



Feeding the City, Empowering the Citizens: An Ethnography of Solidarity Economy in the Municipality of Ankara

Şehri beslemek, Vatandaşları Güçlendirmek: Ankara İlinde Dayanışma Ekonomisinin Etnografisi

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DOI: 10.5505/jas.2024.36854

Abstract

This study analyses the networks of grassroots associations which constitute the solidarity economy food chains in Ankara. It is based on a one-year ethnographic study that considered the activities of these networks and connected the ethnographic findings to broader global dynamics related to food chains. The association and networks involved are first described, with a focus on their practices and purposes, and similar cases in other cities in the literature are determined to reach a general conclusion. The main findings of the research are that grassroots associations in Ankara, as with ones triangulated with the existing literature, have a significant impact on the connections between the city and its citizens, as well as between urban and rural areas, by developing alternative practices of food production and exchange. These practices originate from the perceived impoverishment of urban spaces in relation to the loss of both green and farming areas, in addition to local traditional knowledge related to food. Although the social networks of these associations are relatively limited, there is significant potential in terms of advocacy and sensibilization. Moreover, there was growth in critical approaches to urban food and environmental policies during the period of our research due to crises over food prices and COVID-19. The resilience shown by these networks during such times of crisis, as well as their capacity to focus on structural weakness of the food chains in general, and of Ankara urban development model in particular, emphasise the contemporary political relevance of these practices and ideas.

Keywords: Solidarity economy, Grassroot activism, Food sovereignty, Urban sprawl, Traditional knowledge, Social anthropology, Ankara



Öz

Bu çalışma, Ankara’da dayanışma ekonomisi gıda zincirleri üzerine çalışan taban örgütlenmelerini analiz etmektedir. Çalışma kapsamında bu ağların faaliyetlerine aktif katılım göstererek bir yıl boyunca yürütülen etnografik araştırma, gıda zincirlerinin geniş küresel dinamiklerin bir parçası olduğunu ortaya koymaktadır. Bu makalede, ilk olarak çalışmadaki ağlar, uygulamalarına ve amaçlarına odaklanarak tanımlanmaktadır. Daha sonra, bazı genel sonuçlara ulaşmak için bunları mevcut literatürle ve diğer şehirlerdeki benzer vakalarla ilişkilendirmektedir. Araştırmanın temel bulguları, Ankara’daki taban örgütlenmelerinin alternatif gıda üretimi pratiklerini geliştirerek kent ile kentliler ve kent ile kırsal alanlar arasındaki bağlantılar üzerinde güçlü bir etkiye sahip olmayı amaçladığını ortaya koymuştur. Bu pratiklerin ortaya çıkarılmasındaki çaba, hem yeşil ve tarım alanlarının hem de gıda ile ilgili yerel geleneksel bilginin kaybına bağlı olarak kentsel mekânın algılanan yoksullaşmasından kaynaklanmaktadır. Bu örgütlenmelerin sosyal ağları nispeten küçük olsa da, savunuculuk ve duyarlılık yaratma açısından güçlü bir potansiyele sahiptir. Dahası, kentsel gıda ve çevre politikalarına yönelik eleştirel yaklaşımların artması, COVID-19 ve gıda fiyatları krizleri nedeniyle araştırmamızın yapıldığı dönemde daha da artmıştır. Bu ağların kriz sırasındaki dayanıklılığı ve genel olarak gıda zincirlerinin, özel olarak da Ankara kentsel kalkınma modelinin yapısal zayıflıklarına odaklanma kapasiteleri, pratiklerini ve fikirlerini güncel siyasi tartışmalarda çok önemli kılmaktadır.

Anahtar sözcükler: Dayanışma ekonomisi, Taban aktivizmi, Gıda egemenliği, Kentsel yayılma, Geleneksel bilgi, Sosyal antropoloji, Ankara

Introduction

This article analyses the networks of solidarity economy associations focused on the food chain and is based on a one-year ethnographic study which examined the networks of grassroots associations which produce and/or distribute food in the urban area of Ankara. The article explores the local peculiarities of Ankara while engaging with the broader debate on the capacity of grassroots associations to challenge hegemonic practices and propose alternative policies in food chain management. The analysis begins with an apparent contradiction detected during the field research: the desire, inspired by the notion of creating a notional ‘green’ Ankara shaped during the early republican era, of most of the actors involved in these networks to develop alternative practices to mainstream agriculture. The main practices implemented by the networks analysed during the ethnography – agro-ecological farming, which involved the protection of green areas, valorisation of traditional local knowledge, and short supply chains – were simultaneously proposing an alternative to the dominant market-oriented soil exploitation and revamping an image of an “old Ankara” in which there was stronger connections between the citizens and their environment. Hence, the “innovation” seems to somehow entail reconnecting food chains to an “original” character of the city which was abandoned during the urban transformation that began in the 1990s. There is a particularly strong rural connection in Ankara,

in comparison to other Turkish cities, and recent modernisation and soil consumption are widely considered to have caused the loss of certain unique elements of the city.

The ethnographic findings in this study were connected to broader global dynamics. Since the 1950s, extensive innovations in industrial and agricultural technology (chemical fertilisers and pesticides, mechanical tractors and irrigation, improved seeds, etc.), which are generally referred to as “the green revolution”, have reshaped both the rural environment and agriculture. This movement is related to greater urbanisation of the landscape, due to less manpower being required in rural areas, and is based on the idea that increased volume of production enables both the reduction of farming land and the expansion of the urban population. Although often celebrated for their broader positive impacts in terms of economic growth, there is a heavy environmental and social cost to the green revolution. Since the 1980s, grassroots movements related to food chains which, according to Harriet Friedman (2016), can be described as “food sovereignty,” have focused on building alternatives to the dominant “food regime”. In a world where neoliberal policies are globally hegemonic, grassroots movements in general, and solidarity economy associations in particular, respond to both the harsher social consequences of these politics and efforts to produce alternative networks of exchange or tools of contestation (Dacheux & Goujon, 2011). There



has been clear impact of neoliberal policies on Ankara since the 1990s, namely that the amount of land for farming in the municipality has shrunk from 54% in 1990 to 9.7% in 2018. This has been a dramatic shift which has impacted both the geography of the city, due to much less area available for farming, and the modality of the food supply, as a reduction in local production has meant a growing dependence on external producers. Most of the networks encountered would like to radically transform the way food chains work, so there is a consideration of the peculiarities and history of Ankara. Although there was already a consistent body of literature on grassroots activism and social movements that considered the intersection between rural and urban contexts, this topic has only recently become the focus in Ankara, mainly due to the handling of the COVID-19 outbreak (Atalan-Helicke & Abiral, 2021), as well as the thesis research of a number of graduate students (Weitzhofer & Yurtışık, 2012; Kaplan, 2021).

The aim of this study is to contribute to the field by focusing on associations that share an approach based on the active engagement of its members, as well as on those associations that do not consider market-oriented practices as being the only strategy for empowerment. It has been found that the topics addressed by these associations are extremely important in Ankara, due to the massive transformations and challenges the city has undergone. These challenges include the Covid 19 pandemics, the recent food price crisis, and increased migration from the east due to events such as the crisis in Syria and the 2023 earthquake in Eastern Turkey. All of these events, when seen in the context of growing dependence of external food markets, and the seizure of fertile lands for real estate expansion, have heavily impacted food chains. This paper argues that the strategies of the solidarity economy are particularly relevant in Ankara's food chain because of the recent rural history of the city. This allows grassroots movements to enhance production practices and ideas regarding the importance of agricultural spaces still rooted in various strata of the population. Ankara, along with the other Turkish megalopolis of Istanbul and Izmir, has expanded greatly in recent years, and this expansion has altered iconic locations, such as Atatürk Forest Farm (*Atatürk Orman Çiftliği*: AOÇ), generating a widespread unease and a sense of exclusion for much of the population. In this context, the methods and ideals of solidarity economy, which intersect with other

grassroots approaches that aim to protect the environment and promote healthy life, is a useful starting point to explore the relationships between these groups and the changing city, as well as to assess their proposed alternative practices. For these reasons, the data in this study has been triangulated with insights on the promotion of alternative work practices and social connections to market logic provided by the literature on the peasantry. The literature on solidarity economy and social movements that emerged following the 2008 global financial crisis, which revitalized grassroots associations in search of alternative practices in various sectors of economic life, is also considered. However, although these practices are connected to a rooted tradition capable of mobilizing different sections of the population, there are structural limits to their ability to impact global dynamics and influence municipal food policies.

The article first summarises the issues involved in debates on neoliberal reforms in agriculture and grassroots alternatives. This is followed by a presentation of the methods utilized in the research and the networks studied to emphasise the peculiarities of Ankara. There is also an exploration of the main ideas and strategies that are being developed in the city by those networks.

The Intersections of Neoliberalism, The Green Revolution, and Peasantry

This section reviews the main debates on food regimes and demonstrates how the transformations triggered by the green revolution and neoliberal reforms has led to, in the wake of the global financial and food price crisis of 2008, the concept of the "solidarity economy."

Marxist scholars have coined the term "food regime" to describe the control of food production and distribution as a tool to exert power in capitalist societies (Friedmann, 2016). This term emerged in the 1980s to describe the emergence of a few globally powerful agri-business actors that were able to exert strong power as suppliers of specific inputs, such as seeds, fertilisers, and pesticides (McMichael, 2014). The liberalisation of food markets on a global level in the 1980s represents the peak of a commodification of foods that started with the expansion of "the green revolution" outside of the Euro-American sphere after World War II (Patel, 2013). While this has led, on the one hand, to an increase in food production on the global level thanks to the new technologies, it has, on the other hand, concentrated the control of agricul-



tural inputs among a few major private corporations and impacted both biodiversity and the independence of peasants in their agricultural management (Friedmann, 2016). These policies reached their peak in the 1980s when a variety of peasants' associations - initially in Latin America and then globally - began proposing alternatives based on the concept of "food sovereignty." Peasants' movements – the largest being *La Via Campesina* - defined food sovereignty in the Declaration of Nyéléni of 2007 as "the right of peoples to healthy and culturally appropriate food produced through ecologically sound and sustainable methods, and their right to define their own food and agriculture systems."¹ This concept opposes the mainstream notion of "food security" pursued by humanitarian organisations which is based on the idea that increasing production to feed more people is the only way to develop agriculture. Implicit in the mainstream "food security" approach are the notions that the techniques spread by "green revolutions" are more effective in improving food chains and need to be applied worldwide, and that global markets will automatically shift towards more efficient decisions about production (Scott-Smith, 2020). The idea of "food sovereignty," in contrast, emphasises the right of each community to autonomously produce its own food according to its own practices, and constitutes a basis for an alternative approach to food production which is generally shared by all the organisations involved in our research. The movements connected by the idea of "food sovereignty" denounce the mainstream "green revolutions" methods as a specific "food regime" and aim instead to concentrate the culture of agriculture and food production among global agribusiness corporations. It is also the aim of these movements to develop an alternative system in which small, independent food producers can maintain control over both land and food chains (McMichael, 2014).

Peasant movements emerged as a reaction to neoliberal policies in food production. Such policies have increasingly been used in Turkey since the 1970s where the development of agri-businesses, along with a boosted real estate sector, have heavily impacted the livelihoods of rural communities (Aydın, 2010, Öztürk 2012, Öztürk et al. 2020). These dynamics have continued to increase, especially from the 1990s onwards, and protests by peas-

ants and local civil society groups for the protection of farming land from mining exploitation or real estate construction have become a common occurrence in Turkey. Large infrastructure projects, such as the construction of major roads, dams, or airports, are particularly a cause of discontent and protest, and in many cases rural people, who are traditionally not particularly involved in such action, are on the frontlines of the protests (Ribeiro, 2023). During the last twenty years, farming land has shrunk by about 20% nationwide, while the number of farmers has halved, and the rural population today represents only 7.5% of the country (Yücer, 2020). The elimination of the legal status of rural villages in large municipalities by Law 6360 has further contributed to the de-ruralisation of the territory, and the data testifies to the massive scale of the urbanisation process. In this paradigm, land progressively stopped being an ancestral source of livelihood under the control of local communities to instead being valued for its rental potential.

In Ankara, the reduction of the once extensive agricultural land surrounding the capital is mainly due to real estate expansion (Öncel & Levend 2023). The main impact of current zoning policies is how urban sprawl and infrastructure expansion in what used to be the rural and peri-urban areas of the city has displaced previous inhabitants, reduced land for farming, and increased both prices as well as the demands on infrastructure. (Varlı Gök & Rittesberger Tiliç, 2016; Sınacı Özfindik, 2019). The progressive shrinking of the green areas surrounding Middle East Technical University (ODTÜ) and the neighbouring lakes, Eymir and Mogan, the dramatic reduction in farming land of AOC, and the shrinking of the estates of the Department of Agriculture of Ankara University (Sınacı Özfindik, 2019; Ribeiro et al., 2020), are all too apparent.

While the discomfort generated by these social and environmental impacts has been apparent since the early 2000s, the risks that they exert on the stability of food prices, especially in urban areas where most of the population is dependent on market prices, have emerged more recently. The negative effects of global food price crisis of 2008, the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic, and the grain crisis arising from the conflict in Ukraine, have all further been aggravated by the unorthodox monetary

1 Declaration of Nyéléni, consulted at <https://nyeleni.org/IMG/pdf/DeclNyeleni-en.pdf> in August 2023



policy of the Turkish government. The effect on Ankara has been particularly profound, with food inflation regularly beyond 90% for most of 2022, and between 50% and 70%, for the first half of 2023.² Crises are often caused by major structural problems and generate strong social movements. The turbulence that has been created by the global shock of the financial crisis – the food price crisis in 2010, the so-called “Arab springs” and the complicated situation in the Middle East, the debt crisis in the European Union and its global economic repercussions, not to mention the COVID – 19 crisis and the war in Ukraine, have all demonstrated the need to explore alternative practices in both the social, political and economic sphere.

One such alternative practice is solidarity economy. Ethan Miller (2009) explains how the term applies to a variety of practices such as recycling, local trading schemes, collective kitchens, organic farmers’ cooperatives, micro-credit, fairtrade, and solidarity tourism. Miller also explains how its actual meaning comes from the 1980s in Latin America and France and relates to the global movement protesting neoliberal reforms in the food chains. Solidarity economy does not only focus on the economy but entails a broader democratic transformation of the social and political sphere. This analysis overlaps with Eric Dacheux and Daniel Goujon’s (2011) definition of solidarity economy as a “transition” economy aimed to transform society moving from the needs of excluded groups. In terms of the situation in Turkey, Olivier Gajac and Selin Pelek (2019) emphasise the connection between decentralization and solidarity economy initiatives. Since the late 1970s, a global wave of “decentralization reforms” aimed to boost the role of non-state local actors has generated room for cooperative and grassroots associations to develop alternative practices. However, in Turkey, the “decentralization reforms” ended up reinforcing the role of local state authorities. Therefore, most solidarity economy initiatives emerged as an effort to claim a stronger political role by groups that felt excluded. Our findings in Ankara confirm this trend, especially in relation to the urban policies of the last thirty years.

The research in this paper is concerned with the following: the intersections of the agendas of various actors in

urban civil society worried about the impacts on food quality and accessibility, peasants’ associations aiming to protect their land and livelihood, and public opinion concerned about environmental damage. Global transformations in food chains are potentially problematic for the poorest urban areas and their inhabitants. In the last decade, scholars and social activists have been involved with such issues as urban areas expanded in size and became more vulnerable to the vagaries of the markets (Morgan & Sonnino, 2010; Moragues-Faus & Morgan, 2015; Sonnino & Coulson, 2020). This paper is particularly focused on the urban context in its use of Ankara, whose urbanization path is quite recent and rapid, as a very pertinent case study.

Food Crisis and Grassroots Movements in Ankara

This section explores how the previously discussed issues manifest themselves in a context like Ankara. The previous section ended by emphasizing the importance of cities in the field of food production and the global attention the topic is receiving. Indeed, city governments become more involved in food production with the growth of urban areas in order to reduce their vulnerability to external shocks. A number of organisations, such as Eucities, C40 and ICLEI or groups mixing municipalities, humanitarian associations, and civil society, like the RUAF Global Partnership on Sustainable Urban Agriculture and Food Systems have been set up for the design of specific food policies for urban contexts. In 2015, 113 municipalities signed the Milan Urban Food Policy Pact, which called on its signatories to promote good practices. These include the reduction of the distances between rural suppliers of food and city centres, the promotion of farmers’ markets and urban gardens, the prevention of food waste, and the support of agriculture production in urban and peri-urban areas. Urban food security can be summarised as a sector in which municipal officials, civil society actors, and scholars work together to improve the quality of policies and refine good practices to be shared and replicated globally.

In such a landscape, Ankara presents an interesting case. The area of the major conurbation covers a densely urbanized centre made of nine municipalities (*Altındağ*,

2 <https://tradingeconomics.com/turkey/food-inflation>, visited on August 2023



Akyurt, Çankaya, Etimesgut, Keçiören, Yenimahalle, Mamak, Pirsaklar, and Sincan) with broad peri-urban areas distributed in the remaining sixteen municipalities. These sixteen municipalities generally consist of a main town surrounded by belts of greener areas. Although the municipality of Ankara has not signed the Milan Urban Food Policy Pact, it has nevertheless implemented various good practices indicated by this pact, such as farmers and organic markets, a consultative forum of the actors of food chains, and various urban gardens. In 1923, when it was established as the capital of Turkey, Ankara was a small town with massive agricultural and pastoral lands. The establishment of the AOC in 1923, together with the first urban plan of the city, had the aim of keeping this rural aspect alive (Arapgirlioglu & Baykan, 2016). Moreover, the area of the municipality is the original home of specific agricultural strains and husbandry breeds that are still well known, such as Ayas tomatoes, Kalecik Karası grapes, and the Angora goat, which was the official symbol of the Ankara Municipality until 2011. Despite enormous expansion, the rural character of the city persisted for a long time, with agricultural surface still represented 54% of the total land of Ankara in 1990, as compared to 30.7% of İzmir and 28.5% of İstanbul, the two other largest Turkish cities (Öncel & Levend, 2023). The AOC coordinated an important network of local producers to supply the city with vegetable and dairy products. Meanwhile, the green belt protected the İmrahor valley and the neighbouring Lakes Mogan and Eymir on the south-west of the city while, the two major academic institutions of the city, ODTÜ and Ankara University, kept large swaths of green areas and were able to educate and train food and train agronomists on their own extensive campuses (Sinacı Özfindik, 2019, Ribeiro et al., 2020).

This landscape has radically changed during the last thirty years as a more rigid implementation of neoliberal policies has led to massive expansion and the extension of urban areas. Hale Öncel and Sinan Levend (2023) have estimated that the amount of land for agricultural lands dropped to 39.8% in 2000, 18.7% in 2012, and only 9.7% in 2018, and that 82.5% of the total area was covered by artificial surfaces, a rate quite similar to that of İstanbul and İzmir. Although TURKSTAT recently updated the criteria used to calculate the urban-rural distinction, the values calculated using the old parameters clearly demonstrate the transformation Ankara has undergone to achieve the same level of urbanisation as the two other

Turkish megalopolis, İstanbul, and İzmir. The rapid urbanisation of the city can be seen within the context of steady economic growth in 2002-2012, which was then followed by political tensions and economic stagnation. More recent social challenges such as increased migration from Middle Eastern countries, the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic, the food price crisis, and the recent wave of migrants to the city following the devastating 2023 earthquake in the east of the country, have all played their parts in disrupting the city's food chains. The traditional *terroir* of Ankara, a term that encapsulates the connection between a cropping system and the lands containing gardens, vineyards, and orchards within which it is inserted, is being increasingly replaced by large buildings.

The level of urbanisation varied between the different districts, with the greatest increase being in the nine districts inside the main ring-road of the city. The reduced space and importance of the AOC (Figure 1) is best symbolised by how much land was given over during the 2010s to create space for the new Presidential Building and the entertainment area of Ankapark. The expansions of artificial areas have had multiple impacts on rural life, including reducing the land available, dividing land via infrastructure projects, building projects increasing the value of land, and the reduction or pollution of natural resources, such as water. It is also important to note that since its recognition as the capital, and particularly in the last thirty years, the city has expanded to accommodate an increasing number of migrants from rural villages. This also contributed to the "rural connection" mentioned above: the vast majority of the participants in this research had relatives who still inhabited, or had relatively recently left, a rural village. This means that if a participant was not themselves a recent migrant from the countryside, he or she was accustomed to the seasonality of agriculture due to their connections to their villages. It was from this context that an apparent contradictory pattern was observed, namely the framing of opposition to the current food regime being based on more environmentally and socially sustainable traditional practices, while simultaneously engaging in urgent efforts to propose radically new models for social and economic development.

One reaction to these transformations is how a variety of small associations and networks have become actively engaged in valuing more local production in food

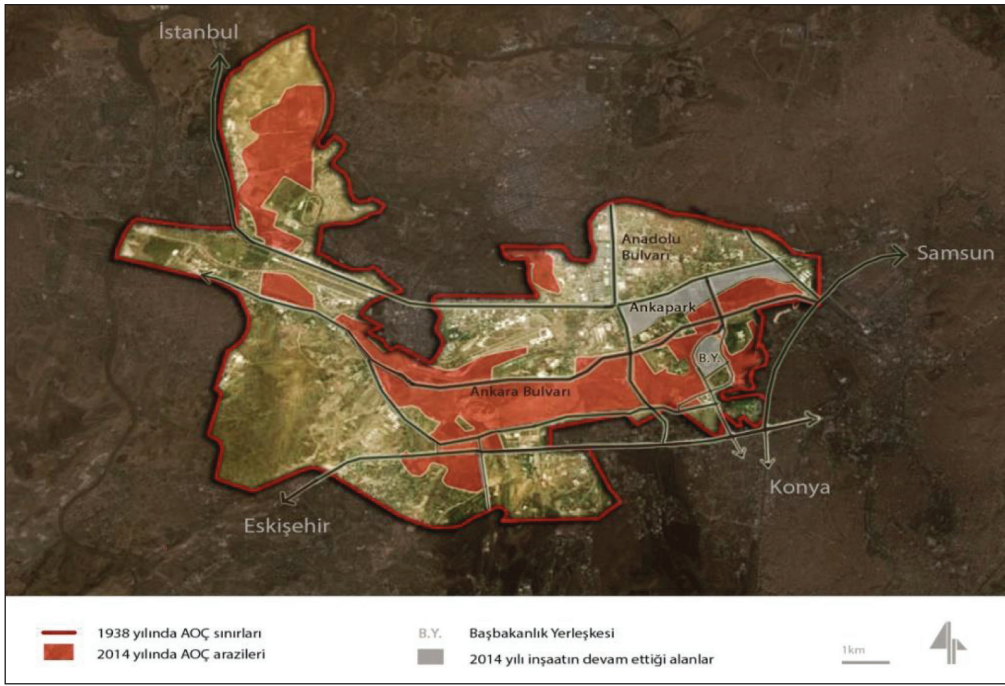


Figure 1. Changes in the boundaries of Atatürk Forest Farm. Source: Çavdar Sert, 2017, p.287.

chains. This phenomenon is not unique to Ankara, and it has been found that the *Buğday* (“Wheat”) Association for Supporting Ecological Living has been extremely inspirational for various smaller groups through its provision since 2000 of training on organic production and agroecology techniques. *Buğday* has been crucial in facilitating the establishment of various cooperatives, ecological markets, and seed exchange programs, as well as in inspiring similar initiatives nationwide (Gürel, 2018). Interesting insights have been provided through the investigation of four major established organisations: *Doğal Besin Bilinçli Beslenme Ağı*³ (DBB; “Natural Food and Conscious Nutrition Network”), the *Güneşköy* Cooperative (*Güneşköy*),⁴ the *Tahtacıörencik Doğal Yaşam Kolektifi*⁵ (Tahtacıörencik Village Ecological Living Collective: TADYA), and *Yüzüncü Yıl Gıda Topluluğu* (“Yüzüncü Yıl Food Society”: Yüzüncü Yıl). Seven smaller groups connected to these bigger realities have also been included.

While these associations have similar approaches, their approaches are different, due to them emerging at dif-

ferent moments and in dealing with specific challenges. This study focuses on the success of the various practices developed in challenging the existing food system and encouraging alternative practices in the city. Some of these practices are as follows: the DBB is a network which aims to connect different forms of institutions; *Güneşköy* is a cooperative that manages a specific plot of land to spread new techniques and practices; TADYA is a union of small farmers from the district of *Güdül*; and *Yüzüncü Yıl* is a food collective that manages an allotment, called *bostan* in Turkish, and arranges the regular buying of food from outside Ankara. Although united by a focus on food, the groups operate in different ways. Some try to utilise the existing green areas to produce vegetables such as tomatoes, peppers, cucumbers, aubergines, green beans, and melons. Others focus more on production and the exchange of seeds, while some groups are involved with processing techniques such as pickling, drying, or making tomatoes or pepper paste, or the dried base for a soup called *tarhana*, all of which are very com-

3 <https://dogalbilinclibeslenme.wordpress.com/dbb-ureticileri/>, visited in January 2022

4 <https://www.guneskoy.org.tr/en/guneskoy/about-guneskoy-2>, visited in December 2021

5 <https://tahtaciorencik.org>, visited in December 2021

mon ingredients in Anatolia cuisine. While gardening is the most common practice, other groups also produce common dairy products such as yoghurt or fresh cheese; while there are those which butcher fresh meat and produce local seasoned sausage (*sucuk*). *Yüzüncü Yıl* is the only organisation that also actively brings this product from other provinces, as their area of production is quite limited. It was felt that this variety could provide different ideas regarding the potential strategies implemented in this sector, as well as outlining the main common elements in terms of strategies and theoretical approaches.

Certain crucial common elements have been identified amongst all of these associations: the importance of established centres of knowledge production and social interactions, such as universities, clubs, and associations; the development of ideas about the different production methods promoted by *Buğday* and other associations; the growing concern about the shrinking green spaces in cities; and dissatisfaction about the lack of public outcry to urban regeneration programs imposed by the municipality or the central government. In regard to that final point, it should be noted that the importance of the nationwide *Gezi Park* protests of 2013 – already mentioned by Gajac and Pelek (2019), and which are seen as an important moment in Turkey’s grassroots movements, were triggered by an urban regeneration project in Istanbul and then expanded nationwide. These protests were significant because they raised an important issue related to discussions of green areas in Ankara, namely how the increasingly top-down and market-oriented approaches of urban policies have not sufficiently benefitted the inhabitants of the “regenerated” areas but have instead contributed to the escalation of real estate prices (Korkmaz & Balaban, 2020). Some of the *Yüzüncü Yıl* groups which emerged from protests decided to continue to act locally by managing a small green area in the neighbourhood of *Yüzüncü Yıl*, as well as by actively promoting the protection of one of the main green areas of Ankara, the ODTÜ forest. It can be seen that a critical aspect of the engagement toward various projects of urban regeneration or infrastructure construction are a common thread of most of the associations considered.

As the oldest of the organisations considered in this study, *Güneşköy* was born thanks to the friendship of students and scholars from ODTÜ. Members of a group from that university came together to create a cooperative to buy and farm a plot of land near *Hisarköy*, which is

on the boundary of the districts of *Elmadag* and *Yahşihan* (*Kırıkkale* Province). The *Buğday* Association inspired these individuals and helped the group take its first steps. Initially, the idea was to develop farming practices following “natural” methods that farmers today are largely abandoning, in hopes of setting an example, and to bridge the growing gap between urban and rural areas in the use of the site at *Hisarköy* as an area for the exchange of food, knowledge, and practices. *Güneşköy* (Figure 2) has been applying a specific food distribution system since 2006 in which, every early spring, individuals interested in obtaining *Güneşköy* products pay in advance the amount of money that the *Güneşköy* staff consider necessary for farming the land. With that revenue, the land is farmed until the end of late autumn, and the harvested produce is boxed every week for distribution to those who have paid in advance. This system means that buyers share the risks of production with rural workers, and the final profit of the production process, whatever it may be in any given year, is distributed among members. Processed foods, such as pickles and sauces are also produced at *Güneşköy* every summer, at the time of both peak production and the holidays of urban residents, to satisfy all members of the group.

Another group of individuals in Ankara aimed to support rural producers by applying ethical and environmentally friendly practices. Some of these people, who were already members of *Güneşköy*, established the DBB in 2009. Initially, the group merely took orders for food from internal members, but the group set up an official website in 2011 and established a specific set of rules for any potential participants aiming to join the group to follow. The main idea was to develop a “community-supported agriculture” system where all actors would know and trust each other, and in which a commonly shared set of rules and principles would be respected. The DBB subsequently expanded to include various partners nationwide. Today, the organisation has two partner-producers based in Ankara Province: the cooperative TADYA, in the district of *Güdül*, and a small initiative called *Marangoz Ailesi Çiftliği* (“Marangoz Family Farm”) in the district of *Çamlıdere*.

TADYA (Figure 3A and 3B) was established in 2011 by existing members of *Güneşköy*. After initially reproducing the *Güneşköy* model, the group bought a plot of land in a rural area near the village of *Tahtacıörencik*, in the district of *Güdül*, which they farmed according to organ-



Figure 2. Greenhouse of Güneşköy.

Photograph: Valerio Colosio, Esra Demirkol Colosio, 2022.



Figure 3A and 3B. Farmland in Tahtacıörencik.

Photograph: Valerio Colosio, Esra Demirkol Colosio, 2022.

ic and agroecological principles. Unlike Güneşköy, however, local farmers from nearby villages began cooperating with the group according to the standards set by the community. TADYA gradually became a food collective with its own website for sharing its products. From the initial focus on vegetables, the organisation also began to regularly produce dairy and seasonal meat products. Since 2013, these products have been distributed through an online system which enables weekly deliveries in An-

kara. The prices of the product are decided collectively in producer meetings, while boxes are re-collected and used every week in order to reduce packaging consumption. This system has been quite successful and actually benefited from the lockdown following the COVID-19 pandemic, in which home delivery became the main channel for buying food. There are currently 16 different families working for the collective, which delivers food to about 150 families across Ankara.



Yüzüncü Yıl started as a resistance movement, as part of the broader Gezi Park protests, to a 2013 urban regeneration project. When the protests ended, Yüzüncü Yıl remained a space for discussions among members of the network and developed a community *bostan* and a food-distribution collective. As *bostan* production could only satisfy the group's minor needs, the collective identified and involved a variety of other producers outside the central area of Ankara who respected the criteria of the environmentally and socially sustainable food that the group's members aimed to buy and share.

These networks are quantitatively small, as they mobilise a few hundred people at most in the city centre, and only support small groups of farmers on the outskirts of the city. That said, the connections within the networks are generally strong. Networks of this kind have both strengths and weaknesses in terms of their capacity to expand and spread ideas and practices. One issue is that such networks are limited in size as members all need to share similar lifestyles and approaches. Moreover, as responsibilities are assumed on a voluntary basis, there is always the risk that key individuals may resign. This can create significant disruptions, as it is the strong ties among the members of the network which makes each actor important. During the research, this was observed to be the case with both Yüzüncü Yıl and Güneşköy, whose activities were neither heavily impacted by the restrictions due to COVID-19, nor the crisis of food prices. Instead, the main concern of such groups was to cope with the turnover of key actors, which had an impact on the entire network. However, the dense interconnections among these associations facilitated the replacement process as well as reciprocal support among networks. It is important to notice how the improvements in communication technology enabled these networks to increase their capacity of functioning through tools such as the WhatsApp groups, or other interactive applications that makes it easy to quickly exchange information and requests among members. Moreover, a dense network fosters the quick spread of ideas and practices. This not only facilitated the access to healthier "products", but also reinforced the capacity of individual citizens to look for seasonal products and manage their own simple "process" by making pickles, pastes, or a molasses like syrup called *pekmez*. As the techniques mentioned do not require great expense or effort, the associations were available to help in the start-up, and the networks tended to

involve new smallholder farmers interested in developing all or part of their productions through these methods. A significant network of *bostan* grew around the city thanks to the collaboration of these bigger groups, which sometimes, as in the case of *Monibostan* in Gölbaşı, created its own local networks of supporters. However, as already explained, the small scale of these networks makes them resilient and cohesive, but also limited.

The impact and importance of these movements are mainly related to their capacity to influence public opinion and propose different political approaches. The recent problems in the food chain have confirmed the pertinence of the practices of these groups, which have been expanding in number since the global financial and food price crisis (Gajac and Pelek, 2019). This paper primarily focuses on the theories and strategies that these associations are implementing and the related ideas of the city that they envision. Before describing these points in detail, the next section will briefly summarise the methodology used in the research.

Methods and Techniques of Data Collection

Qualitative insights from different grassroots solidarity economy associations in Ankara were obtained in order to fully engage with grassroots associations. Classic ethnographic methods of anthropology and the participatory approach developed by Paulo Freire (1968) and Robert Chambers (1983) were utilised to explore the social networks these associations are built upon. Work began with the personal participation and snowball sampling of existing members of cooperatives for food exchange, with progressively broader networks of cooperatives relevant to our theoretical framework being subsequently investigated. As stated above, four main associations were identified in this process: the DBB, TADYA, Güneşköy and Yüzüncü Yıl. Similar approaches were utilised for other associations such as *Afşar Bala'm Kadın Kooperatifi* and *Suyugüzel Çiftliği* in Bala, or *Marangoz Ailesi Çiftliği* in Çamlıdere, although these association were analysed in less detail as they are based on smaller social networks. Moreover, the networks gravitating around these main associations, and which are accordingly incorporated other smaller groups inspired by these associations, such as *Yüzüncü Yıl Berkin Elvan Bostanı*, *Çiğdemim Bostanı*, *Monibostan* and *ODTÜ Bostanı*, were also explored.

After they had been identified, it was confirmed that the associations were willing to participate in the research



Table 1. List of Participants

Age group	Gender	Role
20 – 35	6 Female 2 Male	4 urban members; 2 rural producers; 2 bostan producers
35 – 50	6 Female 8 Male	6 urban members; 5 rural producers; 3 bostan producers
50 – 65	7 Female 4 Male	9 rural producers; 2 bostan producers

before the commencement of in-depth ethnographic exploration. Data was collected via two main tools: participatory observation and semi-structured interviews. Through participatory observations, the practices behind the functioning of the associations were analysed through joint efforts with other members of the networks. In the cases of *Güneşköy*, *TADYA*, and *Yüzüncü Yıl*, research was conducted through continued involvement in ongoing activities, or through joining currently organised activities. In addition to these observations, semi-structured interviews with organisers and members of the associations were also scheduled. Various results were obtained from these interviews, including the personal reasons for becoming involved in these food networks, the stories behind the associations and the involvement of the people interviewed, the impact of recent issues related to food prices on personal involvement, and plans and hopes for the future. Studies involved a total of 11 associations, the 4 main networks, and the other 7 smaller groups, and interviews with 33 individuals were conducted. Table 1 summarizes the gender and age-group of our participants, divided according the three main categories identified: the urban members of the network, the producers in the *bostan*, and the producers in the cooperatives located in rural areas.

Ethnographic data was triangulated with documents produced from both of these networks of associations and the existing literature. All of the data gathered through two filters was then assessed: discourse analysis for detailed examination of the information collected, and network analysis for the mapping of the foundational social networks of the associations. Use of these two forms of analysis enabled an in-depth exploration of the concepts, strategies and forms of communication used by the associations and new members. It is important to underline that the researchers are themselves part of some of

these networks and that the purpose of this ethnography is to represent the point of view of the participants and critically analyse their actions from within, focusing on the link between the activities of the associations and the urban territory of Ankara. The following section summarises the findings that emerged from these analytical processes.

Improving Food Production and Distribution in Ankara: Ideas and Results

The findings presented in this section are organised into three areas: the relationship with the environment, the role of local traditional knowledge, and the importance of seeking new forms of governance.

Protection of the Environment and New Relationships Between Urban and Rural Areas

When participants were asked why they got involved in communal food distribution networks, “nature” and “the environment” were among the most frequently mentioned points. Some emphasised the importance of healthy and safe food, or memories of relatives producing food in their villages, while others focused more on the need to protect the environment. In general, however, the main issue was the perception that the current methods of accessing reliable food products, both in terms of personal consumption and ensuring environmentally and socially sustainable chains of production, were inadequate. Two significant and connected elements in this regard were identified: the importance of accessing “healthy” food, i.e. alternatives to food over produced by agri-business corporations; and the importance of living a “healthy life” in terms of access to nature and green areas for recreation. It has been previously noted how the early movements in Ankara were inspired by the *Buğday* Association which introduced critical approaches to policies for rural development. The valuing of a healthy life



and food seems to build on those environmentalist ideas in reaction to the dynamics of economic development of the last two decades. It is worth noting that the majority of the participants in food networks were from central neighbourhoods of the city and aged between their 30s and early 50s, a demographic that was generally able to spend more money for better quality food. While it is true that it is generally the retired who are more able to regularly participate in the *bostans*, the main reason for the engagement of all groups in these activities was to obtain both a healthier life and healthier food.

One of the most commonly promoted methods for achieving such goals is organic agriculture which aims to provide healthier food and environment by avoiding the use of chemicals in every phase of production. In the cases of associations working in Ankara, organic production is just one tool in a broader approach to reshaping food chains, with the focus being more on actual soil management and food production. Neither *Güneşköy*, nor the producers of TADYA, currently have official certification as organic producers due to the cost of such documentation. In fact, the high cost of such certification means that it is only available to large companies with a high financial turnover and access to extensive distribution chains (De Neve et al., 2008; Shakya and Clammer, 2017), neither of which is available to the associations involved in this research. Instead of mere certification, such associations propose a “holistic” approach in which healthy food and a healthy environment does not mean just avoiding chemicals, but also producing food while respecting biodiversity and the sustainable use of land on a small scale. It is via such efforts that ‘organic’ methods more accurately entail a return to local traditional knowledge that used to be mainstream before the ‘green revolutions’ diffused ‘improved’ seeds and new chemicals to protect crops from pests. Hence, although organic certification is a tool that may help farmers access the market, it is argued that involvement in a network of community trust is preferable.

Although the above represents the main position, different opinions were also expressed. One example from Monibostan:

In Turkey, there is insufficient opportunity for something formed on a democratic level; there is no area of control.... You have to certify, I think. If everyone who produces is certified then this process can work much

more transparently (Participant to Monibostan, Gölbaşı, Personal communication, April 2023).

Specifically, the proposition made by Monibostan was to unite various small producers to obtain a single certification for the whole group which would, so it was believed, create a guarantee for all members of the chain. Although this is a divergent opinion, all participants agreed that being organic should not be an end in itself, but rather only part of the process towards an alternative way of production. Other measures which were considered important include reducing the distances between urban and rural contexts by organising regular field visits from Ankara to the farming areas, and workshops which teach people from the city how to care for seeds and plants, as well as efficient methods for processing and storing the vegetables. Both *Güneşköy* and TADYA organise regular visits to production sites, and they have also managed to obtain funding from international donors to develop specific programs for training and to increase awareness. The same rationale is given for the support and coordination of the various *bostans* across the city. In addition to the fruits and vegetables that can be shared thanks to these *bostans*, such gardens represent an effort to protect and value green areas in cities. The role of the Gezi Park protests in launching the *Yüzüncü Yıl* collective has already been mentioned, and similar experiences in other cities, such as Athens (Rakopoulos, 2014; Cappuccini, 2018) or Milan (Bettinelli, 2018), where various collectives were formed from the protests which continued to demand attention to the issues of green space and land consumption. These collectives attracted individuals who were concerned about the renewal of urban green areas, but who were not necessarily ideologically inclined towards political protest. Evidence of this was that one of the *bostans* was dedicated to Berkin Elvan, who was a fifteen-year-old boy killed during the Gezi protests in Istanbul. Activists realized how the shift of the collective from active protests toward shared practices of gardening attracted a wider participation to the *bostan*. In the words of one activist, who was a student at ODTÜ when the *bostan* was created:

even though its name is Berkin Elvan orchard, even people who might be against the name Berkin Elvan politically were coming and doing something there (Participant to Berkin Elvan *bostanı*, Personal communication, February 2023).



Finally, revisions made to the modalities of production and the different relationships between urban and rural areas also aim to value the existing villages around the main districts of Ankara and increase income through agriculture, the reduction of which has contributed to migration to the cities. This is an aspect that most participants refer to with the word ‘solidarity’, although how the word is used is slightly different to its standard use in civil society to describe support for the most vulnerable. In fact, ‘solidarity’ in this context is not just about helping the poorest members of society, but rather describes a broader way of creating cohesion, interaction, and mutual support. In discussing their *bostan* at ODTÜ, one participant explained what ‘solidarity’ means for her:

People who wouldn’t normally have such a bond come to the garden and work together, and then those relationships develop, in fact, into a different kind of relationship. I think solidarity describes a place where people from different areas, with different views on life and different backgrounds, are gathered so they can produce together (Participant to ODTÜ *bostanı*, Personal communication, February 2023).

It can be seen that the main aim of these associations is not to help those who struggle to access food, but rather to change the economic model to prevent social marginalisation. In this sense, a common connection is detected around the idea of “food sovereignty”, which considers solidarity as the connection between rural and urban citizens that guarantees community-driven food production. The idea, consistent with other experiences, is that rather than focusing on urban poverty and direct support for either subsistence or entrance into the market, effort should be made to prevent the exodus to cities by creating more job opportunities in farming areas. Interestingly for TADYA, the COVID-19 pandemic had the unexpected positive impact of villages being reanimated by many people returning to their villages from the city because of the restrictions imposed in urban areas. The activities of TADYA were thus boosted as production was ensured by regular supplies of food with prices that were not cheap, but were quite stable, as well as conditions that were flexible throughout the pandemic period. Indeed, while the amount requested by these associations for their products was generally higher than the cheapest available prices, they were more stable and not much higher than those of many markets in the central parts of Çankaya in Ankara’s city centre. Protecting the remain-

ing green spaces and increasing awareness of the importance of farming and the rural lifestyle is also implicit in most of these practices, especially in the urban *bostans*, which helps to create both a friendly social context and the dissemination of new knowledge.

*People don’t know each other, and everyone is hostile. We had to change the situation and there was no such thing as food security.... We searched for a place in the neighbourhood... where we could create a better environment. It was not a very small garden in terms of size, but a medium-sized garden where many people could come and work together.... The people who wanted to live in the countryside, but had no previous relationship with the land, wanted to learn. So, we decided to have a place like a laboratory and create a permaculture in various businesses here.... The idea emerged at a point where many needs converged, so we thought, “Let’s both learn about these needs and see the results” (Participant to Berkin Elvan *bostanı*, Personal communication, February 2023).*

However, it remains difficult to expand the model into poorer neighbourhoods of the city, and requirements in terms of the time needed to participate in activities such as visiting farming sites, ordering food, or processing higher volumes during the harvest season, are also problematic for people with limited amounts of time. It was observed that buyers tended to be from the middle-class neighbourhoods of Çankaya, while sellers were mainly from rural villages outside the central urban area of Ankara. Furthermore, TADYA and Güneşköy were set up at a time when land was more accessible, while nowadays launching new activities in rural areas would be expensive, which would make the whole chain difficult to sustain.

Let’s collect apples from ODTÜ and make vinegar, while I can earn money, but we are people who have concerns about how to earn... Land is now very expensive, and it was already very expensive before Covid... unless it is inherited land, it will require capital for me to go and buy a place (Participant to TADYA, Personal communication, March 2023).

This participant in her early 30s acknowledges that having a relatively stable occupation enables her to participate in these activities, but it would be impossible for her to become more deeply involved. Another participant recognizes that they are able to engage in these networks because they can invest some of their money and

time, which is not the case for many people in Ankara. Although the difficulty of involving many participants from more peripheral neighbourhoods appears to be a limitation, creating strong ties between the actual city centre and the surrounding rural areas is important for spreading and keeping alive the practices and knowledge of these peripheries. In order to create such ties, TADYA is considering ecotourism (Figure 4):

We are considering ecotourism as a way of reinforcing the economic dimension of the activities and the direct sales. As ecotourism is based on inequality, with rich people coming from the city to poor rural areas, it is, in itself, not a good practice, but at this stage it can help us to support local producers (Organizer from TADYA, Personal communication, November 2022).

Another recent phenomenon, which was amplified by COVID 19, is migration back to rural areas. This is mentioned by in the literature as well as by numerous participants in the study (Atalan-Helicke, Abiral, 2021). Reviving rural life in peri-urban areas is itself a central issue. The aim of ecotourism is not only for entertainment, but to also disseminate the “local knowledge” developed and used by TADYA. Migration back to rural areas may also contribute to reinforcing these ties and reviving old practices, although the previous quotes about land prices showed the risk of gentrification, connected to both tourism and middle-class migration. A representative from TADYA emphasized this risk in our interviews, as well as the importance of finding a middle ground between

the need to increase relationships without fostering commodification. The importance of strengthening relationships to prevent local traditional knowledge and practices being forgotten is considered in the following section.

Local Traditional Knowledge and New Sensitivities in Relation to Food Chains

As noted above, an important economic aspect of solidarity is the organisation of activities to share knowledge and practices. A particular emphasis on the importance of seeds was noticed in TADYA. Every year stocks are renewed, new varieties are experimented with, and neglected local seeds are studied to facilitate the use of specific locally suitable crops. In Monibostan (Figure 5), the initial focus was on *atalık* seeds, or “seeds of the ancestors,” which were shared among farmers:

there are many associations, communities, etc., which are covered by the name atalık seeds: the first seeds we obtained (Organizer from Monibostan, Personal communication, April 2023).

However, as biodiversity is valued, as is the extension of networks of exchanges, it was decided to test different varieties of the strongest crops (tomatoes, peppers, etc.) and use the notion of “tradition” as a starting point for testing further innovations, and of the exchange of seeds with other producers. In TADYA and Monibostan, the focus is on seeds for the development of specific crops. ODTÜ Bostan, due to its connection with the ODTÜ forests, is developing practices which aim to value the wild



Figure 4. Camping area near by Tahtacıörencik.
Photograph: Valerio Colosio, Esra Demirkol Colosio, 2023.



Figure 5. Mint and strawberry farming at Monibostan.
Photograph: Valerio Colosio, Esra Demirkol Colosio, 2023.



products of the forests. Agro-forestry is indeed a potentially important dimension of agro-ecology in a context like Ankara, where the area of forests is significant, and thanks to reforestation programs, more stable than that of agricultural areas (Öncel & Levend, 2023). There is clearly great potential in the capacity of realizing a variety of products through fruits and herbs that grow naturally in the forest.

Dense networks can help facilitate these exchanges. *Güneşköy* positioned itself as a model of sorts and actively worked to engage with other farmers. Two minor producers were located during research who had begun their activities after receiving training from *Güneşköy*. This association acts as a collector of a variety of local seeds that are stored and then exchanged freely among members, and it also contributed to the opening of an organic market in the neighbourhood of Ayrancı, in Çankaya, which encourages various farmers in the village of Hisarköy to switch to this type of production. As the main aim is not

necessarily the economic expansion of existing activities, but rather the diffusion of different techniques, *Güneşköy* continues to target smallholder farmers who might be struggling to access the market, and shares with them the opportunities that can arise by following a different approach. A visit was made to the market of Elmadağ in November 2022, at which volunteers from *Güneşköy* were administering a survey to small local farmers (Figure 6) to assess whether switching to organic production would be effective for them. This is consistent with the strategy of gradually diffusing alternative practices voluntarily.

The handling of seeds follows the same rationale in that both TADYA and *Güneşköy* (Figure 7) follow in the reproduction of their own seeds and focus on local crops that are suitable for local conditions. Sharing seeds prevents the need to buy new ones every year, thus reducing dependence on the market and emphasising a non-commodified approach to these goods, which are therefore considered as a local resource to be valued and shared, rather than merely a product to be bought or sold. Indeed, if we focus on the main practices developed by these groups, such as the set of rules of the DBB, the advance payment system of *Güneşköy*, the commonly established fair prices of TADYA, and the community-based decisions made by *Yüzüncü Yıl*, food is mainly a medium of exchange for developing, not only different connections with local regions, but also non-market-oriented social ties that lead to common decision-making processes and the sharing of risks and benefits related to agriculture



Figure 6. Farmer market in Elmadağ.
Photograph: Valerio Colosio, Esra Demirkol Colosio, 2022.



Figure 7. Seed bank of *Güneşköy*.
Photograph: Valerio Colosio, Esra Demirkol Colosio, 2022.



through alternative forms of governance. Further details are provided in the next section.

Governance of Food Chains Beyond the Logic of the Market: Ideas and Issues

Internal decisional processes are very important in grassroots associations. Both the existing literature (Miller, 2009; Dacheux & Goujon, 2011) and our ethnographic data emphasise the importance, as well as the difficulties, of implementing a grassroots “democratic” governance where all participants can express themselves and contribute to the decisions of the group. It has been seen how neoliberal policies have progressively reduced the ability of citizens to impact urban planning decisions, while the growth of real estate in agricultural areas has led to an explosion in land prices that is still impacting Ankara. Most of the associations described here aim to take control of plots of land and propose an alternative managing system.

Developed social networks are sure to develop shared political projects, although it may be challenging to extend these networks into different areas, which is why these associations have often been linked to critical engagements with localised issues. These associations try to create internal cohesion through shared values and a participative style of governance, as well as fostering interest in specific problems, but they may struggle both in handling intense turnover and extending their reach on a larger scale. Moreover, as the associations are small, extensive member participation is normally required. This is particularly true for groups which regularly share food, such as *Güneşköy*, in that a package containing fresh vegetables, depending on the season and the weather, is delivered every week. It was concluded that members are normally happy with the quality of the products but find the seasonal nature of production challenging:

The package arrived coming every week... in one year. We began to share the contents with our friends because they included too many products. Towards August the products became quite similar (Participant to Güneşköy, Personal communication, April 2023).

The commitment of the participants is crucial for the functioning of the networks. The DBB has developed a very detailed written code for associations and individuals interested in becoming members. The focus is on internally set parameters and the importance of the

community’s control of those parameters, which distinguishes a network such as the DBB from being a mere “consumer” of organic products. Participants are members because they actively contribute to and respect the specified criteria, without delegating their roles to an abstract “producer” or a labelling institution that will certify products. The importance of internal democratic mechanisms of decision-making varies for TADYA, *Güneşköy* and *Yüzüncü Yıl*. In TADYA, the main difficulty is finding common ground among various smallholder farmers about what to produce and at what price. A pricing meeting was held in October 2022, the basis of which was that decisions should be made by discussion towards a consensus, not by poll. The meeting was held in a coffeehouse, or *kahvehane*, and was equally attended by men and women. The meeting lasted for approximately two hours, and while some decisions had to be postponed because of a lack of agreement, consensus was achieved on most issues. The situation with *Güneşköy* and *Yüzüncü Yıl* is slightly different. This is because these associations do not involve farmers who need to harmonise their production, but rather members who need to agree on a common program, as well as on their personal and voluntary levels of engagement. Participation is voluntary, and so members do not earn a livelihood by working for these associations. In both cases, it was found that decision-making by consensus is difficult because of the need to coordinate actions and ensure balanced involvement among members. This was particularly an issue for *Güneşköy* when decisions about the appropriate response to the construction of a railway track (Figure 8) through the group’s land in 2013 had to be made, as well as during the COVID-19 and inflation crises when rising prices made it difficult for the association to make advance seasonal payments. Problems arose for *Yüzüncü Yıl* in adapting to transformations in terms of the priorities and agendas of the association, as well as dealing with turnover and the personal needs of individual participants. In general, while democratic and gender-balanced participation is an aim of all the associations involved, its actual realization presents challenges.

Another issue that emerged in relation to governance was the effort to engage with decision-makers through advocacy. Reference has already been made to the role that *Güneşköy* played in facilitating the creation of an organic market in Ankara. TADYA was also able to conduct important interactions with the district leaders of



Figure 8. The rail line construction into Güneşköy farmland.
Photograph: Valerio Colosio, Esra Demirkol Colosio, 2022.

Güdül, thanks to the organisation's ability to both attract external funding and mobilise people. The change of administration in the Ankara Metropolitan Municipality in 2018 created opportunities for agricultural and food policies negotiations (Ay et al, 2023). The "Our Food, Our Future" fair (*Gıdamız Geleceğimiz Üretici-Türetici Panayırı*),⁶ a mechanism created by the municipality to spread information about projects, proposals, and the needs of civil society, was on 15 October 2022 at Gençlik Park in Ankara. The purpose of such a mechanism is to facilitate the diffusion of knowledge and practices at the level of decision-maker, and a considerable number of the members of the networks analysed were represented and publicly expressed their projects and opinions. However, although such events and forms of cooperation do seem promising, participants in the research generally lamented the lack of inclusion. A general sentiment was how municipalities tend to make small concessions to politically signal interest or support without pursuing deep engagement:

There were various conversations such as gardening, support, etc. specific to the district council, but we did not see such active support, nor did we have an active relationship with the municipality. But they were not a hindrance (Participant to Berkin Elvan bostanı, Personal communication, February 2023).

Local authorities do not consider the economic model of grassroots solidarity as being a threat, and so are eager to make small concessions without embracing the models they propose. In other words, while rural workers and associations may be consulted, their opinions rarely have an impact in the making of major decisions about land use. Although all four associations, and most of the *bostan*, had meetings with the authorities and received some support for specific events, there was a lack of engagement regarding their methods and practices.

Following this ethnographic analysis, the next section will discuss the strengths and limits of this approach in terms of Ankara.

Moving Toward New Food Chains in Ankara?

This section summarizes the main conclusion reached from the ethnographic data. Connections are made between data related to global issues and the general theories discussed in the first sections in order to assess such connections from a more practical point of view. Economic anthropology theory demonstrates how economic exchanges also have a social and emotional dimension (Mauss, 1925/1990; Polanyi, 2001; Hann & Hart, 2009). Solidarity economy builds on this assumption to transform, through specific economic practices, social and political relationships to promote bottom-up democracy and an alternative relationship with the environment (Miller, 2009; Dacheux & Goujon, 2011). Both approaches reject the placing of concepts such as "consumption" and "consumers," in a central role, as such an assumption recognises that such an approach only leads to the commodifying of food products and common farming land, as well as disrupting the social connections between urban centres and rural peripheries. The ethnographic data exhibits a rejection of these dichotomies and widespread efforts made to take a different approach to the relationship between rural producers and urban consumers.

The overriding aim that emerged from the interviews and the practices of the associations was to create an alternative relationship between areas of food production and consumption. This aim represents the overriding concern of various critics of capitalism and has recently found traction among the social movements that have

⁶ <https://gidamizgelecegimiz.org/15-ekim-panayir>



emerged since the global financial and food price crisis of 2008. In his analysis of these movements, David Graeber (2011) noted how the dichotomy of production and consumption removes the non-economic dimensions of human choices from any analysis. This crucial issue that applies to the social, economic, and political aspects of solidarity economy movements. The refusal of most of the participants in these networks to be defined as being 'consumers', preferring instead to be referred to as 'participants' or 'supporters', and their efforts to go beyond the marketing price system, shows how important the criticism of this dichotomy is in appreciating the aims of the networks analysed here. Certain concepts which are relevant in efforts to meaningfully revise this dichotomy include the ideas that production sites are areas to become more familiar with, producers are actors with whom one should interact with in other contexts beyond merely the act of buying, and that food is not simply a product to be purchased, but that citizens can, and should, learn about methods to properly store and process food.

Moving beyond the dichotomy of producers and consumers also entails a different relationship with the environment. This is because assuming such a relationship means that the *terroir* is not considered a mere tool for production and/or profit, but rather a common space to share and inhabit together. Assuming such a relationship recognises the importance of the rural environment as being an integral element of the city to be preserved and valued. This study refers to such an approach as "local traditional knowledge," described by participants as being either traditional or merely old, and primarily includes simple practices passed down the generations by first-hand teaching. Such an approach encourages the development of a more harmonious and sustainable use of natural resources, as well as the importance of a more balanced relationship between urban and rural spaces.

It can be said that the associations working in Ankara are following trends that are spreading across Turkey. These trends, which started with the *Buğday* Association, value local crops, as well as traditional ways of processing and conserving food. In a city like Ankara, these aims overlap with efforts to protect the existing pockets of farmland across the city and integrate them into networks of exchanges and visits. This practice has the double aim of both reducing the need for food products imported over long distances, as well as protecting green areas as common spaces. Such associations are working on food

chains to spread awareness – both by informing citizens and advocating such approaches through local authorities - about the role of farmland and the connections with it. Raising awareness of topics such as the mitigation of climate change with the need to develop healthier lifestyles has led to efforts to engage neighbouring villages and build networks based on different uses of existing resources. Finally, and this is a specific peculiarity of Ankara, efforts made to enhance green and agricultural spaces ideally connect to the urban policies of the early republic period in which the rulers of the time tried to find a synthesis between the rural nature of Ankara, at the time a small city, with its transformation into the political capital of the newly formed republic. Recollection of this original ethos often emerged in the interviews, reinforcing not only the social, but also the cultural value of these efforts.

Finally, there are some important limits and issues of the approach that need to be mentioned. First, it was noticed how, in the relationships between rural and urban areas, inhabitants of the city centres are generally privileged buyers of external products. Secondly, despite efforts made to communally establish the prices, most decisions are impacted by the effects of the market on land and transport costs, as well as the need of the participants to establish a reliable livelihood. Thirdly, it is difficult for the associations to maintain their activities at the required level through voluntary engagement. Finally, it was observed that the impacts such initiatives have on political choices and gender dynamics is limited. This issue is highlighted by Alison Alkon and Julie Gutman (2017) in their argument, which builds on Patricia Allen's (2008) observations regarding the difficulties in going beyond the inclusion of the more privileged classes, on the limit of food alternative chains to effectively address structural problems. While a certain awareness of these limits among participants was seen, it was also noticed that difficulties existed in fully overcoming them. Although alternative food chains in Ankara can highlight relevant problems and propose pertinent practices to handle them, the transformative capacities of the organisations are limited. A variety of social and political actors do find alternative food chains attractive and effective, but the broader structural change that they require for complete success is more difficult to implement. Hence, although temporary and contingent agreements with political institutions may exist, such as those required for the cre-



ation of markets, it is clearly problematic to challenge the existing food regime in the current political landscape.

Conclusions

The aim of this study was to provide an analysis of the work done by grassroots associations on solidarity economy food chains in Ankara. The main finding of the research was that these associations aim to make a serious impact, not only on food distribution, but also on the connections between the city, citizens, and the urban and rural areas of Ankara through the creation of social networks to develop and share alternative practices in connection to specific locales. A particular goal in the context of Ankara is the notion of the city regaining the original ‘rural’ soul it is perceived to have had during the first years of the republic, as represented by the creation of the AOC. In order to achieve this, solidarity economy associations aim to build an alternative food system by revamping the “original” idea of Ankara as being a city within a rural forest that is able to feed its own citizens healthily and cheaply. The creation of *Yüzüncü Yıl* and *Gölbaşı* can be seen as a reaction to the experiences observed in more rural districts, as well as in the green areas of ODTÜ, in which there has been a perceived loss of the green areas representing that spirit, and an increasingly experienced vulnerability in terms of access to safe and healthy food. The movement can also be expressed as part of a collective effort to redefine some of the broader categories and practices implemented by the current food regime. Such practices originate from the perceived impoverishment of urban spaces in relation to the loss of both green and farming areas, as well as local traditional knowledge related to food. Indeed, while the idea of “food sovereignty” and criticisms of dependence on global markets for food and soil consumption for construction were once relatively abstract issues, recent crises have created broader awareness about the potential economic, social, and environmental impact of the actual “food regime”. Although not as radically as in grassroots applications, some elements of this model seem to be penetrating into local policies, and the aforementioned crises have provided some space for the work of such grass roots associations.

A common foundational aim of the associations included in this research was the desire to create a new relationship between citizens and the territories they inhabit in order to establish alternative connections between the central city of Ankara and its rural surroundings. The awareness

that the commodification of not only food, but also land and other natural resources, was impoverishing Ankara in terms of its general well-being, cultural diversity, and the agency of its more marginal citizens, created the desire to create alternative spaces where these resources could be handled differently. The workshops organised by *Güneşköy*, as well as visits arranged by TADYA and various *bostans* across the city, all represent efforts to create alternative interactions with the spaces of the city.

In this sense, the concept of solidarity that has been identified as being at core of this research is not expressed as charitable help for the powerless, but instead refers to the interdependence and sharing of experiences that exists among actors. The marketisation of food had previously framed the relationship between actors as being separate and competitive. Hence, the individuals who operate within this notion of solidarity are not consumers or producers, but rather informed citizens who share and exchange with the common purpose of working within a better system. The alternative approach proposed by these associations tries to establish alternative practices and engage with existing urban institutions with the hope of expanding on a voluntary basis and slowly transforming the city.

Taking the idea that certain resources should not be managed exclusively through a market approach as their operating principle, these associations attempt to redefine the categories used to refer to the various types of rural workers. A consequence of refusing to frame food as being merely a “product”, and rural workers as merely “producers” for “urban consumers”, is the need to develop and share a more profound knowledge of the entire food chain in which grassroots associations strive to produce and locally share knowledge about seeds and local ways of processing and storing agricultural products. Discussions of local traditional knowledge in a cradle of agriculture like Anatolia may evoke fixed practices that have been utilised by peasants for millennia. However, the overarching aim is not to revive a mythical past or ossify diets or farming methods, but rather to protect the biodiversity of the area and disseminate a variety of seeds that are suitable for the local territory in terms of water needs, the agricultural calendar, and their effective utilisation. While modern agriculture as fostered by the “green revolutions” values of monocropping and improving seeds to homogenise and optimise production, the agroecological approach proposed by solidarity associations values



diversity, intercropping, the valorisation of existing wild herbs, and the practising of simple food processing procedures. Sharing seeds and self-producing organic pest control products and fertilisers are all practices that are valued among grassroots associations as tools to challenge the existing “food regime” and emancipate both rural and urban workers from the vagaries of the markets and the decisions of agri-business corporations. Teaching self-production methods of products such as pickles, tomato and pepper pastes or purées, dried fruit, or *pekmez*, is reviving what used to be common knowledge in Ankara, while making it possible to handle summer overproduction and diversify a diet weakened by urbanisation and industrialised production.

The availability of fertile land on the outskirts of Ankara enabled these associations to create strong ties with more central neighbourhoods and jointly promote an alternative approach. Citizens who follow the seasonality of production and know how to transform the surplus fruits and vegetables of the summer are applying simple but effective strategies to foster a deeper knowledge of the *terroir* and better manage local products as resources to be preserved and developed. As these techniques do not require expensive investment or capital, smallholder farmers are able to access the networks. The members of the associations can decide whether they will continue to work through these networks alone or diversify their types of production. This was experienced amongst female farmers working with TADYA, people trained by Güneşköy, and people working on different *bostans*. It can therefore be seen that, to a certain degree, the resurrection of local traditional knowledge is able to empower people with less capital or access to credit. Such practices aim to be models capable of influencing the governance of the city.

All of these dynamics are harmonious with the general literature on solidarity economy which was described in the first section. The same limitations described by the literature and recognized by most of the activists involved in the research were also encountered in the research: the difficulties in expanding alternative practices beyond a certain scale without structural changes; the limitations in the involvement of participants, especially of those with limited economic resources; and the risk to becoming “tokenized” by political authorities. All of the above risk neutralizing some of the more “transformative” aspects of the practices proposed. The grassroots networks

investigated in Ankara are not capable, and neither have the purpose of promoting on a large scale the radical paradigm shift they desire. They are cohesive and functional groups that, within a context with an important rural past such as Ankara, manage to remember, rework, and disseminate elements of local identity and culture endangered by the rapid socioeconomic transformations of the last decades, laying the foundations for imagining and apply on a small scale a different relationship between citizens, the urban environment, and their food.

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