

Solidarity Purchasing Groups and garden-based learning in the Marche Region, Italy: building a “polis” in the wild

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Regional context

Corine land cover

- Artificial surfaces
- Agricultural areas

Surface and population (2012)

- Regional area: 9,363 km² (100%)
- Urban area: 627.3 km² (6.7%)
- Urban fringe: 1,516.8 km² (16.2%)
- Utilized agricultural area: 4,718 km² (50.4%)
- Regional population: 1,539,459 inh. (100%)
- Population in the major towns: 323,610 inh. (21%)
- Average population density in the major towns: 518 inh./km²

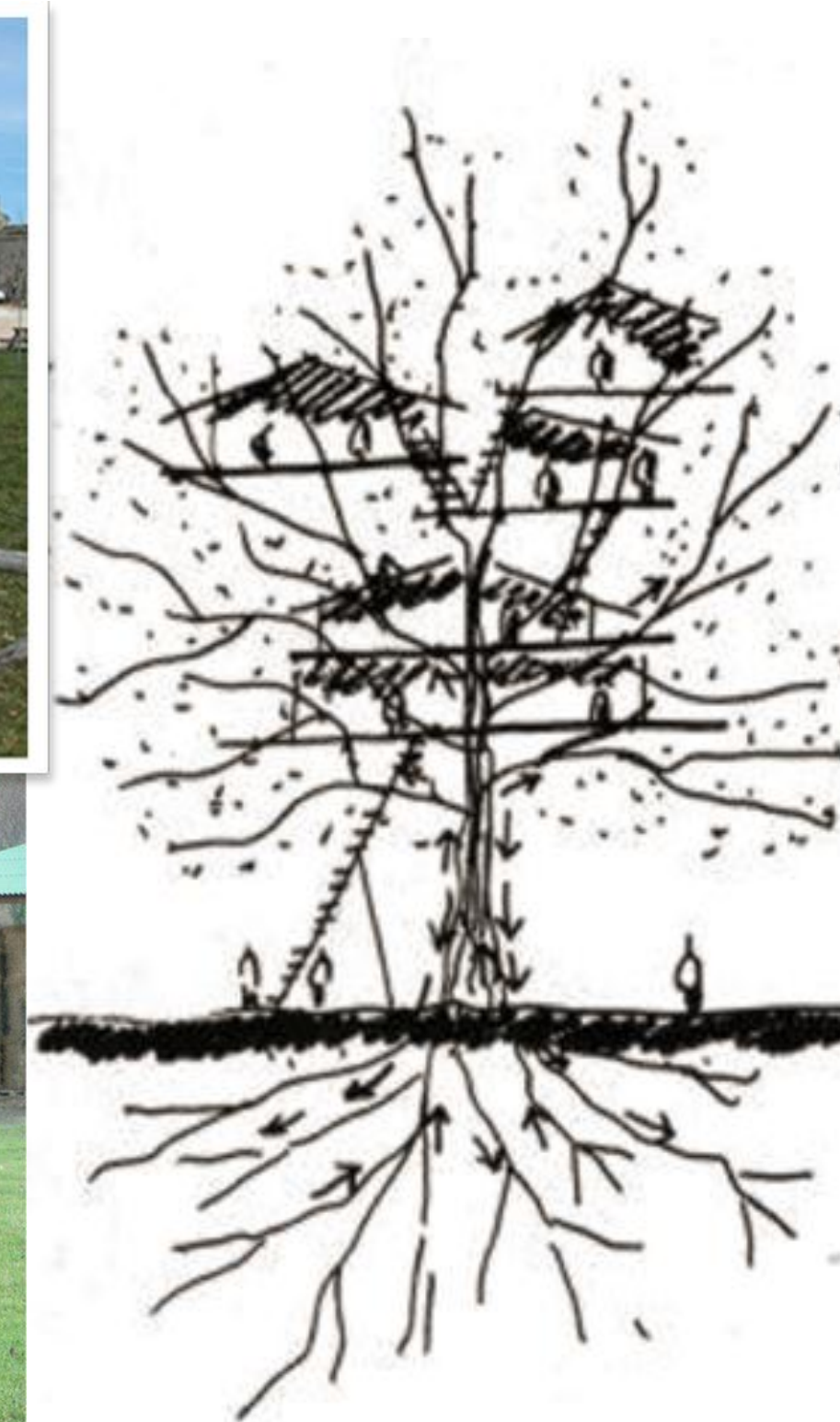
No actual metropolitan areas exist in the Marche Region, known as the “hundred towns region”. As a matter of fact, built up spaces are spread across the countryside. The coast shows a higher density of urbanised spaces, linearly gathered along the East-West infrastructural axes. The historical trend, during the second half of the last century, was characterized by people migrating from the inlands towards the coastal zones. Thus a wider urban-agricultural fringe from the North-West to the South-East sprung up, where, notwithstanding the high population density, citizens and farmers hold strong relationships.

Urban Agriculture: types and actors



Local food + farms

2 large agriculture cooperatives and around 30 organic family farms engaged in provisioning organic cereals and typical local food to the SPG network placed in Marche. They intentionally orientate their production to a *minority active citizenship* experiencing food as a factor of social change.

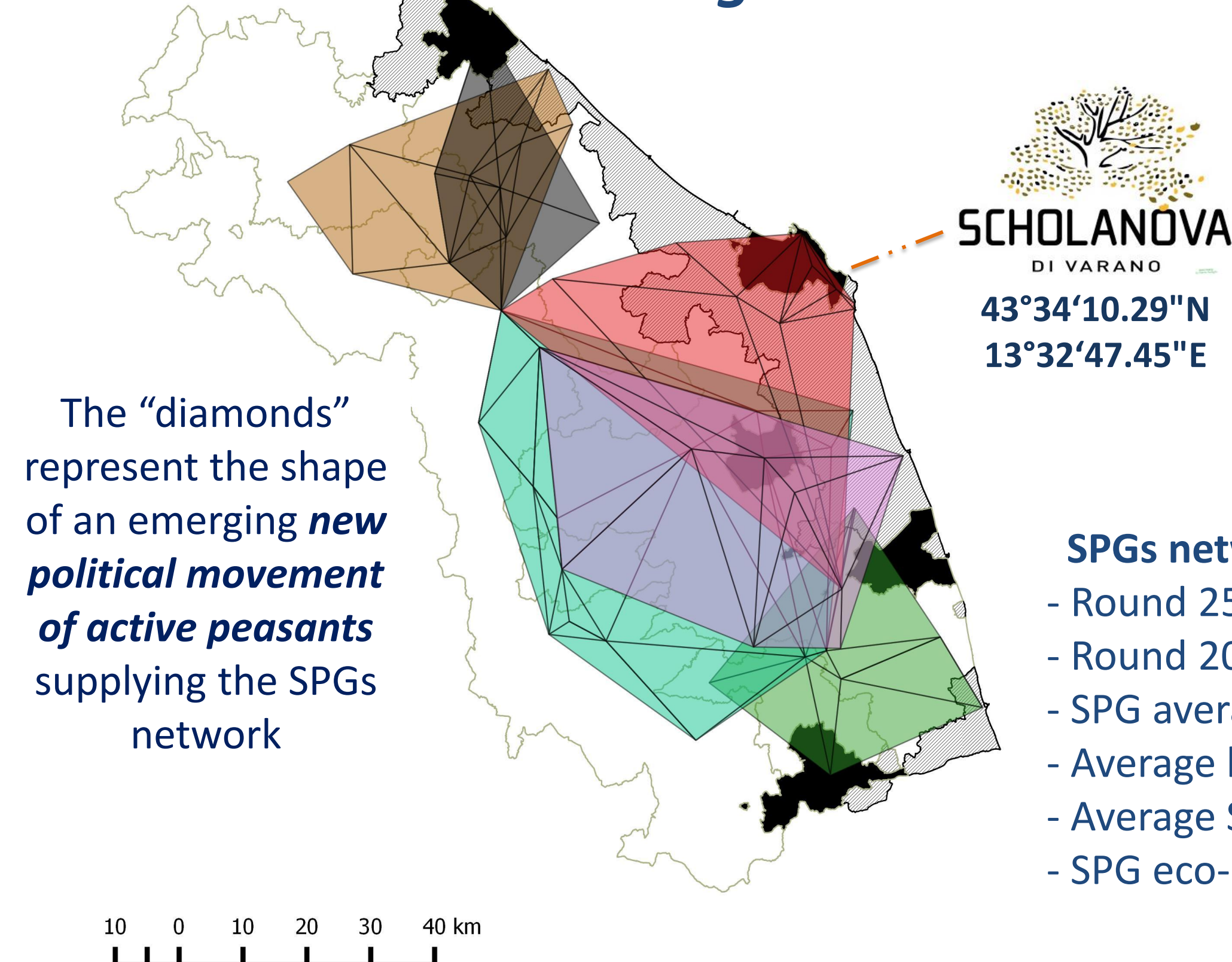


Educational gardens

Scholanova di Varano is a no profit association founded in 2013 and located close to the east-side of the Ancona suburb. The main goal of Scholanova is to promote and practice the principles of *participatory development* with a particular endeavour to *permaculture* and *garden-based learning*.



SPGs regional network and Scholanova site



The “diamonds” represent the shape of an emerging *new political movement of active peasants* supplying the SPGs network

Scholanova core activities:

- Recovery of a neglected school
- Garden-based learning
- Permaculture
- Distributed participatory design

SPGs network dimensions:

- Round 25 SPGs placed in urban and peri-urban areas
- Round 2000 families involved in the SPGs network
- SPG average size: 70 households
- Average household size: round 3 members
- Average SPG family food provision: 130 €/month
- SPG eco-efficiency: biotic + abiotic = 10% eco-gain

According to GIS analyses, the spatial distribution of farms supplying the Solidarity Purchasing Groups (SPGs) shows strong relationships among the urban, peri-urban and rural sets. The overall operational strategy of SPGs is driven by the attempt to meet new market needs: city dwellers are ever more asking not only for quality food, but also for immaterial goods, such as memory of the past, creativity and beauty. Besides, Scholanova embodies how it is possible to think about a “garden” as a psychological space made of physical, aesthetic and creative functions in which the perceived boundaries between human and nature naturally fade-out.

Spatial context



Agriculture is becoming a tool for citizens' organizations to improve their life quality. This way they becomes steering agents pushing farmers to gather in supplying networks where sustainability, resilience, beauty, biodiversity, heritage, and other qualities are improved and maintained at a higher spatial scale (or better, at a landscape level) rather than at the single farm level.

Benefits

Economy:

The case study of UA in Marche primarily reveals that the main achievements in economic terms are only partially linked to a better farmer income and a better food quality for the citizen. The hidden advancement, what really matters, is an emerging – paradoxically in the urban environment – post-modern conception of the *peasant* addressing the necessary shift towards sustainability. This paradox is represented in the UA metabolism space.

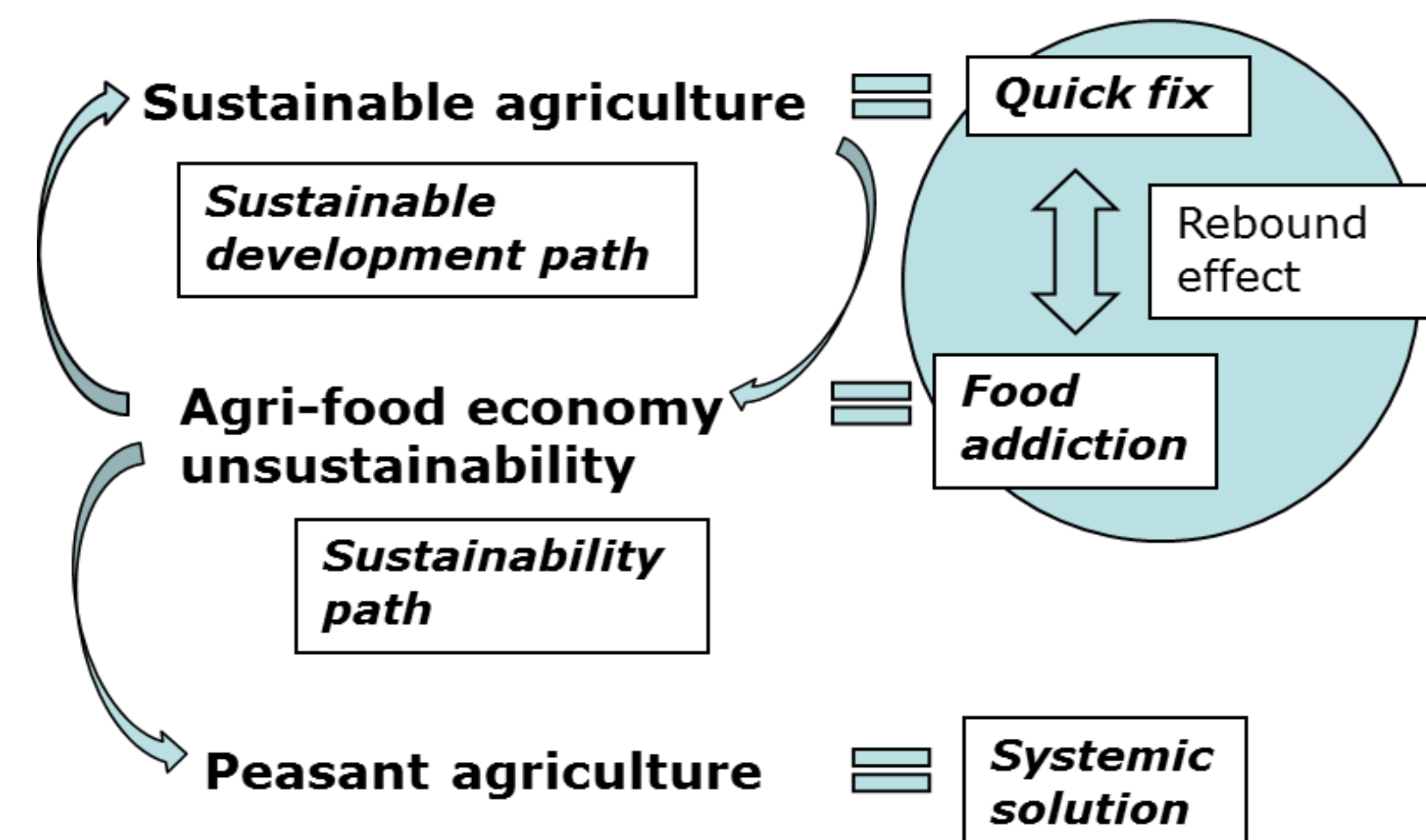
Society:

Both the direct contact between citizen and peasant achieved through the SPG network and the citizen involvement in the garden-based learning promoted by Scholanova di Varano are tools for discovering our food system with a *systemic approach*. Each single SPG as well as the small group of people committed to creating a synergistic garden can be interpreted as a “living entity” in close relation with the agriculture and food economy, whose effectiveness depends on its autonomy, sense-making and space perception, seen as a psychological projection.

Ecology:

Concerning the “environmental quality” of food and calculating the *eco-efficiency* of products in terms of ratio between inputs and outputs through the material input per service unit (MIPS indicator), it was found that the material requirement reduction potential of the SPG agri-food chain was estimated to be a comprehensive 10 percent, while better performances are obtained in terms of water consumption and air (emissions), which are reduced by 53 and 71 percent, respectively.

Urban agriculture metabolism



The paradox of the urban shift towards a post-industrial idea of the peasant economy:

Worldwide, the emerging interest in the political meaning of peasant comes from the heart of a progressively more urbanised society.