Expanding Well-Being by Participating in Grassroots Innovations: Using the Capability Approach to Explore the Interest of Alternative Food Networks for Community Social Services

Sergio Belda-Miquel 🆔 *

Departament de Treball Social i Serveis Socials, Facultat de Ciències Socials, Planta 2, Office 1D10 Universitat de València. Av. dels Tarongers, 4B, València 46021, Spain

*Correspondence to Sergio Belda-Miquel, Departament de Treball Social i Serveis Socials, Facultat de Ciències Socials, Planta 2, Office 1D10, Universitat de València, Av. dels Tarongers, 4B, 46021 València, Spain. E-mail: *sergio.belda@uv.es*

Abstract

Grassroots social innovations are citizen-led initiatives that develop bottom-up solutions to societal challenges. Alternative food networks (AFNs) are innovations which propose alternative schemes for distribution and consumption of food— such as community-based agriculture or food cooperatives—which can improve the well-being of participants. Its potential for social work and social services has been recognised, but remains underexplored. This paper proposes a theoretical framework based on the capability approach in order to explore the impacts, drivers and factors at play in the expansion of well-being in participants in AFNs. This framework is applied to address seven cases of different kind of AFNs in Valencia (Spain) and to explore implications and strands of action so community social services can make use of AFNs. The study draws on information from thirteen interviews with participants of AFNs, local experts and policymakers; from secondary sources and from participant observation. It deductively uses the categories in the framework and inductively identifies specific capabilities, drivers and factors. The results show that AFNs expand well-being in several aspects of human experience. They are highly diverse, from more reformist to more radical, so they can mobilise different publics. Social services can benefit from this impact and diversity.

Introduction

There is a growing academic interest in understanding how citizens can contribute or even lead transitions to more sustainable and just societies by transforming the patterns of everyday production, exchange and consumption of goods and services (Hossain, 2016; De Moor, 2017). In this regard, the idea of 'grassroots innovation' has been attracting increasing attention (Seyfang and Haxeltine, 2012).

Grassroots innovation has been defined as 'networks of activists and organisations generating novel bottom-up solutions for sustainable development' (Seyfang and Smith, 2007, p. 585). They favour localised and democratic economies, placing well-being at the centre (Hossain, 2016). They present very different organisational forms, such as cooperatives, informal neighbourhood and community groups (Seyfang and Smith, 2007), although they frequently combine arrangements from public, civil society and private sectors (Matthies *et al.*, 2020). From cooperative housing to social currency, they operate in very different domains (Seyfang and Longhurst, 2013).

Recent literature has highlighted the relevance of grassroots social innovations to social work and social services (Matthies *et al.*, 2020) in a context of families facing increasing needs and of growing concerns about the effectiveness of services (Winter *et al.*, 2020). For many authors, social services should look at practices which combine organisational traditions (Fantova, 2014). The practise of social work should be committed to participatory and creative initiatives aimed at inclusive economic models, such as those led by grassroots innovations (Schmitz *et al.*, 2012; Weber, 2012; Morales-Villena *et al.*, 2021).

Literature has explored the relevance of grassroots innovations for social work in domains such as water management (Case, 2016), energy consumption (Weber, 2012), cultural initiatives (Matthies *et al.*, 2020), post-disaster recovery (Ku and Dominelli, 2018), rural development (Ku and Kan, 2020) and community-based enterprises (Elsen and Wallimann, 2008). The literature suggests that this relation between grassroots innovations and social work and social services may be 2-fold. Firstly, social work can create and reinforce initiatives of grassroots innovation (Matthies *et al.*, 2020). Secondly, social work can benefit from existing grassroots innovations, as they 'offer alternative forms of work and participation for people at the margins' (Matthies *et al.*, 2020, p. 385).

The specific interest of bottom-up initiatives in the food sector for promoting well-being through consumer engagement has been recognised (Michel-Villarreal *et al.*, 2019). Under the umbrella concept of AFNs (Forssell and Lankoski, 2015), literature has described innovative food systems which are somehow oppositional to 'conventional' ones: AFNs are characterised by shorter distances and on trusting relationships between producers and consumers (as opposed to conventional long supply chains); by small-scale, diverse, family and organic local production (as opposed to large-scale, monoculture and highly mechanised agriculture) and by venues such as cooperatives and farmers' markets (as opposed to supermarkets) (Ilbery and Maye, 2005).

Nevertheless, only a few studies have explored the connections between AFNs and social services. In general, studies focus on 'production' and on 'how social workers can create or reinforce AFNs', such as organic farming, food cooperatives and short commercialisation channels (Ku and Dominelli, 2018; Matthies *et al.*, 2020). In contrast, the focus on 'consumption' and the question on 'how existing AFNs can support or reinforce social work services and social work interventions' has yet to be investigated.

Exploring this question implies addressing another gap in the literature. Although a number of studies highlight that consuming food through AFNs expands well-being (Forssell and Lankoski, 2015), only a few have explored the 'specific dimensions' in which it is expanded. These studies refer to improvement of health; enhance community life and social support (Belda-Miquel *et al.*, 2020; Neulinger *et al.*, 2020); building identities (Neulinger *et al.*, 2020) or creating sense of empowerment and capacity to participate in social change (Zoll *et al.*, 2018; Belda-Miquel *et al.*, 2020; Neulinger *et al.*, 2020). Equally, only a few studies have explored the 'mechanisms' deployed by AFNs for expanding the well-being of participants. These studies almost exclusively focus in that AFNs have this potential because they enhance participation and create new social relations (Sánchez Hernández, 2009; Lockie, 2009; Belda-Miquel *et al.*, 2020).

The question about 'which specific dimensions of well-being are expanded' and which 'drivers and mechanisms' are at play remains unexplored. Moreover, analyses of AFNs mostly focus on a single case (Michel-Villareal *et al.*, 2019). Considering the diversity of AFNs, this limits the potential of the research for obtaining reflections for social work practice.

Taking all this into account, this study proposes a theoretical framework that is suitable for exploring the impact, the drivers and the factors at play in the expansion of well-being for people participating in AFNs. This framework is applied to address several empirical cases of AFNs, from which the paper explores the specific implications for social services.

The theoretical aims of the study draw on the capability approach, associated with Amartya Sen but widely used by an increasing community of scholars. This approach offers a multidimensional perspective of well-being that has proven to be very appropriate for exploring the expansion of opportunities in the fields of social development (Robeyns, 2016) and of social work policy and practice (Kjellberg and Jansson, 2020). Nevertheless, the approach has been used in very few studies of AFN, only with exploratory aims and only for addressing single case studies (Clavin, 2011; Belda-Miquel *et al.*, 2020). In the current paper, this approach will be connected with some elements from the literature on social innovation, in order to better address its aims.

The paper addresses several AFN initiatives in the city of Valencia. This is a pertinent case, as the city has experienced significant growth in the number, diversity and visibility of AFNs. Moreover, there is an increasing interest in AFNs related to local public policies in areas such as land management, innovation and social services. The empirical exploration will establish the implications for general community social services—the basic social services level in Spain (Pastor Seller, 2017).

The next section outlines general ideas on AFNs and their relevance for community social services. The 'Theoretical framework' section presents the framework. Subsequently, the paper presents the cases under study and the methodology. Then, the results, discussion and final comments are presented.

AFNs and their relevance for social services

Studies on AFNs generally agree that their emergence was originally driven by the demand of urban consumers, mostly affluent ones, looking for seasonal, locally grown, organic and fairly traded products (Jarosz, 2008; Lockie, 2009). Nevertheless, studies have also shown that participants in AFNs may come from very different socio-economic levels, including the lower levels (Lockie, 2009)—from which users of Spanish social services usually come. Studies also illustrate cases of AFNs established in deprived areas, as AFNs can emerge from different political, economic and socio-cultural processes, thus generating very different models (Jarosz, 2008).

In fact, AFNs can involve a variety of schemes, such as food cooperatives (consumer cooperatives which build fair relations with local producers); community-based agriculture and food groups (self-managed groups which establish stable relations with local producers); box-schemes (direct purchase, either on the Internet or at a physical premises, of vegetable boxes from farmers) and community gardens for self-production; farmers' markets, etc. (Michel-Villarreal *et al.*, 2019).

This diversity is also present in the radicalness of the innovations they propose. Some AFN initiatives are similar to mainstream channels, whereas others explore substantially different ways of commercialising and consuming food (Follett, 2009). The distinction made by Marqués et al. (2018) between 'radical' and 'complementary' social innovations is thus applicable. For these authors, on the one hand, 'radical' social innovations explicitly challenge the status quo and propose activities that fundamentally reshape how essential goods and services are delivered to improve welfare (Marqués et al., 2018). On the other hand, 'complementary innovations' are those activities that seek to improve the production and delivery of certain goods and services, without radically reshaping current institutional arrangements or power structures (Marqués et al., 2018). As these reformist innovations do not challenge mainstream values and behaviours, they can usually gain users, grow and replicate more easily.

Studies reveal various ways in which AFNs can contribute to the sustainable development of communities (Matacena, 2016): at the environmental level, they can increase agrobiodiversity, reduce emissions and help in achieving sustainability agendas; at the social level, AFNs can promote social justice and social capital that can spill over into other community initiatives; at the economic level, they enhance local economic circuits. This potential been acknowledged in the case of local public policies in Spain: for example, several local food strategies recognise the role of AFNs, such as those in Valencia (Ayuntamiento de Valencia, 2018) and Barcelona (Ayuntamiento de Barcelona, 2016). Nevertheless, these policies mention the connections between AFNs and social services only very superficially, focusing on the potential to use food from AFNs to supply the needs of catering services.

Considering the nature of AFNs, they can be of particular relevance for those social services more directly connected to the community. In the Spanish case, these services correspond to the so-called 'general community social services', which are the primary care level, as opposed to the specialised services level—the secondary care level (Pastor Seller, 2017). These community social services are managed locally and organised geographically in social service centres. They are versatile basic structures which provide basic services to citizens, be they individuals, families or groups (Pastor Seller, 2017).

Existing regulations (Ministerio de Sanidad, Servicios Sociales e Igualdad, 2013) guarantee that the basic services provided are: (1) 'Information and guidance' on the access, use and enjoyment of social resources; (2) 'support unit and home help', that is, the provision of personal care, psychosocial, educational, technical and domestic support for families and groups in their own environment; (3) provision of 'alternative accommodation' when people do not have or cannot stay in their family units; (4) 'vulnerability and social integration', which are

preventive measures aimed at strengthening of people's social networks and (5) promotion of 'social solidarity and social cooperation' of individuals and groups in these communities.

As will be explored, AFNs can be used by social workers in order to increase the choice and the influence of users in the delivery of these services. In this sense, AFNs can be an instrument for advocacy. This connects with the specific tradition of advocacy which focus in 'fostering identity and control' (Freddolino *et al.*, 2004). Beyond advocacy strands which are based more on representation, on creating support systems or on legalistic considerations, this tradition focuses on fostering meaningful relationships in communities and in controlling the apparatuses that offer services with the support of advocates. As it will be shown, AFNs can be relevant in this sense.

Theoretical framework

The capability approach

The capability approach is based on the core idea that well-being should be approached in terms of the opportunities or freedoms people have to live the life they have reason to value, which are called 'capabilities' (Sen, 2000). People may value different beings and doings, called 'functionings'. Examples of beings may be being well-nourished or being part of a supportive social network. Doings may include concepts such as living in contact with nature or taking part in public life. They can be achieved because people have capabilities, but whether or not they occur depends on the 'choices' of individuals (Robeyns, 2005). In this way, the capability approach recognises a plurality of life options (Alkire and Deneulin, 2009).

There is a key distinction in the capability approach between means and capabilities. Capabilities require certain 'means' or 'resources', be they goods or services, material or otherwise, which can be produced by the welfare system, the community, the market, etc. These resources can create capabilities, depending on the particular context and person (Robeyns, 2005). The relationship between resources and capabilities is mediated by 'conversion factors', the aspects modelling how people can transform means into capabilities (Sen, 2000). These factors are of various types, such as personal (e.g. education, gender and physical conditions) and social (e.g. norms and beliefs), institutional and environmental. For example, a person may have access to a health system, but this will not lead to the capability of being healthy if access to the system is limited by geographical issues.

There is a central academic debate on the capability approach, concerning whether it is possible or desirable to identify a 'list' of

capabilities which can be valuable for any person in any particular con-
text. Some academics, including Sen, have argued that this is not desir-
able, as 'to have such a fixed list [...] is to deny the possibility of fruitful
public participation on what [capabilities] should be included and why'
(Sen, 2004, p. 77). Other authors, notably Martha Nussbaum (2003), con-
sider that the capability approach is too vague, and that it is possible
and desirable to build a reasoned and flexible universal list of capabili-
ties. For this reason, Nussbaum (2003) has proposed a reasoned list
which has been very influential in the assessment of social development
policies and process (Robeyns, 2016). It identifies some core capabilities
that, on the bases of human rights, every democratic system should pro-
mote (Nussbaum 2003).

1. Life: being able to live a human life of normal length.
2. Bodily health: to have good health and to be adequately nour-
   ished and sheltered.
3. Bodily integrity: entails being able to move and to be safe from
   violence and to have opportunities for sexual satisfaction.
4. Senses, imagination and thought: entails capabilities related to
   the use of the senses, to imagine, to think, reason, express or ex-
   perience pleasure.
5. Emotions: being able to have attachments to things and people
   and a full emotional development.
6. Practical reason: the capability to reflect critically and to have a
   conception of what is good.
7. Affiliation: to live with and towards others, to engage in relation-
   ships and to have self-respect.
8. Other species: the capacity to live with concern for and in rela-
   tion with the natural world.
9. Play: implies being able to laugh, play and enjoy.
10. Control over one's environment: having two aspects, a political
    one, such as being able to participate effectively in political
    choices and a material one, related with the capacity to seek
    work and own property.

Adapting the CA to address AFNs and their implications for social services

A combination of elements is used in the study involving ideas on
AFNs, types of innovation (radical and complementary), general con-
cepts on the capability approach, aspects of Nussbaum's core capabilities
and from Spanish community general social services. This allows a
framework to be constructed in order to explore the expansion of well-
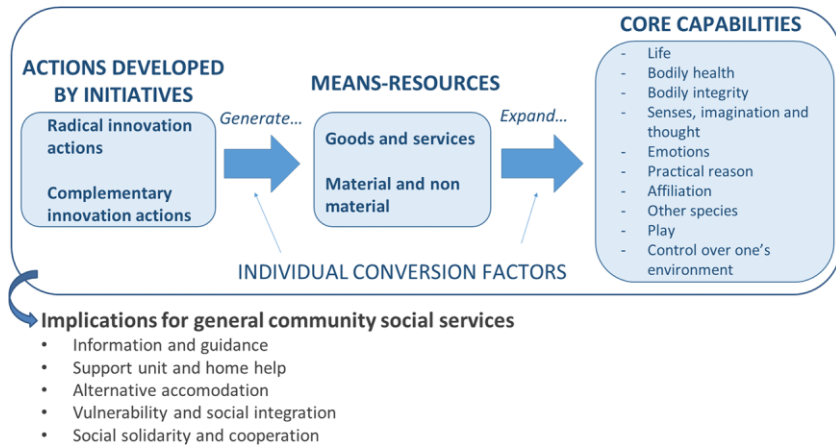being in participants in AFNs, the drivers and factors of this expansion

Figure 1: Theoretical framework for exploring AFNs.
Source: Prepared by the author.

and the specific implications for social services in the Spanish context (see Figure 1).

Case studies

This section briefly describes key aspects of the initiatives to be studied:

- *Som Alimentació* (SA). A consumer cooperative formed in 2017, self-defined as a 'participatory supermarket' (Som Alimentació, 2020). It runs a physical store open to the general public and members, providing access to local and organic products. It has more than 650 members and 4 paid workers. Members may have different levels of commitment: from buying and voting in the general assemblies to more active participation. It is the only experience of this kind in Valencia.
- *La Morera* (LM) and *Grup de Consum de Vera* (GV). These are two food purchasing groups, fully self-managed, involving somewhere between seven and thirty families, which establish direct relations with local producers to periodically order food, which is received and distributed at the group's premises (usually weekly). They are fully democratic and based on volunteer work (usually organised in working groups). They operate in premises from the local council or from local associations. Around twelve of these groups operate in Valencia.
- *Way Colmena* (WC). This is an online food community, based on an Internet platform that facilitates the organisation of collective

food consumption. Members of the 'colmena' (hive) periodically order food from local organic farmers (and also exchange other information and discussions). They go to a meeting point weekly in which they collect the food and meet some of the farmers. Around ten to twenty families order food each week, with significant differences throughout the year. There are three 'colmenas' like this in Valencia.

- *Mercat agroecològic de la Universitat Politècnica de València* (*UPV Market*). A farmers' market run weekly on the campus of the Polytechnic University of Valencia. Promoted by University-based associations in 2012, it is now managed by the Vice-Chancellor of Social Responsibility with the support of the associations and of a farmers' cooperative. Around ten farmers sell their products. Two more markets are operating in the city and at least three more will operate soon.

- *Mastika l'Horta* (MH). This is an initiative by a farmer who sells vegetable and fruit boxes (as well as some processed food) directly to families. Consumers can order food weekly by using an online application and receive their products at some meeting points or at their homes. Several dozen similar initiatives can now be found in Valencia.

- *Biosofia* (BS). A local shop established in 2016, inspired by the idea of the traditional neighbourhood shop. It only sells local organic products and tries to work directly with farmers and to respect their prices and conditions. It goes beyond the idea of a shop, aiming to be a social centre in which workshops and continuous contact with customers take place. It is also a pick-up point from which consumers can collect vegetable boxes ordered from farmers.

These initiatives operate in different neighbourhoods in Valencia. Although this has not been analysed in depth, most neighbourhoods in the city seem to have easy access to AFNs, online or physically.

Table 1 summarises the information on the initiatives and highlights the commitments required from consumers and their relation with farmers.

Methods

The empirical work is based on the analysis of the aforementioned case studies. The purposeful selection of cases was done considering the following criteria: amongst the diversity of AFN (Michel-Villareal *et al.*, 2019), selected cases correspond to the six most relevant types of AFN that directly connect producers and consumers which can found in the

Table 1. Case studies

Case	Type of initiative	Consumer commitment and relation with farmers
Som Alimentació	Cooperative supermarket	Consumers may be members and can participate actively in decisions and daily operation.
La Morera and Grup de Consum de Vera	Food groups	Members engage very actively and undertake all the tasks
WayColmena	Platform-based on-line food community	Consumers are part of the community and can meet farmers when picking up products.
UPV Market	Farmers' market	Consumers only meet farmers and buy produce from them.
Mastika l'Horta	Vegetable box and direct sales	Consumers usually make a commitment to the farmer and buy frequently.
Biosofia	Local organic shop	Consumers only buy produce and can participate in some of the shop's activities.

Source: Prepared by the author.

city of Valencia (Cerrada Serra, 2019); cases were accessible to researchers and they were relevant as 'critical case studies' (Flyvbjerg, 2006) for discussing the framework and propositions. They are all well-established initiatives (at least four years in existence).

The research had an exploratory aim, given that it was proposing and empirically testing new theoretical propositions and addressing an under-studied topic. It adopted a purely qualitative methodological strategy aimed at capturing and understanding meanings, views and frames (Corbetta, 2003).

Various methods were used for gathering information:

- Thirteen semi-structured interviews to different kind of informants.
- Nine semi-structured interviews to participants of initiatives. One person from each initiative under study (and two in the case of each of the food groups) was interviewed. These interviews were oriented to understanding the operation of the specific AFN and its implications for participants. Researchers asked for persons with a broad perspective of the initiative and who have been actively engaged in then for at least three years. Then, specific persons to interview were proposed by the initiatives (food groups proposed two). The interview involved questions on the initiative's aims, organisation and operation; on the experience of learning

and change when participating and on the key drivers and aspects that made this learning and change possible.

- Two interviews with experts on AFN in Valencia. One person from academia and one from a local NGO were interviewed. These interviews were oriented to understanding the local context and the perceived potential of the AFN. Its structure involved questions on the potential, the relations, the general context and the policies regarding AFNs in Valencia.
- Two interviews with local policymakers. The head of the local department for food policies of Valencia city council and the head of the local innovation agency were interviewed. These interviews were oriented to understanding the local policy context of the AFN. Its structure involved questions on the general context and the policies regarding AFNs in Valencia.

All interviews were made between January and March 2019 by the same interviewer, had a duration between 30 and 50 min and were recorded and transcribed. Participants provided verbal consent at the beginning of the interview for the use of the information provided for the aims of the research, as well as for the anonymised publication of quotes.

- Secondary information: information was gathered from material produced by the cases themselves (websites, booklets and public statements) which contained their stated values, aims, objectives, perspectives and organisation and reports and public policy documents, which offered elements to understand the context (such as the local food strategy and other policy actions).
- Participatory observation: the author systematically gathered information, from September 2017 to May 2019 in several forums and meetings of AFNs in which the case studies participated. In situ condensed notes were gathered, separating descriptive and evaluative aspects.

The information was processed by means of a qualitative content analysis of the interviews, documents and notes from observation. In a first phase of analysis, researchers coded the data using predefined codes deductively drew from categories from the analytical framework: Nussbaum's ten core capabilities, 'resources' and 'conversion factors'. In a second phase, after the organisation of data considering these predefined categories, subcategories were inductively obtained from the data: specific capabilities related with each of Nussbaum's core capabilities, specific resources and specific conversion factors. During the analysis, common trends and differences between cases were identified, considering the differentiation between complementary and radical innovation posed in the framework. Discussion drew on these trends and on the implications for the specific services of the aforementioned Spanish community social services centres.

The study conforms to internationally accepted ethical guidelines and to relevant professional ethical prescriptions. Although there is no specific ethics committee at the author's institution that research with the characteristics of this study is required to address in order to receive approval, the study followed the general recommendations of its 'Research Committee' on the bases of its 'Code of Good Practice in Research' and in accordance with the 'European Code of Conduct for Research Integrity'—as is stipulated for any research within the Universitat de València. As examples of coherence with these ethical standards, the consent of interviewees is consistent with the models provided by the institution and data from interviews were anonymised before processing.

Results

Capabilities expanded by consuming through AFNs

The results identified that AFN initiatives may expand specific capabilities related with at least six of the core capabilities identified by Nussbaum (2003), as shown in Table 2.

As seen, three core capabilities are present in all cases. First, capabilities related with 'bodily health' are amongst those most mentioned, as revealed by statements such as 'buying [in the food group] allows me to eat more healthily' (Participant AFN 3, P3) or 'a key motivation to buy [in BS] is to easily buy healthier food, free of chemicals' (P11). These ideas can be inductively grouped in the capabilities to 'access food easily and safely' and 'being healthy'.

Second, capacities related with 'relation with other species' are also frequently mentioned. These questions are usually connected with self-respect and self-care, so they are also related with the core capability of bodily health: '[To consume organic products] implies love and respect towards nature and towards ourselves. As we like to say: if we take her of her, we take care of us' (Mastika L'Horta, 2020).

Thirdly, all cases mention aspects regarding the core capability of 'affiliation'. For example, interviewees and documents frequently mention the relevance of supporting small farmers and the local economy: 'Support local agriculture! In our groups, producers freely establish prices and receive a fair payment so they can develop their activities' (La Colmena que dice Sí, 2020). These ideas were inductively labelled as 'Capability of taking care of and protecting other people and the community'.

Other capabilities are only present in some cases. For example, only the food groups and the food cooperative clearly mention aspects regarding 'affiliation', which can be identified as part of the more specific 'capability of being part of and participating in a community or group'. For example, 'The best thing in the group is the things you share, the people

Table 2. Capabilities expanded through participation in AFNs

Nussbaum's core capabilities	Related capabilities that AFN users consider expanded	Cases in which they are mentioned
Bodily health	Capability to access food easily and safely.	http://www.pap.minhap.gob. es/bdnstrans
	Capability of being healthy.	ALL
Emotions	Capability of feeling connected with the community, the territory and the environment.	LM, GV (partially)
Practical Reason	Capability of thinking critically and to analyse the agro-food system.	LM, GV, SA
Affiliation	Capability of being part of and participating in a community or group.	LM, GV, SA, WC, BS
	Capability of taking care of and protecting other people and the community.	ALL
Other species	Capability of protecting natural goods, plants and animals.	ALL
Control over one's environment	Capability of controlling what you eat and what it is produced.	LM, GV, SA
	Capability of empowering others to control what they produce.	LM, GV, SA
	Capability of transforming the agro-food model.	LM, GV, SA

Source: Prepared by the author.

you meet, the group you create' (P1). In connection with this, only people in the food groups mention capabilities related with *emotions*.

Regarding 'practical reason', it is present only in the cooperative and in the food groups, which state in their objectives that they try to instil a critical view of the existing unfair agro-food system. This is also the case of the related ideas on 'Control over one's environment'. For example: 'we define the rules of the game, not the big companies' (Som Alimentació, 2020).

Key means that are generated by participation (and which generate capabilities)

The results identify key resources for expanding the capabilities mentioned, as presented in Table 3.

All initiatives provide certain resources to expand well-being. Firstly, by providing a channel to 'access to healthy food without intermediaries' (P9), something mentioned on all the webpages and by all interviewees. The channels involved vary (buying in a supermarket or a market, buying collectively, receiving food at home, etc.), but are suitable for the different targets. Secondly, all interviewees mention the importance of 'information', acquired mostly through relationships with producers or

Table 3. Resources to expand capabilities

Means or resource created by AFNs relevant to expanding capabilities	Cases in which it is mentioned
Platform to directly access fresh, local and organic products.	ALL
Information on responsible food consumption.	ALL
Direct contact with farmers.	ALL
Learning about farmers' projects in situ.	LM, GV, SA, CV, WC
Spaces of participation, exchange and debate.	LM, GV, SA
Access to new discourses and analysis of the food system.	LM, GV

with other AFN members. Thirdly, direct relations with producers (in the markets, when ordering the food in the food groups, when picking up the food at WC, etc.) are highly relevant for most interviewees: 'it is what makes it all worthwhile' (P10).

Some other resources to expand capabilities are frequently mentioned, but only in the AFN cases that require greater engagement from participants. For example, most interviewees refer to the importance of spaces of participation, discussion and celebration: 'it was in the assemblies and in informal spaces, like when we went to eat together after delivering the food, when everything happened, you learned, you shared, you enjoyed [...] the group was formed there' (P3). In some of these cases, people also mentioned the importance of learning about the daily lives of producers in situ: 'visits to farmers were fundamental [...]. Learning about this directly gives you something you cannot get otherwise. This is particularly important for new members' (P4). Finally, a few interviewees referred to the relevance that it had for them to learn about alternative and critical discourses, such as those regarding 'food sovereignty'.

Activities creating the resources

Following the classification of Marqués *et al.* (2018), the results suggest that some of the AFN initiatives under study propose more radical innovations, that is, which are significantly different to mainstream ways of buying food: they propose a more collective approach to consumption, involve more engagement and participation and present more critical views on the food system. This is the case of food groups and, to a lesser extent, of Som Alimentació. More superficially, WayColmena also presents some radical features.

The other AFN initiatives carry out more complementary innovations, such as the UPV market, 'Mastika l'Horta' or 'Biosofia'. They do not propose radical changes in the way food is consumed (e.g. buying in a local shop, in a local market or buying online). Nevertheless, they still

present some innovation in the kinds of products, the direct relations created and the values at play.

Conversion factors

The results reveal that different conversion factors operate depending on the kind of innovation at play. In the case of more radical AFNs, interviewees explain that various personal factors prevent people from participating: lifestyle, lack of time and availability and lack of familiarity with participatory and collective processes. For example, one of the experts interviewed mentioned that 'obviously, participating in a food group or similar initiative is not an option for the majority of people' (Expert 1). Members of these groups mentioned issues such as that 'it is difficult to engage new people', 'we do not reach certain kinds of people'. An interviewee from 'Som Alimentació' stated that, in fact, the organisation was created in order to 'offer an alternative, overcome the problems that food groups have, which demand a lot of engagement' (P6). Regarding lifestyle, one person from 'WayColmena' declared that 'it is difficult for people to overcome individualism. The question is not one of time, but of the priorities people have' (P5).

In the case of initiatives of more complementary nature, the results show that there are fewer limiting personal conversion factors, as they demand less engagement. Nevertheless, limiting factors still exist: people need to know about the initiatives, to have a certain predisposition towards them and no prejudices against organic products. For example, a person engaged in the UPV market mentions that 'people do not know when we are here, or they think that our products are too expensive' (P8).

Having economic resources is a limiting factor in all cases, but for the people in the AFNs under study, the products are not necessarily more expensive than those in supermarkets. Moreover, some members have the impression that people spend less on food when buying through an AFN, as this usually helps people to change buying habits, by eating more vegetables and less processed (and more expensive) foods.

Discussion

Trends identified and their implications for social services

Two trends seem to emerge in the AFNs under study. The first involves more radical initiatives, which are more participatory and create more quality relations and more intense learning processes. For these reasons, they have the potential to expand capabilities in more varied areas. Nevertheless, they demand more time and some participatory culture.

This trend involves the food groups and, to a lesser extent, 'Som Alimentació' and 'WayColmena'. This makes these initiatives interesting for social service users that, with the necessary support, could improve a number of different aspects of well-being related with health, emotions, reflection and relations with the community.

A second trend includes initiatives developing less radical consumption practices. Whilst they do not involve participatory processes, they do promote closer relationships with farmers and other people, alternative values and new reflections on consumption. These initiatives expand well-being in aspects such as those related with health, affiliation and taking care of the environment. Consuming through these AFNs does not require special commitment, but is dependent on some previous information, economic resources and a receptive attitude. This is the case of the farmers' markets, vegetable boxes and local organic shops. These initiatives may be interesting for social service users who, with limited information, time or motivation, can improve their health, self-esteem and interest in others through consumption.

In any case, a key aspect for social services is that there is a variety of AFN alternatives which can be appropriate for people with different profiles and motivations.

Specific implications for programmes in community social services centres

The results suggest a number of implications for the services offered by the general community social services in the Spanish system.

On 'Information and guidance on the access, use and enjoyment of social resources', community social service centres could easily offer information to the general public on AFNs in their area of action, explaining their benefits for well-being. In general, social workers could, when planning interventions, consider AFNs as a community resource. Depending on the case, users may benefit from complementary initiatives (e.g. for promoting users' healthy habits) or from more radical ones (e.g. in cases in which users' engagement in the community is a priority).

Regarding 'support unit and home help', complementary initiatives may be relevant for different kinds of interventions with homes and families: for example, when families receive food services at home, they could use food coming from local AFNs (e.g. vegetable boxes); in the case of educational support, AFNs may be useful to improve food and health habits (e.g. through visits to markets and farmers); when they receive support to improve family relationships, AFNs can be a source of interesting activities (e.g. making visits and picking up the pre-ordered food). In some cases, some family members may benefit from engagement in initiatives like food groups.

In programmes and actions of 'alternative accommodation', participation in AFN alternatives which require different levels of engagement may be also relevant. In some cases, such as residences or supervised flats (e.g. flats for minors), buying through an AFN (e.g. going to local markets and ordering vegetable boxes, etc.) can be promoted as a shared activity for the residents and a way to promote a healthier life and the feeling that they are taking care of themselves and protecting other people, the community and the environment. In some cases, residents may be supported in order to join more radical alternatives, in order to develop their feeling of actively participating in the community in which they live.

Concerning actions of 'vulnerability and social integration', encouraging engagement in more participatory AFNs can be an interesting resource for generating self-esteem and a sense of belonging to groups for people participating in various programmes preventing social exclusion. For employment programmes, participation in cooperatives or food groups can be highly relevant for developing skills such as teamwork or time planning.

With respect to the 'promotion of social solidarity and social cooperation', social service centres could work with AFN members, who could support social services by making it easier for their users to participate in AFN initiatives. These members could help social service users to overcome the problems of participation due to personal factors: they could provide information, give guidance on participation in meetings and assemblies and supply food to homes. This could, in fact, reinforce AFN initiatives and their social responsibility and also introduce more variety in the profiles of AFN members, which is a concern some interviewees sought to address.

Conclusions

This paper illustrates the potential of AFNs, and of grassroots innovations in general, to the contribution towards improving well-being. Social workers can take advantage of AFNs for advocacy actions aimed at increasing the choice and the influence of users in the delivery of social services. These services can take advantage of AFNs in the context of pressing challenges and the need to rethink welfare systems from a more participatory perspective.

The results show that these initiatives are very diverse, ranging from the radical to the more reformist, but that they can all expand well-being in several aspects of human experience, from health and emotions to the capacity to transform our environment. This takes place given that they create closer relations and mobilise alternative values of

solidarity and support. Nevertheless, there are important limitations for participation to be considered.

The study was exploratory in nature. For this reason, some questions, although relevant, were not addressed. For example, the study focused on the general potential of the different AFN initiatives, but not on the diversity and the complexities that may exist within each initiative. The people interviewed illustrated the potential of initiatives, not the very different processes that people may experience when participating in the AFNs. Moreover, the study did not address the power relations that take place within these initiatives.

Future research may focus on these questions, to better understand the potential and limits of AFNs. Moreover, the framework and methodological approach used could be applied in other contexts and for other grassroots innovations, in order to detect differences and common trends. In any case, the study shows that the potential of grassroots innovations to rethink social services is promising, but remains underexplored.

Acknowledgements

Funding

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