



Tracing Democratic Innovations: A Longitudinal Perspective on a Food Policy Council

Mattia Andreola, *PhD Candidate*

My research

Research fellow at **University of Trento**,
PhD candidate in AgriFood and
Environmental Sciences (C3A)

Research focus:

- *Sustainable Food Systems*
- *Alternative Food Networkss*
- *Urban Food Governance*

Participation in EU projects (SURFIT,
FOODIVERSE, NUEcity, SATURN)

Former visiting researcher at SIFO OsloMet
(Norway) and Aeres University of Applied
Sciences (Netherlands)



Introduction



The rise of FPCs:

- Multi-stakeholder platforms for sustainable food policies (e.g., Nutrire Trento).
- Goals: Food democracy, justice, and local resilience.

Focus:

- How can Food Policy Councils balance diverse representation and effective action?
- What happens when inclusion creates conflict or fragmentation?

Insights from a longitudinal case study: Nutrire Trento (2016–2023)

This study combines MLP + ESA to trace Nutrire Trento's evolution.



The context: Trento



Population

120000 residents; average age: 45,5;
foreign residents 11,6%;
families: 42,2% single-person households (2023)

Environment

located in the Adige River valley at 194m a.s.l., surrounded by mountains. Due to its terrain, agriculture is often conducted in terraces

Agricultural area

Trento municipality with largest agricultural area: 2536 ha (12/31/2020). Mostly vine and apple trees.
Trento organic agricultural area: 586,04 ha (31.12. 2023).

Farms

The province counts 16500 agricultural companies, all in all small farms. The cooperative model dominates (i.e. 80% of wine production)

The Case: Nutrire Trento



First Steps

Memorandum of Understanding in 2016;
Initiated in 2017 by the Municipality and
University

Diverse Composition

civic groups, farmers, activists, institutions,
researchers, shopkeepers, trade unions

Focus

sustainability, short supply chains, food education

Perspective

Substantive, not formal

Theoretical Framework + Methodology

Multi-Level Perspective (MLP):

- **Niches:** grassroots innovations (e.g., AFNs, Solidarity Purchase Groups).
- **Regimes:** dominant systems (e.g., conventional agriculture, farmer unions).
- **Landscape:** external shocks (COVID-19).

Event Structure Analysis (ESA):

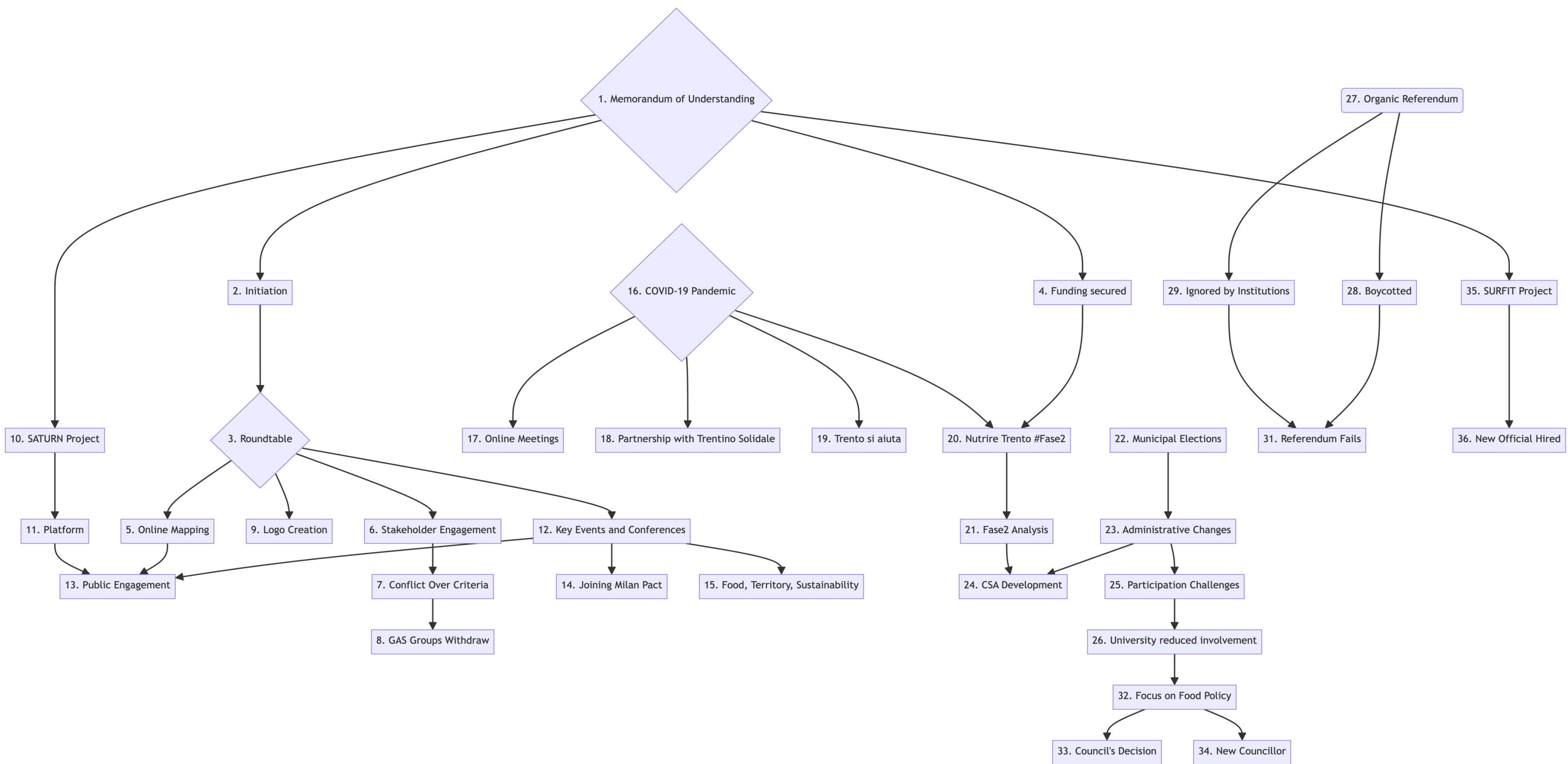
- Tracks nonlinear interactions between actors/events by following two logics:
 - **Implicative Question:** does Event Y imply the prior occurrence of Event X?
 - **Counterfactual Question:** if Event X had not occurred, could Event Y still happen?

Why MLP + ESA?

- MLP is criticized for its **lack of specific methodological** tools for empirically analyzing how and why factors are assigned to theoretical levels.
- ESA enables clear definition and operationalization of events

Methodology:

- **Ethnographic approach** (interviews, participant observation + field notes).
- Tracks 36 key events (2016–2023)
- Validated with interviewees to ensure accuracy.



Key Dynamics in Nutrire Trento's Evolution

1. Early conflicts over **Representation**

- Tension arose over including non-organic vs. organic producers.
- Grassroots actors (e.g., Solidarity Purchase Groups) temporarily withdrew, citing misalignment with sustainability goals.

2. COVID-19 as a **Catalyst**

- Pandemic renewed participation and collaboration.
- FPC launched home-delivery services and mapped local producers, re-engaging disengaged actors.

3. Political **shifts & setbacks**

- Municipal elections and administrative reshuffling slowed momentum.
- Divisive organic farming referendum (2021) deepened friction:
- Farmer unions boycotted; institutions stayed neutral.
- Academics and civic actors reduced involvement in protest.

Main Insights – Representation vs. Transformation

1. Tensions between **systemic** & **sectoral** logics

- Systemic intent vs. sectoral priorities
- Designed as a holistic space, but actors pushed competing logics (producer interests, activist values, institutional agendas).

2. Crisis as a **window of opportunity**

- COVID-19 reset alliances: re-engaged withdrawn actors, spurred municipal action (e.g., home-delivery networks, CSA schemes).
- Limits revealed: post-crisis participation faded, showing temporary openings **need institutionalization to endure**.

3. Institutional **ambivalence** & **legitimacy** gaps

- Grassroots drive innovation, but legitimacy is guaranteed by institutions
- However, ambiguity (e.g., neutral stance on organic referendum) eroded trust.

Key lesson: FPCs must iteratively **negotiate power and priorities**, a static representation is not enough.

Questions for discussion



- How can FPCs institutionalize **flexibility**, so that they can adapt to crisis opportunities without losing long-term coherence?
- And how can councils navigate **legitimacy** when both grassroots innovation and regime recognition are needed, but often pull in different directions?
- When institutions dominate (e.g., municipalities), how do we ensure niche voices **influence rather than just participate**?



**Thank you for
your attention!**

