.

According to the interview data, the arena process was seen as adaptable and could be effectively applied to other countries and regions within the EU (albeit with recognition of obstacles, such as bureaucracy and regulations). The data also highlighted more generic factors contributing to the success and impact of arena processes, including: bottom-up approaches, involving diverse stake-holders, building on existing practices, establishing better communication, developing collaborations, and support from policymakers and authorities.

#### **Facilitation**

With regard to facilitation and interpersonal communication, within the experiments multiple perspectives needed to be dealt with, due to the variety of stakeholders present. Interviewees recognised diversity among the arena participants in terms of roles / positions in the food system as well as expertise, age and gender. However, interviewees also reported little ethnic, socio-economic and educational background diversity. Overall, interviewees sensed that most participants held rather similar views of the food system, its underlying issues and promising future developments. In other words, the arena approach fostered diversity, but within bounds. This similarity of views was seen as both positive and negative: positive, because starting from a similar base, participants were able to get further, and negative in the sense that more diverse stakeholders and perspectives could have created a more inclusive process and outcomes.

Some interviewees mentioned challenges with group dynamics and power differences based on gender and status, mostly related to age and experience, however interviewees also mentioned that tensions were solved through facilitation techniques as much as possible. Most initiatives included elements of eating together and sharing food. The interviewees enjoyed these informal (food) settings that contributed to connecting to the topic and being able to learn from and network and collaborate with each other. All initiatives used their own discretion to flavour the arena process, with Streekwaar, for instance, adding elements of local story telling and recounting of 5,000 years of local history.

Interviewees experienced a lot of space for interpersonal communication and communication, was experienced as open-minded and with freedom of expression. Overwhelmingly, interviewees reported that they experienced a sense of equality, respect and an inclusive atmosphere within



the group in which everyone had a chance to speak. Interviewees emphasised the quality of the facilitation, noting that having facilitators from the region was crucial for the process, as their local knowledge enhanced the experience. These results again underscore the importance of the social and content-based parts of the arena approach.

"It was organised in such a way that the enthusiasm between people was always strengthened. The organisation and the programme were also very strong. And they were set up in such a way that they were not very dry assignments, but that it was very much an incentive to think and dream." [NL01, Woman, 20-29]

#### Interviewees' lessons learnt

We identified lessons learnt by the interviewees, from learnings on food systems to more personal learnings. A recurring theme was the importance of the role of local communities in agriculture and the interviewee's own role, as a consumer, producer, policymaker, or inhabitant of the region, in their local community. Many gained a deeper appreciation for local food systems, acknowl-edging all the work that is already been done. The interviewees mentioned that they learned how a multisectoral approach is needed to transform food systems and that they need collaboration with policymakers and supporting policy tools. All initiatives found that there is a need to increase awareness of the above points as well.

"It changed my way of thinking about Stockholm as a more progressive city than I would have expected. Better suited for radical experiments than I have thought before... I saw a lot of hard work being taken on and yeah, maybe I would never expect so many people to show up" [SE04, Man, 30-39]

A strong take-home message for the interviewees was the deepened sense of regional identity and awareness, where interviewees realised that they are part of their community, they value this and want to stay involved in the region. The interviewees also discussed the relationships they built through shared experiences in the experiment, such as eating together, as noted above, which reinforced the importance of personal interactions and meaningful engagement. They emphasised the value of creating shared moments, exchanging stories, and incorporating art (e.g. story tell-ing) into the process, as it engaged multiple senses and deepened their connection to the arena process as a shared experience.

Beyond content and community connections, interviewees noted personal growth, such as improved listening skills and a greater openness to hearing other perspectives. The importance of diversity and social justice become more pronounced, with interviewees expressing that the experience deepened their understanding of justice and motivated them to consider these factors more in their own work. The interviewees emphasised a shift toward long-term sustainable solutions rather than short-term changes, with a greater focus on a bottom-up approach. They recognised that meaningful change often starts at the grassroots level, highlighting the importance of creating a lasting impact that future generations can build upon. This requires a holistic, interconnected perspective to effectively address these complex issues.

#### Empowerment and capacity building

We explored the extent to which interviewees reported being able to contribute to the process. Interviewees expressed a range of experiences and perspectives regarding their involvement in the assembly meetings. In general, interviewees valued the opportunity to share their own expertise and learn from others, feeling it was mutually beneficial. Skilled leadership and facilitation created a secure environment, making interviewees generally feel safe and encouraged to express their thoughts during the assembly.

The assembly meetings were in part plenary and at other times in subgroups. Interviewees did mention that work in smaller groups better facilitated participation than larger, plenary parts of the assembly meetings. Interviewees with less prior knowledge of the topics or with less experience felt they may not have been able to contribute at the same level as other, more informed stakeholders, but were still able to engage in the discussions. In terms of empowerment, we conclude that the arena process contributed to interviewees' competence to contribute.

One of the outcomes that was already briefly mentioned was that people felt more connected to their region, building a sense of belonging whereby one feels at home and finds their place. Interviewees expressed a strong sense of belonging and being part of a community working towards a common goal. Interviewees highlighted this sense of connection and shared purpose as a key positive outcome, with many expressing a desire to continue collaborating and supporting each other's efforts beyond the meetings. The meetings were even described as healing experiences, providing a sense of fulfilment and a place where interviewees could contribute to something meaningful alongside like-minded individuals.

"Additionally, the idea of working together in a group for a common goal without money or direct personal benefits involved, and seeing that everyone was interested and engaged, was wonderful." [IT02, Woman, 30-39]

With regard to resilience and impact, interviewees expressed positive attitudes about the current situation, noting that good working examples and interest in improving food systems already exist. Due to existing challenges related to political will and feasibility, interviewees reported they were initially were somewhat pessimistic. They mentioned a shift towards optimism and feeling that the situation can be realistically improved, with collective engagement. Interviewees expressed hope that the pilot actions and ideas generated during the assemblies would continue to be developed and implemented, involving more stakeholders from the local community. Overall, it appears that the assemblies instilled a sense of hope and optimism among interviewees, who felt empowered and motivated to work towards a more sustainable food system.

Finally, interviewees felt encouraged due to other participants' care about the issues and their willingness to work towards solutions. There was a recognition that while individual actions are important, collaboration and joint efforts are key to achieving meaningful change and interviewees highlighted the value of local partnerships. The gatherings amplified enthusiasm and passion, motivating interviewees to take responsibility for local challenges and to rethink their approaches, both personally and professionally, and to apply the lessons learned to their work and communities. The project instilled optimism about the potential for long-term impact, with interviewees eager to continue influencing policy changes and advancing sustainable food initiatives.

Participants felt empowered to take action by engaging more with school food quality, advocating for community-driven initiatives like markets and farm visits, and leveraging networks to share knowledge and inspire change. People also expressed that they felt they *could* take action, which refers to a sense of autonomy. For example, due to their increased personal awareness some feel more confident to engage in food systems, using the connections they made in the process. Additionally, many opportunities to collaborate emerged during the experiments, and more concrete actions were formulated. For example: advocating for change through creating local food places (markets, community spaces or educational farms for children); leveraging existing and emerging networks and platforms; projects in agricultural schools and elementary schools; or creating informational materials or newsletters to distribute in the region. Lastly some interviewees expressed that participation in the experiment helped them to achieve their goals. The assemblies provided new knowledge and perspectives on practical and graspable solutions that interviewees could apply in their own contexts. The assemblies helped build connections and networks between participants that they can continue to leverage. For example, a food forest educator and advisor from the StreekWaar initiative, found new opportunities for her food forest to start harvesting, processing and marketing through connections made at the meetings. Participation helped some interviewees achieve goals they had been advocating for years, such as creating a map of local restaurants using local products and vegetarian menus. Participation also boosted existing initiatives by attracting new partners and strengthening collaborations.

In sum, we found several ways in which narratives and transformations were related in the experiments. First, experiments all resulted in new perspectives on transformation in an agroecological direction at the local level, in the sense that every experiment envisioned local transformative change. While the experiments did not explicitly set out to produce agroecological narratives, agroecology did emerge as a shared underlying theme, suggesting that narratives themselves transformed as they were produced. Second, producing the narratives proved a transformative experience for the participants themselves, in broadening their perspective, giving them hope, and empowering them. Third, the transition agendas that were part of the narratives hold a promise of real-world change, if associated actions are indeed carried out.



# 4. Learning points and recommendations for policy and governance

Our study was informed by two research questions:

- 1. How can we foster food system transitions to sustainable agriculture?
- 2. What are the benefits of the transition arena approach to transition governance for fostering food system transitions?

Both of these questions give rise to specific lessons learnt and associated recommendations, discussed in turn below. The policy lessons described in section 4.1 are summarised in the executive summary at the start of this report.

## 4.1. Lessons and recommendations about sustainable agriculture

In the Food experiments, our partners explored the development of transitions to sustainable, agroecological agriculture. Their proceedings suggest both promise and concern. Results show that every experiment was able to strengthen its local network and foster the communities involved in this transition. Their analysis resulted in a plethora of potential local transformative actions being identified in the form of a transition agenda, as well as various transition barriers identified beyond the local level. These findings underscore the necessity of thinking outside of the box to foster food system transitions. In sum, the initiatives exhibited a clear awareness that the challenge of establishing sustainable, agroecological agriculture requires transformative change and action at both local levels and beyond.

In this context, it was striking that the transformative actions identified by the experiments almost exclusively addressed the local context, despite the fact that regional- and higher-level barriers and enablers had been identified by the dozen. This result suggests a lack of agency beyond the local level. Experiments were able to identify local transformative actions, but struggled to identify transformative actions aimed at higher-level change. However, it is systemic institutional conditions that hinder agroecology, despite clear ecological and social advantages for farmers and citizens alike. From a policy perspective, this dearth of higher-level action and coordination means that broader institutional conditions (which, as a rule, favour incumbent agricultural practices) remain in place. As a consequence, local transformative experiments run a strong risk of being limited to having local-level impacts, preventing wider adoption and scaling-up of agroecological principles.



We therefore suggest the following recommendations for policy and governance:

#### **1.** Take stock of local experiment experiences and learn from them about existing institutional barriers.

EU-level and national level policymakers should turn their ears to lessons from local initiatives like the ones in this report, and their experiences with institutional conditions, in order to learn about institutional impediments for food system transition, because some of these impediments need to be addressed at a policy level. The same situation applies to regional- and higher-level coordination and lobbying work from agroecology enthusiasts, such as European Coordination Via Campesina and Slow Food Youth Network. We recommend that NGOs active at national and international levels take stock of lessons from local initiatives as well, in order to lobby for the removal of institutional impediments and to advocate for more favourable institutions.

#### 2. Strengthen coordination across local initiatives and strengthen the lobbying positions of cross-local coordination initiatives

Results regarding transition barriers and enablers suggest that experiments may underestimate the influence they might exert beyond the local context. This phenomenon was even identified as a barrier in the Streekwaar case. We recommend that future support of community initiatives should establish further, translocal coordination between experiments, to help them become more aware of both the higher-level barriers that they share and the potential for translocal coordinative action. Such support can take various forms, such as professional support for communities with regard to community organisation, community governance, acquisition of funds, and local policy advocacy. As it stands, such support does exist, for instance with organisations like ECOLISE (European Network for Community-led Initiatives) and Energy Cities, and it could be greatly expanded.

#### 3. Invest in market conditions that favour local producers

We recommend that policymakers implement legislation that creates more favourable market conditions for local producers. Looking more specifically at agroecology, our findings point to the importance of current dominant consumption patterns and how they may work against sustainability transitions. The experiments indicate that land use policies often do not support mixing agricultural and nature protection, advertising laws favour multinationals over local producers, and food procurement laws favour non-local producers. We have a food system configuration that, in many different ways, favours conventional international food and agribusiness, with a range of societal costs. At this junction, it is important to add checks and balances to an economic system that is increasingly unfavourable to local business that have no direct lobbying influence in Brussels. This implicit economic support requires explicit consideration by policymakers.

#### 4. Address structural barriers to healthy and sustainable food choices

Unhealthy food consumption patterns are not only shaped by individual preferences and food literacy, but also by affordability, marketing strategies, and the availability of food options. Structural factors such as the dominance of fast-food outlets in urban areas, aggressive advertising of unhealthy food, and procurement policies that favour large-scale, unsustainable producers all contribute to a limited set of healthy choices, particularly in vulnerable communities. We recommend that policymakers should not only promote supplier and consumer food literacy but also prioritise measures that improve the affordability and accessibility of nutritious food. This includes promoting urban planning that facilitates access to fresh, affordable food, namely by revising procurement systems to support local and seasonal produce in school and workplace canteens,



addressing regulatory obstacles that hinder sustainable food initiatives, and extending restrictions on advertising harmful products to include unhealthy food.

## 4.2. Lessons and recommendations about the arena approach

The interviews with arena participants suggested many benefits of applying the transition arena approach. In terms of content – the collaborative creation of the narrative – interviewees liked how the arena approach helped them think outside of the box, a broadening of their perspectives that they felt would also be beneficial in other contexts where interconnectedness and complexity played important roles. The exercises of visioning and backcasting were especially valuable in this regard. We therefore propose a recommendation, in governance processes, to more strongly set a preferred, sustainable future centre stage, as an antidote against short termism.

In terms of applicability, participants reported seeing the arena approach as adaptable to various different contexts across the EU. As researchers, we witnessed this ourselves. Where differences existed between the different initiatives, this appeared to be mostly due to how novel the idea of transition management was to them. Some initiatives needed our support more than others, but they also exhibited a very steep learning curve and were able to successfully carry out their arena assemblies. These positive experiences suggest that the arena approach merits a broader adoption as in instrument for policy making in general, rather than just being seen as an experiment.

Our findings suggest that the social and content-based aspects of the arena approach are very much intertwined. Interviewees shared their sense of belonging and the feeling that they were contributing to something meaningful with like-minded individuals. They also mentioned that predominantly social activities such as eating together contributed to this sense of belonging and impact in important ways. Perhaps in the transition management literature, this social aspect has been underplayed. We recommend that social activities are put on a more equal footing with narrative-oriented exercises, and that future research more specifically includes the social elements of the arena process. Incidentally, this intertwining of content and social dynamics has long been part of approaches to social learning (e.g. Beers, Van Mierlo & Hoes, 2016; Pahl-Wostl, 2006) that clearly apply to the arena process.

## 5. Conclusions

In this report, we applied the transition arena approach in four local initiatives with the aim of developing transition narratives for food systems. Our work was focused on two questions:

- 1. How can we foster food system transitions to sustainable agriculture?
- 2. What are the benefits of the transition arena approach to transition governance for fostering food system transitions?

The local initiatives we worked with felt that EU policies mainly support large-scale farming and large-scale processing with a focus on technological solutions instead of cultural and behavioural shifts, leading to dominant industrial food systems that small-scale local food initiatives struggle to compete with. The local initiatives all identified systemic transition barriers that hinder them in developing agroecological food systems in their local context.

However, despite this, the actions on the initiatives' transition agendas mainly focused on the local level. Although they mentioned strengthening regional collaboration, they were mostly oriented at actions like supporting local (and small) scale producers and short food supply chains to foster agroecological food systems. In other words, while the initiatives were clearly aware of beyond-local systemic barriers to food system transition, their transition agendas did not feature many actions that address such barriers.

- 1. We suggest that policymakers scrutinise existing market and social conditions that favour existing systemic practices at the cost of more sustainable and just alternatives:
- 2. Take stock of local experiment experiences and learn from them about existing institutional barriers.
- 3. Strengthen coordination across local initiatives and strengthen the lobbying positions of cross-local coordination initiatives
- 4. Invest in market conditions that favour local producers
- 5. Address structural barriers to healthy and sustainable food choices

With regard to the transition arena approach, we found that it helped participants learn from each other. Creating the transition narrative together also helped participants better understand the food system transition challenge and find local ways forward. Importantly, we found that the social and content-based aspects of the arena approach were both important and they seemed to reinforce each other. We recommend that future research within the transition management field should attend to the role and impact of social activities alongside narrative-oriented exercises and specifically explore the social outputs of the arena process.

With regard to the wider sustainability transition, as noted above, the arena approach mostly generated action perspectives for the local context, leaving broader systemic barriers and opportunities out of scope. For a food system transition to agroecology to succeed, there is a need for translocal collaboration aimed at institutional developments that favour local food systems.

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We are profoundly grateful to all those who have contributed to this research in various ways, and we look forward to continued collaboration in fostering sustainable food systems across Europe.

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## Appendix – Methods

This appendix outlines the methods of the study, detailing the processes involved in participant recruitment, data collection and data analysis. It first describes the criteria and rationale for recruiting participants for the assemblies and interviews, ensuring that the target number and profile of participants (e.g. young people aged 18-35) were met. Next, the data collection process is described in detail, explaining how field notes and interviews were collected. We then outline the coding process, emphasising the iterative approach taken to refine the coding framework and ensure inter-coder reliability. In the last subsection, we outline the final coding framework used to analyse the transition narratives and interviews.

#### A1. Recruiting assembly participants and interviewees

#### Recruiting assembly participants

Before the experiments, local partners<sup>3</sup> carried out a stakeholder mapping and a few exploratory interviews in order to begin delving into the transition challenge and to scout for promising arena participants. We suggested they focus on individuals that they considered 'frontrunners' – because of their willingness to go beyond business as usual or for their intrinsic motivation to change the food system. We suggested that the local partners who ran the four initiatives select especially people that are intrinsically connected to the subject of their assembly meetings, with the ultimate aim of building a group of ambassadors of the future food system that they would like to achieve.

We further suggested that the key for a fruitful series of assemblies is diversity – change makers with diverse backgrounds (e.g. business, government) and competencies (e.g. leadership, creativity, analytical skills). Furthermore, we suggested they bring together a group that shares a sense of urgency and is diverse in composition, such that it radiates potential and creates opportunities for participants' own (business) activities.

Other criteria we suggested for recruiting assembly participants:

- Own vision on the development of the region;
- Involvement in the region;
- Strong network;
- Practising change;
- Ability to set aside own interests;
- · Ability to listen to others and being open to and appreciative of other perspectives; and
- Motivation to engage in a searching and learning process as captured in the assembly meetings.

Finally, we reminded local partners that within the target group there was an aim to engage young participants in the network of local food system change makers so that at least one third of the network members are young participants (age 18-35). This target was largely achieved by all local

<sup>3</sup> In this appendix, we use the term local partner to denote the four initiatives discussed in this report.



partners, with only two out of 13 assemblies falling slightly below the threshold at 28%. This was due to unforeseen circumstances, such as the absence of a few young participants on the day of the assemblies in Wageningen, despite the local partner's efforts to ensure strong attendance from the target group. This was promptly addressed, as attendance of young people in the subsequent assembly at this site met the target.

#### Recruiting interviewees

For the interviews we advised local partners to select participants that had attended most, if not all of the assembly meetings, in addition to catering for the diversity aforementioned. The purpose of these interviews was to learn more about individuals' experiences of participating in the local experiment. Questions covered a range of topics including their general experience of the experiment, the impact of the experiment on transforming the regional food context, the group dynamics of the experiment, the wider context of the experiment, and recommendations for policymakers/ those interested in undertaking activities similar to those undertaken in the experiment.

#### A2. Data collection processes

Our study was based on two sets of data. First, we asked every local partner to write a field note about the proceedings of each assembly meeting (12 field notes in total), primarily in terms of the content, that is, the elements of the narrative, and, where applicable, also in terms of the process. Field notes were pre-structured based on the proposed assembly programme, so that each field note effectively would align with elements from the narratives.

Second, every local partner conducted ten interviews (40 in total) with assembly attendants. In Table A2 the numbers and interviewee's characteristic breakdown (age, gender and occupation) are described. Interview transcripts are available at: <u>https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.15387236</u>.



#### Table A2. Interviewee's characteristics breakdown across the four initiatives' countries.

Country	Interview number	Age range	Gender	Occupation
Italy	1	20-29	Man	Research or education role
Italy	2	30-39	Woman	Research or education role
Italy	3	30-39	Man	Research or education role
Italy	4	30-39	Man	Research or education role
Italy	5	30-39	Woman	Food/drink company role
Italy	6	30-39	Woman	Farm worker
Italy	7	20-29	Woman	Farm worker
Italy	8	20-29	Man	Research or education role
Italy	9	30-39	Man	Food/drink company role
Italy	10	60-69	Man	Policy or governance role
Netherlands	1	20-29	Woman	Other employment role
Netherlands	2	30-39	Woman	Non-governmental organisation role
Netherlands	3	60-69	Man	Consultancy role
Netherlands	4	60-69	Woman	Other employment role
Netherlands	5	30-39	Woman	Other employment role
Netherlands	6	30-39	Man	Other employment role
Netherlands	7	40-49	Woman	Research or education role
Netherlands	8	40-49	Woman	Other employment role
Netherlands	9	50-59	Woman	Other employment role
Netherlands	10	50-59	Man	Food/drink company role
Sweden	1	30-39	Woman	Project management role
Sweden	2	30-39	Woman	Food/drink company role
Sweden	3	40-49	Man	Other employment role
Sweden	4	30-39	Man	Food/drink company role
Sweden	5	40-49	Woman	Other employment role
Sweden	6	30-39	Man	Project management role
Sweden	7	20-29	Woman	Student
Sweden	8	20-29	Woman	Student
Sweden	9	20-29	Man	Student
Sweden	10	40-49	Woman	Food/drink company role
Slovakia	1	30-39	Woman	Research or education role
Slovakia	2	30-39	Man	Unemployed
Slovakia	3	20-29	Woman	Project management role
Slovakia	4	20-29	Man	Farming company role
Slovakia	6	20-29	Woman	Project management role and member of NGO
Slovakia	5	20-29	Woman	Farmer and member of NGO
Slovakia	7	30-39	Woman	Policy or governance role
Slovakia	8	50-59	Woman	Catering role in education sector
Slovakia	9	30-39	Woman	Project management role in education sector
Slovakia	10	20-29	Woman	Project management role in education sector



#### **A3. Coding process**

#### **Field notes**

In creating the initial coding scheme, we began with a set of codes for the field notes. We compiled these in an initial analysis document that was then used by two coders to begin coding the field notes. We held a meeting on 13 June 2024, to compare how the two coders were applying the analysis framework initially to see whether the framework worked as intended. We concluded that we needed to clarify the codes about need for change, and to distinguish between multi-level-barrier and enabling dynamics. Otherwise, the two coders agreed that they applied the coding framework similarly based on sharing coding examples with each other for two hours. The analysts each coded one full case (Wageningen and Klima t'a Potrebuje) to discuss on 8 July 2024. Again, we concluded that no changes to the coding scheme were necessary. We did elaborate more on the difference between 'Actions' and 'Need for Change', emphasising that we only speak about actions if it pertains to something the initiative is doing or intend to do themselves, and sufficiently so that we would expect them to follow through. Closed coding of the field notes proceeded throughout the summer and was finished by 3 September 2024. Meanwhile, open coding of the field notes by category had begun, with an intermediate check-in on 11 November 2024 to safeguard inter-rater validity, and was finished by 1 December 2024, upon which the two coders collected all qualitatively different results per code in tables that were prepared for final reporting.

#### Interviews

The analyses of interviews began on 3 September 2024. Again, we started with an initial set of closed codes for empowerment and capacity building, mainly to chart the impact of the experiment approach for creating narratives. On 30 September 2024, we compared initial coding. We decided to (temporarily) add a code for 'Tensions' to be applied to whenever we encountered related excerpts that were negative about our approach or about the process itself, to ascertain a nuanced view of our results, both positively and negatively. We continued evaluating the coding approach on 23 October 2024, but at that meeting no further changes were made. All interview data were closed-coded by 28 November 2024. However, when we discussed the coding, some deviations appeared to have occurred between the two coders, in part due to differences between cases. We agreed that some recoding might be necessary, but for now, we would recode most codes under facilitation and knowledge creation that weren't further specified under take-home messages. We scheduled another meeting to further safeguard inter-coder reliability.

On 2 December 2024, we again compared strategies and found that coders had become sufficiently aligned to proceed. However, we also agreed that some of the coded excerpts were hard to interpret without more context and decided to add that context while compiling the interpretive analysis step. This led to a thorough revisiting of all applied codes. After that, no further changes were necessary.

Final interpretive coding and summarising was done throughout January 2025.

#### Final coding framework

The field notes were analysed using a semi-open coding approach using the elements of the transition narrative as main codes, that is, sustainability / transition challenge, future images, transition dynamics, and transition agenda (actions). We did not use pathways as a separate code because the different initiatives each only resulted in one overarching pathway. Additionally, for the field note excerpts coded 'transition dynamics', we sub-coded whether these were at local levels or regional-level and beyond. For excerpts coded 'actions', we sub-coded whether these were local actions within the initiative, actions oriented at the local context, and/or actions oriented at higher levels



(regional-level and beyond). Finally, 'actions' were sub-coded 'transformative' if they were related to excerpts coded 'transition dynamics' or if they were related to either excerpts coded 'future image' or 'sustainability challenge'.

The analysis of the interviews was done using a semi-open coding approach to conceptualise the process. We started with the co-creation of knowledge using 'co-creation of the narrative', 'facilitation', and 'qualitative different learnings' as main codes. The different methods, 'x-curve analyses', 'future images', 'backcasting', and 'agenda development' were subcodes for 'co-creation of the narrative'. The subcodes for 'facilitation' included 'dealing with multiple perspectives', 'dealing with power differences and power dynamics', 'stakeholder diversity', and 'other interpersonal communication'. For 'qualitative different learnings' we used 'experiment content', 'take home lessons', and 'take home messages' as subcodes. Additionally, the analysis looked into the impact of the experiment process in terms of empowerment and capacity building.







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