CGIAR POLICY INNOVATIONS

The understudied potential of producer organizations as a collective action mechanism for equitable global food governance and food systems transformation - A literature review

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Key messages

1. Transforming food systems requires inclusive governance, yet the role of Producer Organizations (POs) in shaping global food governance (GFG) remains poorly understood.
2. While social movements and POs have increasingly been embedded within GFG arenas, foregrounding justice, equity, and sustainability as organizing principles, the research has not kept pace with this reality. The existing literature focuses predominantly on internal PO governance structures, decision-making, and organizational dynamics, while the question of how POs influence food system governance, particularly in the Global South, remains largely unexplored.
3. Global governance has evolved to incorporate diverse, non-state actors, including POs, but this can cause friction; when actors have incompatible development visions, it can either reinforce existing inequities or catalyze movement toward more just and sustainable food systems.
4. Knowledge gaps identified in the literature from a governance perspective include research needing to adequately address the diversity of governance arrangements, recognize the various forms of participatory food system governance, and how ecology, culture, and health issues are embedded within these processes. From a food systems perspective, how local food systems function and the characteristics defining Alternative Food Systems remain understudied and largely absent from the literature.

1. Introduction

Producer organizations (POs) are inherently part of food systems, and their role has been conspicuous and well-documented mostly in the Global North. In developing economies, the role of POs in food systems is less understood, despite their potential as powerful instruments for achieving food system transformation.

This literature review aims to examine POs' contributions to global food governance (GFG) and food system transformation, and to examine the remaining knowledge gaps.

A key challenge for a more just, resilient, and sustainable food system is the meaningful inclusion of a broad range of actors, such as food producers, researchers, policymakers, entrepreneurs, and consumers, in decision-making processes (Stiem-Bhatia et al., 2025). Indeed, GFG is characterized by a diversity of actors involved in establishing international rules and shaping policy beyond formal government structures (Okereke et al., 2009). In particular, GFG implies a shift from state-centric governance to the inclusion of private (for-profit and non-profit) actors such as multinational corporations, transnational non-governmental organizations (NGOs), academia, as well as the reduced sovereignty of powerful states through the influence of international organizations (Biermann and Pattberg, 2008; Biermann et al., 2009). Thus, the global food system, depending on the actors involved, the governance mechanisms in place, and the power dynamics at play, can either perpetuate and deepen inequalities and environmental issues, or promote transformation toward just and sustainable food systems.

In this context, we set out to explore the extent to which the available literature has studied the participation and role of POs in GFG and food systems transformation. The review presents insights related to the existing knowledge and gaps regarding the role of POs in GFG and food systems transformation, aimed at orienting future research as part of the Global Agrifood Governance Analysis (GAGA)[1] Hub.

2. Review methodology

We implemented a non-systematic, narrative literature review focusing on three concepts: "global (food) governance", "food system (governance)" and "producer organization (governance)". Based on the scientific articles identified published between 2005 and 2026, we examined both the existing knowledge produced and the gaps for these concepts.

In total, 70 scientific articles, three book chapters, and three reports were reviewed, as described in Table 1. The documents were identified through a Google Scholar search using the keywords "global (food) governance," "food system (governance)," and "producer organization (governance)." The documents were selected or rejected based on the topics mentioned in the title and abstract.

Based on this, we identified the main findings and knowledge gaps (reported or identified by the authors).

Table 1. Characteristics of the literature review, based on the concepts of "global (food) governance", "food system (governance)" and "producer organization (governance)"

Number of documents reviewed	Years of publication	Document types identified	Main topics mentioned in the document titles ranked by number of mentions
76	2005–2026	70 articles 3 book chapters 3 reports	30: Producer organization/Farmer organization 28: Food system governance 21: Local food system 21: Producer organization governance 19: Food system sustainability/Alternative food systems 10: Global governance 8: Global food systems 7: Social movements

1. The **Global Agrifood Governance Analysis (GAGA)** is an academic and policy framework that evaluates how corporate and state-level power shapes global food and agriculture systems.

3. Results

We inductively organized the findings of the non-systematic literature review around five main topics: (1) the current debates on global (food) governance; (2) the global food system and the call for food systems transformation; (3) the rise of social movements in GFG for food system transformation; (4) governance within POs and the role of POs in global (food) governance; and (5) knowledge gaps. We present the results in five sections, in line with our categorization of the findings.

3.1 Global governance as a challenge and a solution

Global governance refers to: (1) the aspect of world politics such as the inclusion of private (for-profit and non-profit) actors; (2) the reduced freedom of states through the influence of international organizations; and (3) the "*perceived inadequateness of political responses to globalization*" (Biermann and Pattberg, 2008: 279; Biermann et al., 2009). In response to this perceived inadequateness, authors call for new global governance to act as a "*counterweight to the negative consequences of economic and ecological globalization*" through the promotion of new institutions such as "*multilateral treaties and conventions, new and more effective international organizations, and new forms of financial mechanisms*" (Biermann and Pattberg, 2008: 279).

Thus, global governance architecture comprises private and public institutions such as multinational corporations, transnational NGOs, academia, and governmental agencies within a given issue area of world politics (Pattberg, 2005; Biermann et al., 2009). Indeed, authors have observed the rise of non-state actors in global governance due to global economic transformations and the global nature of the issues, which produce frictions (Biermann and Pattberg 2008; Pattberg, 2005). The fact that global issues are no longer addressed by governments alone constitutes a shift in authority, where partnership has become a new form of interaction between companies, government, and civil society (Pattberg, 2005).

This situation invites us to analyze power dynamics occurring within global environmental/food governance and, in particular, improve our understanding of: (1) the nature of power (some actors' views are more listened to and other actors' views ignored); (2) relations between state and non-nation-state actors (NNSAs) (power as relative configuration of forces depending on interacting actors: not only which actor has power but also the power dynamics at different stages and levels of environmental/food governance systems); (3) structure and **agency** (the effect of the dominant neoliberal political economic framework and the role/agency of NNSAs); and (4) how the process of governing takes place (what should be governed: governmental rationalities; how they should be governed: government nature) (Okereke et al., 2009). For instance, Birner & Resnick (2010) recognize the dominant role of international agribusiness in agricultural value chains, including input markets and food processing firms. Moreover, by examining the power dynamics in agri-food data generation and their use within GFG, Ezirigwe et al. (2024) showed that power dynamics influence global rules on agri-food data use, leading to inequalities and inequities among certain actors and groups. Other studies showed that the ultra-processed food industry privileges the interests of corporations located exclusively in or near the Global North and stressed the need for policy and regulatory instruments, such as subsidies, to support access to healthy foods and to apply prohibitive taxes on ultra-processed foods (Slater et al., 2025; Mockshell and Ritter, 2023, 2024).

Agency. In this context, is defined as "the power of privileges and collective actors to change the course of events or the outcome of processes" and is mostly located "beyond the state and intergovernmental organizations" (Biermann and Pattberg, 2008: 280).

Food governance is defined as a process that gathers stakeholders in "the design of public policies and institutional, technical, and financing measures for the functioning of the food system" (Pedro, 2020: 321), while the food community network involved a variety of organizational forms including consumers and farmers organized in democratic manner and under membership-based contracts (Pascucci et al., 2013).

Local governments are presented as key actors in food governance and in the democratization of food governance (Berti & Rossi, 2024; Nihlani, 2025). However, local governments are not adopting local food policies due to challenges such as resource constraints and policy coordination (Berti & Rossi, 2024; Nihlani, 2025). Some authors (Von Braun & Birner, 2017) propose redesigning GFG by establishing an international platform with policy clusters mapped along the set of global public goods.

3.2 The global food system and the call for food system transformation

The global economic shocks of the 1970s and 1980s led **to food system** inequities (Koc et al., 2008; Laforge et al., 2017). Moreover, globalization (characterized by food traveling long distances) has complexified food production, distribution, and consumption chains (Nayak & Waterson, 2019; Long et al., 2025). In this context, the global food system refers to the corporate food regime that emerged in response to neoliberal capitalist expansion (Laforge et al., 2017; de Wit et al., 2021). It is characterized by: (1) liberalization of global food trade and the monopoly of agribusinesses and financial capital; (2) globalized animal protein supply chains; (3) strong links between food and energy economies; (4) growing concentration of land ownership; and (5) depletion of natural resources (de Wit et al., 2021). Moreover, the role of the **global food system** in shaping the COVID-19 pandemic has also been highlighted, as has the global food system's vulnerability to shocks (Lambrou et al., 2021; Vandermeer et al., 2018; Mockshell & Ritter, 2024). More recently, the Russia–Ukraine conflict has added further strain to the fertilizer sector, leading to fertilizer shortages and rising fertilizer and food prices that have caused a food crisis in many Global South regions (Asante-Addo et al., 2023). Global and industrialized food systems are characterized as unsustainable and vulnerable to the effects of climate change, conflicts, and other global shocks (Milsom et al., 2026; Vandermeer et al., 2018). This vulnerability and unsustainability call for transformation toward a more sustainable, resilient, healthy, and equitable food system (Lambrou et al., 2021; Dysard et al., 2025; Milsom et al., 2026).

In this context, local food systems are increasingly drawing attention, as their framing emphasizes reconnecting producers and consumers, in contrast to what has been defined as "faceless" and "placeless" industrial agriculture (Papaoikonomou & Ginieis, 2017: 53; Stone et al., 2024). Indeed, local food systems are presented as critical elements for addressing food-related challenges and achieving a sustainable food future (Kremer & DeLiberty, 2011; Laforge et al., 2017). For instance, Beingessner & Fletcher (2020) showed that farmers' drivers for localized production are political and social, and mainly motivated by the rejection of the dominant neoliberal agri-food system and the promotion of food sovereignty (not directly related to environmental sustainability issues). Moreover, another study showed a rise in local associations and cooperatives to address economic export strategies, centralized food-oriented policies, shocks such as the COVID-19 pandemic, and to improve food and nutrition security (Alpizar Rojas et al., 2023).

> **The food system** has been defined as "the entire range of actors and their interlinked value-adding activities involved in the production, aggregation, processing, distribution, consumption, and disposal of food products that originate from agriculture, forestry or fisheries, and parts of the broader economic, societal and natural environments in which they are embedded" (FAO 2014: 1).

However, other authors argue that the narrative on local food systems may be romanticized (Papaoikonomou & Ginieis, 2017). Indeed, evidence shows limited results on how local food systems achieve sustainability due to their lack of interconnectivity (Zerbian et al., 2022). Authors argue that the impact of local food systems depends on the type of supply chain involved, nuancing the claim that local food systems are inherently good (Enthoven & Van den Broeck, 2021). Key constraints for local food systems to achieve sustainability and equity have been identified. There is a mismatch between political goals aimed at fostering local food systems and resources allocated/available to address the challenges faced by farmers (Schreiber et al., 2023). Integrated approaches to local food systems are challenged by volunteer work on which these local initiatives are usually based (Zerbian et al., 2022). Furthermore, research suggests that local food systems can reproduce neoliberalism when they prioritize niche-market consumerism over enhancing access for poor people and/or focus on food security (Chapman & Perkins, 2020). There is also an issue related to the rapidly expanding consumer demand for local food, highlighting the need for transitional food systems to build on existing conventional local food system infrastructure (Bloom & Hinrichs, 2011).

Furthermore, other related concepts co-exist, such as **sustainable food systems** and **Alternative Food Networks**[2]. Sustainable food systems have been conceived to guarantee food security and nutrition for all without compromising the economic, social, and environmental foundations necessary to guarantee them for future generations (Pedro, 2020). **Alternative Food Networks** (AFNs) are a concept used in opposition to conventional food systems and the global food regime, which refers to localized food networks that foster ecological, social, and economic equity and sustainability (Maysels et al., 2023).

Debates about the diverse framing of terms and definitions of "local" in local food systems (Lever et al., 2019; O'Neill, 2014; Enthoven & Van den Broeck, 2021), in addition to "local food" (Eriksen, 2013; Lever et al., 2019) and "sustainability" (Baldy, 2019) persist.

3.3 The rise of social movements in global governance for global food system transformation

Globally, **social movements** and networks engaged in food systems governance have grown substantially in number, scale, and scope to address global governance issues (Koc et al., 2008; Levkoe et al., 2025).

Their engagement in GFG is aimed at promoting greater justice, equity, and sustainability (Huttunen, 2022; Levkoe et al., 2025). It is argued that there are opportunities for civil interactions between society and state, and possibilities for new types of regulatory action toward greater food system sustainability (Koc et al., 2008). Indeed, there are interdependencies and potential complementarities among agri-food systems actors, including farmers, intermediaries, policymakers, and civil society (Lamine et al., 2012).


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Social movements are important drivers of collective action within communities. They are also drivers of policy change. **Collective action** (CA) can be defined as joint or concerted action (spontaneous or organized) involving a conscious intention on the part of the actors taking part. The goal pursued through CA can be concrete (government measures) or propose the recognition of a community identity, or the establishment of local action mechanisms. **Social movement** is understood as a CA driven by a concern for the public good to be promoted or a public evil to be avoided, with a view to enabling processes of participation, redistribution, or recognition (Cefaï, 2007; Goodwin & Jasper, 2009).

While food system governance is often presented as a top-down, government-imposed mechanism, influenced by small groups of powerful private-sector actors, civil society organizations explore participatory governance mechanisms, based on collaboration and social and environmental principles (Levkoe et al., 2023). For instance, Levkoe et al. (2025) showed that in Canada, civil society organizations play a key role in advancing food systems governance in the way they frame and act on food issues.

3.4 Governance within POs and role of PO in global governance

We identified two tiers of producer organization (PO) governance analysis: (1) internal PO governance and outcomes, and (2) POs' role in food system governance. While the first topic has been extensively studied, the second one remains understudied.

3.4.1 Internal PO governance and outcomes

Research on PO governance distinguishes formal from informal governance mechanisms within POs, including contractual, organizational, and social mechanisms that tackle governance issues related to quality food products (Bijman, 2007). Moreover, governance characteristics assessed in the research include Board of Trustees size, management size, director independence, manager independence, CEO independence, non-member ownership, and the PO's relationship with agency costs (operating expense ratio) (Grashuis, 2020).

Research also emphasized the reduction of State support to POs due to market liberalization and institutional reforms (Shiferaw et al., 2011; 2016). According to Shiferaw et al. (2011), donors and governments can play a key role in fostering and supporting PO emergence and sustainability, while the private sector is presented as crucial for the provision of financial services.

Regarding, PO governance, its mechanisms have been presented as key for their emergence and development to govern group behavior (Falkowski & Ciaian, 2016), in improving access to markets (Shiferaw et al., 2006; 2011; Ramappa & Yashashwini, 2018; Groot-Kormelinck et al., 2022; Prasad & Kanitkar, 2023; Patil et al., 2025), reducing transaction costs (Bijman, 2007), fostering collective action (Torre, 2006; Bikkina et al., 2018), territorial development (Koopmans et al., 2018), and PO's performance in general (Shiferaw et al., 2016). For instance, studies focused on understanding POs' role in enhancing farmers' competitiveness in emerging market opportunities (Ramappa & Yashashwini, 2018). However, the dual nature of farmers' cooperatives, including both social groups and business enterprises, complicates performance evaluation (Kiisk et al., 2026).

Related to the benefits of POs, one study showed the link between farmer-PO members' social networks and the farmers' propensity to participate in cooperative governance, where members are more willing to be elected when they receive support from their (personal) network (Morfi et al., 2021). Furthermore, literature on farmer cooperatives showed that membership positively impacts prices, yields, input adoption, income, and other indicators of member performance (Grashuis & Su, 2019).

On the one hand, findings related to PO governance research identify key limitations, such as financial constraints, governance issues, low member participation, market access difficulties, and environmental factors (Boomish et al., 2025; Stiem-Bhatia et al., 2025). Shiferaw et al. (2016) also argue that POs face the challenges of overlapping demands of social inclusiveness, empowerment, and external competition. The authors found a critical lack of support for farmers involved in commercial market-oriented food systems, characterized by strong asymmetric power relations (Blanc & Kledal, 2012). PO governance inefficiency is linked to heterogeneity in members' attitudes and objectives, particularly regarding commitment and participation (Grashuis & Su, 2019). Finally, within farmer cooperatives, there is an uneven distribution of benefits between small- and large-scale producers (Grashuis & Su, 2019),

suggesting nuances in the benefits provided by POs. No clear evidence has been established on the relationship between PO ownership, governance, and performance (Ibid.).

On the other hand, research on POs has identified key factors that strengthen them, such as digital tools and technology. Research on POs also sheds light on their role in facilitating market access, governance, and access to financial services for their members (Grashuis & Su, 2019). Furthermore, social factors—such as transparent communication, group cohesion, conflict resolution, institutional complementarity, capital diversification, embedded leadership, inclusive stakeholder engagement—are key elements for the strengthening and sustainability of POs, as are interpersonal trust, organizational alignment, and ecosystem responsiveness (Singh et al., 2026).

3.4.2 The role of POs in food governance

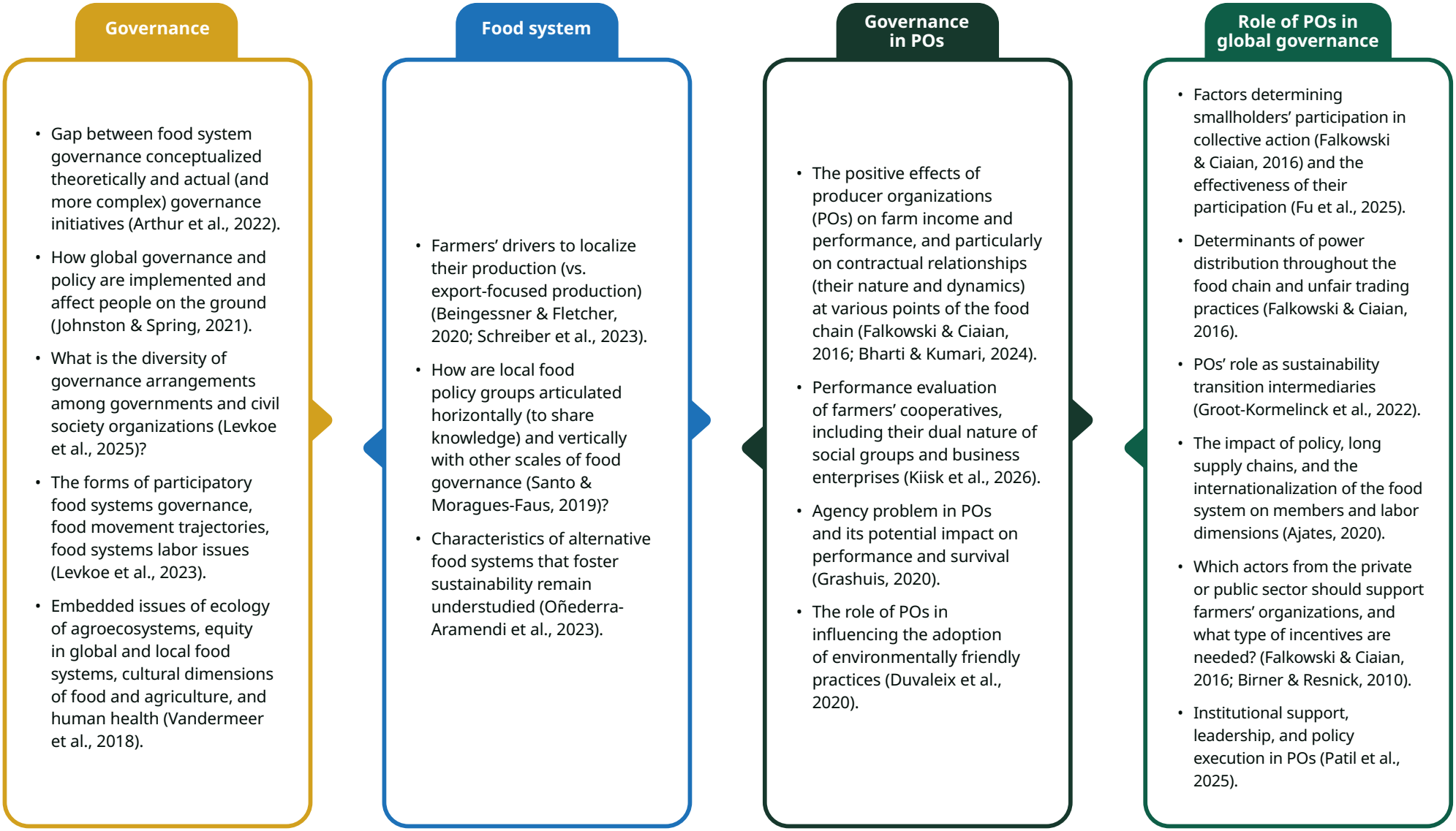
As previously noted, we found very sparse literature on the role of POs in food governance. Of the 76 studies reviewed, only three provided minimal insights. Studies that do mention the role of POs in food governance, social movements, and civil society present it as an opportunity for POs to contribute to social justice and ecological sustainability (Andrée et al., 2019). According to Laforge et al. (2017), both strategies of contesting and collaborating with governments adopted by POs represent opportunities for change toward more sustainable and just food systems.

3.5 Knowledge gaps

The knowledge gaps reported or identified by the authors are presented in Figure 1.



Figure 1. Knowledge gaps reported in the literature or identified by the authors.



4. Conclusions and outlook

Through a literature review of 76 documents, we identified findings and knowledge gaps related to the role of POs in GFG and food system transformation.

Based on the growing recognition that more just, resilient, and sustainable food systems require meaningful stakeholder inclusion—food producers, researchers, policymakers, private-sector, and consumers—in decision-making processes, the main findings allowed us to unravel the global governance context, which is instead characterized by inequity and environmental unsustainability, in which not only governments but also private (for-profit and non-profit) actors participate and whose orientation and influence are driven by power dynamics. Due to the negative social and environmental consequences of GFG, some of its actors have promoted system transformation as a solution, including local food systems and increased participation by social movements such as POs in GFG. It is expected this increased participation will shift the power dynamics within GFG and thus lead to greater justice, equity, and sustainability. Indeed, POs are presented as having great potential in supporting individual farmer-members (by facilitating market access, practice adoption...) and as a key intermediary within GFG to promote food system transformation.

However, knowledge gaps related to governance, food systems, and PO topics reveal how little of this potential has been studied. In particular, there is limited research documenting the diversity and complexity of *real* food system governance, including governance arrangements, and its effect on people (equity, labor, health). Besides, more studies are needed on local food systems, their characteristics, the drivers for farmers to localize their production, as well as food systems' articulation within GFG. More information is needed on the distribution of power throughout the food chain, POs' potential role in the sustainability transition, and the support required to enable POs to meet their goals. Overall, POs in the Global South remain understudied.

Therefore, as social movements, POs have the potential to drive political change within the GFG. It is therefore critical to understand POs' strategies regarding collective action, collaboration, framing, and achievements. It is also interesting to analyze the scope of their involvement from the local to the global level. In general, it is relevant to identify the differences between POs in Asia, Africa, and/or the Americas.

This literature review underscores the need for further research on the potential role of POs in the Global South in relation to GFG and food systems transformation. Additionally, this topic should be further assessed to comprehend the policy implications for supporting POs in GFG and FS transformation.

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