

Review

Bridging Food Justice and Management: A Pathway to Sustainable and Equitable Food Systems

Ioannis Manikas 

Faculty of Agrobiological Food and Natural Resources, Czech University of Life Sciences Prague,
16500 Prague, Czech Republic; manikas@af.czu.cz

Abstract

Although our world produces more than enough food, hunger and malnutrition remain widespread. This is not simply a problem of production—it is about how we manage and organize our food systems. Many researchers and practitioners see food security either as a business challenge to be solved with technical and managerial tools, or as a social movement rooted in justice, sovereignty, and sustainability. These two schools of thought rarely meet, and their disconnect holds back real progress. This paper brings these perspectives together, through the introduction of the “Managerial Architecture of Food Justice”—a new way to think about food management that does not pick sides but aims to transform how food systems are governed. By blending the best of strategic management with values of equity, agency, and ecological stewardship, this framework shows how management practices can help build food systems that are not only resilient and efficient, but also fair and truly sustainable. Grounded in public and collaborative governance theory, this approach provides practical steps for policymakers and food system leaders who want to break the cycle of hunger and injustice. The proposed model supports the Sustainable Development Goals by making sustainability defining features of food security efforts.

Keywords: environmental sustainability; social sustainability; food justice; food security; food system transformation; sustainable development goals (SDGs)



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1. Introduction

In the twenty-first century, the world faces a stubborn paradox: even when enough food is being produced, many still go hungry or suffer malnutrition [1]. The reasons go far beyond agricultural output; they reveal deep-rooted problems in the way our food systems are managed, governed, and organized. For years, experts have debated two main paths. Some see food security as a challenge for strategists, managers, and policymakers to solve with efficiency, technical solutions, and supply chain improvements prioritizing efficiency over transformative goals. Others insist the heart of the problem is social and political—food justice, community rights, and respect for the environment must come first [2,3]. But these two camps, instead of learning from one another, have mostly developed their ideas in isolation. This separation slows our ability to create fair and sustainable food systems. Management approaches bring powerful tools—including strategic management frameworks, supply chain optimization, forecasting models, and procurement systems—but when applied in isolation, these tools can overlook equity and perpetuate systemic injustices. For instance, supply chain management’s emphasis on standardization and economies of scale has historically excluded smallholder farmers who cannot meet the demands of efficiency-driven networks. Similarly, risk assessment frameworks focused

narrowly on technical hazards have overlooked the social vulnerabilities and inequities that food systems themselves create, as starkly revealed during the COVID-19 pandemic when marginalized communities and essential food workers bore disproportionate burdens. Justice movements offer important values but sometimes struggle to scale solutions. Justice movements offer important values but sometimes struggle to scale solutions [4]. To overcome this divide, this paper proposes a new framework, the Managerial Architecture of Food Justice, that brings together managerial tools and justice principles in a practical, actionable way. The “Managerial Architecture of Food Justice,” demonstrates how food systems can be managed in ways that support both practical efficiency and real ethical change. This approach takes core values from food sovereignty and justice, like democratic participation and environmental stewardship, and applies them to everyday managerial decisions about strategy, procurement, and risk. Instead of framing sustainability as an afterthought or a separate pillar, it is put at the center—arguing that true food security can only exist within a system that is sustainable socially, environmentally, and economically. Insights are used from collaborative governance theory and real-world examples from across the globe to ground our ideas. This new framework aims to equip leaders and communities with a toolkit for action that supports resilience, fairness, and sustainability, making the bold transformation of food systems not only possible, but practical. The framework is designed to be practical in four specific ways. First, it provides functional specificity—translating abstract justice principles into detailed operational guidance for specific managerial functions that practitioners engage with daily. Second, it ensures institutional compatibility—the framework can be adopted within existing organizational structures without requiring complete upheaval, repurposing capabilities food system actors already possess [5]. Third, it enables measurable implementation—by specifying concrete metrics and indicators (e.g., food miles, farmer value share, soil health, community agency measures) that allow monitoring, evaluation, and adaptive management [6]. Fourth, it achieves policy scalability—the framework is explicitly designed for integration into existing public policy instruments such as sustainable public procurement regulations and multi-stakeholder platform governance structures that operate at scale [7].

2. Theoretical Foundations

2.1. Evidence of Managerial Dominance

The application of management science to food systems is built upon the foundation of established disciplines that form a powerful toolkit for managing complexity and operating on a global scale. Strategic management provides frameworks for setting long-term objectives and aligning resources, whether at the level of a multinational corporation or a national government agency. Forecasting and risk assessment offer data-driven tools to anticipate and mitigate threats, from climate shocks to market volatility, thereby enhancing the stability of the system [8]. Operationally, supply chain management (SCM) offers principles for optimizing the flow of goods, information, and finances from producer to consumer, aiming to enhance efficiency and reduce waste, while procurement planning governs the acquisition of food for aid or social programs [9].

This managerial approach has been shaped by the evolution of the food security concept itself. Initially, following the 1974 World Food Conference [10], the focus was on four interconnected pillars: availability (sufficient physical supply), access (economic and physical ability to obtain food), utilization (the body’s ability to use nutrients), and stability (consistent access over time). However, contemporary research and high-level policy bodies like the High-Level Panel of Experts on Food Security and Nutrition [11] have identified critical limitations in this model, proposing the addition of two further pillars: agency (the capacity of individuals and communities to make autonomous decisions about their

food systems) and sustainability (the long-term ecological, economic, and social viability of food systems). Most research on food systems focuses mainly on traditional managerial ideas [12], i.e., how food is accessed, and how much food is available. However, fewer studies look at people's ability to influence decisions (agency), and even fewer consider the long-term health of the environment (sustainability) [13–15].

This suggests that research tends to focus on things that can be measured easily, like food supply and access, rather than on harder topics like fairness and environmental protection [16]. On the management side, the biggest focus is on coordinating different groups involved in the food system and planning strategies to keep things running smoothly [17]. Only a small number of studies look at procurement—the way food is bought and sourced—which could be used to support fairer and more sustainable farming methods [18]. This shows that management efforts are often more about keeping the current system working well than changing it for the better. Moreover, studies that focus on basic food security ideas, like making sure food is available and accessible, tend to be grouped together. The topics of justice and sustainability are much less common and appear separate from these [19]. This highlights a clear division between the dominant managerial approach and the emerging ideas around food justice and sustainability [3,20].

Most studies stick to technical aims like efficiency and control, while questions about power, fairness, participation, and environmental care are pushed aside [21]. This pattern is not random; it reveals the managerialist worldview's blind spots. Rooted in traditional economics and business strategies, it favors measurable, short-term goals over complex, long-term social and environmental issues. Concepts like “agency” (people's ability to participate and influence) and “sustainability” (caring for the environment over time) are difficult to measure and often conflict with quick efficiency gains, so they tend to be seen as secondary or “soft” issues [22]. This approach faces growing criticism for prioritizing managers' perspectives and top-down control [23].

In food systems, it leads to an overemphasis on production and market solutions, expert-driven policies that may not fit local cultures and ignoring deep-rooted issues of inequality and power [24]. By treating food security as a technical problem, this mindset masks the real causes of hunger, such as unequal land distribution, unfair laws, and corporate dominance [25]. For example, international food aid procurement offers another illustrative case: for decades, aid agencies prioritized efficiency metrics—delivering the most tons of food per dollar spent—which systematically favored large agricultural producers in wealthy donor countries while weakening local farmers' ability to feed their own communities. By treating procurement as simply a logistics problem rather than examining whose interests it served, this technical approach obscured how aid programs simultaneously reinforced corporate control over global food markets and created dependency relationships that prevented recipient nations from building their own food systems. Women farmers in the Global South, who grow much of the world's food, have been particularly marginalized by these arrangements, receiving disproportionately limited support even as policy rhetoric has shifted toward local procurement [26].

2.2. The Justice-Oriented Response

In response to the shortcomings of dominant managerialist approaches, a powerful justice-oriented paradigm has emerged. Rooted in social movements and critical scholarship, this perspective calls for fundamentally rethinking food systems around principles of democratic control, equity, and ecological integrity [27]. Food sovereignty, the right of peoples and communities to define their own food and agriculture systems based on their cultural preferences and local needs, rather than having food policies dictated by global markets or external actors, which originated in the 1990s with the international peasant

movement La Via Campesina [4,28], shifts the focus from simply ensuring access to food to affirming people's rights to define their own food and agriculture systems based on culturally appropriate and sustainable practices. This rights-based framework challenges the dominance of corporate food regimes and emphasizes the empowerment of local and national communities [29].

Closely related is the food justice movement, which primarily addresses systemic inequalities within food systems in the Global North. It highlights issues such as racial and class-based disparities in access to healthy food—often framed as “food apartheid”—as well as labor exploitation and disproportionate environmental burdens borne by marginalized groups [30,31]. Efforts in food justice seek to dismantle such systems of oppression through community-led initiatives, policy advocacy, and protection of culturally significant foodways.

Agroecology, an approach to agriculture that applies ecological principles to farming systems, prioritizing biodiversity, soil health, and resilience through practices like crop diversification, reduced chemical inputs, and integration of traditional farming knowledge, underpins much of this justice-oriented vision by providing both a scientific approach and a set of agricultural practices that prioritize biodiversity, soil health, and resilience. It acts as a bridge between ecological sustainability and social justice, promoting regenerative farming techniques that contrast with industrial monocultures [32,33]. While emerging evidence suggests agroecological systems can offer stable productivity and improved livelihoods [34], their research and integration into mainstream management remain limited. Despite growing recognition, this review shows that this justice-oriented paradigm remains a minority voice in food system scholarship. Only a small number of studies explicitly engage with agency and sustainability, highlighting ongoing marginalization [35,36]. The promise of food sovereignty and agroecology as transformative frameworks risks being sidelined unless more attention is given to these concepts in both research and practice. This analysis underscores the urgency of integrating justice-centered knowledge and methods into governance and management to achieve truly sustainable and equitable food systems.

2.3. The Governance Gap

This analysis reveals a significant gap in current food system governance research. While most studies focus on stakeholder management, the most examined governance function, there is a lack of clarity about the specific roles these actors should play to drive real transformation [37]. Multi-stakeholder platforms (MSPs) bring diverse voices together, but they often fall short in guiding concrete actions that challenge prevailing power structures and systemic injustices. Power imbalances allow dominant actors—typically large corporations and government agencies—to control agendas and decisions while sidelining the voices of smallholder farmers, Indigenous communities, and civil society groups. Weak accountability means that while diverse stakeholders may be heard, MSPs rarely have the authority to enforce commitments or redistribute resources, reducing them to discussion forums rather than decision-making bodies. Conflicting interests are addressed through superficial consensus-building that avoids confronting the structural inequalities some stakeholders seek to preserve, and others aim to transform. Without deliberate institutional design to counterbalance power, empower marginalized groups with real decision-making authority, and establish enforceable accountability measures, MSPs risk becoming vehicles for legitimizing the status quo while creating an appearance of inclusive governance [38]. This gap highlights a broader crisis of purpose within the dominant managerial paradigm. Research emphasizes efficiency and coordination, addressing strategic procurement's role in enabling agroecological and justice-oriented transitions [7]. This neglect of operational strategies critical for transformation limits the potential for sustainable change. Further-

more, power imbalances and insufficient inclusion of marginalized voices constrain the effectiveness of MSPs. Without deliberate attention to governance design, these platforms risk becoming discussion forums without substantive impact [39]. The proposed Managerial Architecture of Food Justice aims to fill this gap by defining clear mandates, accountability measures, and inclusive processes that enable MSPs to act as engines of systemic transformation, balancing competing interests and steering towards equity and sustainability. Addressing this governance gap is vital for unlocking food systems' capacity to contribute significantly to the Sustainable Development Goals. By moving beyond coordination towards purposeful action, enhanced governance can foster resilience, equity, and sustainability amidst pressing global challenges. Table 1 reveals how current research priorities and governance practices consistently miss the very dimensions needed for real transformation—community agency, ecological sustainability, strategic procurement, and fairer power distribution—while maintaining the deeper structural inequalities driving food insecurity.

Table 1. Key gaps in food system governance research and their consequences.

Research Gap	Evidence from Literature	Consequence
Overemphasis on Traditional Food Security Pillars	Most research focuses on availability and access, with limited attention to agency and sustainability dimensions	Research priorities favor easily measurable metrics over transformative concerns like fairness, participation, and ecological stewardship, perpetuating a technical rather than political understanding of food insecurity
Neglect of Strategic Procurement	Only a small number of studies examine procurement as a tool for supporting agroecological transitions and justice-oriented outcomes	Missed opportunities to leverage public purchasing power (billions in annual institutional food spending) to reshape markets, support smallholders, and advance sustainability goals
Ineffective Multi-Stakeholder Platforms	MSPs bring diverse voices together but lack clear mandates, accountability mechanisms, and power-balancing measures	Platforms become consultative “discussion forums” rather than transformative decision-making bodies, allowing dominant actors to maintain control while creating an appearance of inclusive governance
Separation of Justice and Sustainability from Management	Justice and sustainability topics appear isolated from mainstream managerial approaches in the literature	Perpetuation of the paradigm divide between efficiency-focused management and values-based food justice movements, limiting possibilities for integrated solutions
Power Asymmetries in Governance Structures	Insufficient attention to how structural inequalities between corporations, governments, and marginalized communities shape governance outcomes	Governance interventions risk reinforcing existing power imbalances rather than redistributing decision-making authority to those most affected by food system outcomes

3. The Managerial Architecture of Food Justice

This section develops the core theoretical framework. It elaborates on the central propositions, detailing how the integration of justice-oriented principles reconfigures the logic and practice of key managerial functions. This is not about adding a “social” or “environmental” component to existing models; it is about a fundamental transformation of the models themselves. The result is an integrated governance framework where managerial functions are repurposed to serve the goals of equity, agency, and sustainability. The framework is synthesized in Table 2, which serves as a conceptual map for the theory developed in the following subsections.

Table 2. The managerial architecture of food justice: an integrated governance framework.

Managerial Function	Conventional Managerial Logic	Food Justice-Integrated Logic
Strategic Management	Focus: Firm/organizational competitive advantage; top–down policy execution. Focus on Strategy: Corporate boardroom; central government agency. Goal: Maximize efficiency, profit, or predefined policy outputs. Key Tools: SWOT analysis, market positioning, centralized planning.	Focus: Systemic resilience, equity, and sustainability. Focus on Strategy: Multi-Stakeholder Platforms (MSPs); collaborative governance networks. Goal: Enhance collective agency and the adaptive capacity of the entire food system. Key Tools: Participatory scenario planning, co-design, food democracy facilitation.
Supply Chain & Operations Management	Focus: Linear efficiency; cost and time minimization. Design Principle: Standardization and economies of scale. Goal: Optimize flow from farm-to-fork for maximum throughput. Key Metrics: Cost-per-unit, lead time, inventory turnover.	Focus: Agroecological resilience and circularity. Design Principle: Localization, biodiversity, and regeneration. Goal: Build resilient, equitable value networks that create positive externalities. Key Metrics: Food miles, post-harvest loss reduction, farmer share of value, soil organic matter.
Procurement	Focus: Transactional cost minimization. Criteria: Lowest price for specified quality. Goal: Secure necessary inputs efficiently. Key Tools: Competitive bidding, large-volume contracts.	Focus: Strategic market creation for social good. Criteria: Ecological sustainability, local sourcing, labor standards, nutritional value. Goal: Leverage purchasing power to drive systemic change. Key Tools: Sustainable public procurement (SPP) policies, preference for smallholders.
Risk & Forecasting Management	Focus: Technical assessment and control of identifiable hazards. Knowledge Base: Expert-driven; quantitative models (e.g., WFP’s VAM). Goal: Ensure stability and predictability of the existing system. Key Risks: Price volatility, supply disruption, food safety incidents.	Focus: Systemic vulnerability reduction and building adaptive capacity. Knowledge Base: Democratized; integration of scientific, local, and Indigenous knowledge. Goal: Enhance the resilience of communities and ecosystems. Key Risks: Social exclusion, loss of agrobiodiversity, erosion of agency, corporate capture.
Stakeholder Management	Focus: Instrumental engagement to mitigate risks to the organization. Power Dynamic: Manage external actors to secure legitimacy and social license. Goal: Ensure smooth implementation of organizational strategy. Key Tools: Consultation, communication plans, partnership management.	Focus: Political process for power redistribution and co-creation. Power Dynamic: Actively rebalance power and dismantle structural inequities. Goal: Enact agency, decolonize knowledge, and build democratic governance. Key Tools: Capacity building for marginalized groups, decolonizing methodologies, empowered MSPs.

3.1. Repurposing the Managerial Toolkit

The primary scientific contribution of this manuscript is the development of a formal theoretical model that resolves the paradigm conflict between managerialism and food sovereignty. This is achieved through a core conceptual leap: the separation of managerial tools from managerialist ideology [21]. A closer examination of the literature reveals that critiques of managerialism often conflict between the instruments of management (e.g., forecasting algorithms, logistical optimization, financial modeling) with the ideology that typically directs their use (e.g., profit maximization, market share growth, top–down control) [22,23,40,41].

However, these tools are not inherently bound to a single ideological purpose. A supply chain model is an analytical instrument; it can be designed to optimize for lowest cost and speed, or it can be re-parameterized to optimize for minimal carbon footprint, equitable value distribution to smallholders, and nutrient density [6,42]. For example, carbon footprint minimization replaces conventional time-and-cost parameters with transportation distance (food miles), emission factors per ton-kilometer, and cold storage energy use, shifting the model’s goal from fastest delivery to lowest environmental impact. Equitable value distribution tracks farmer income as a percentage of retail price, sets minimum procurement quotas for smallholders (e.g., $\geq 30\%$), and constrains payment cycles to prevent cash flow pressures on small suppliers. Nutrient density optimization incorporates micronutrient content per serving and dietary diversity indices, allowing the model to prioritize foods that deliver better nutrition per dollar rather than simply more calories. A risk assessment framework can focus solely on financial and operational hazards to a corporation, or it can be expanded to include the risks of biodiversity loss, social exclusion, and erosion of community agency [43].

This separation allows for a conceptual breakthrough: the possibility of repurposing the managerial toolkit. The core of our theory is that the principles derived from justice-oriented paradigms such as agency, democratic participation, equity, and ecological integrity—can serve as the new design principles for managerial architecture [44]. This translation occurs through three mechanisms. First, abstract principles are decomposed into measurable criteria: “ecological integrity” becomes specific requirements such as maintaining agrobiodiversity (crop variety indices), preserving soil health ($>3\%$ organic matter content), and minimizing emissions (carbon per ton-kilometer). Second, these criteria are embedded as binding constraints: ecological integrity shifts from external aspiration to internal requirement—supply chain models must meet biodiversity thresholds, procurement must specify regenerative practices, and risk assessments must track ecosystem vulnerabilities. Third, monitoring and accountability systems make principles enforceable through regular measurement, transparent reporting, and adaptive management that adjusts practices based on evidence (Table 3).

Table 3. Translating justice-oriented principles into design principles: examples.

Abstract Principle	Operational Criteria	Managerial Application	Measurement/Accountability
Ecological Integrity	Agrobiodiversity preservation; Soil health maintenance; Carbon footprint minimization; Circular material flows	Supply chains prioritize sourcing from diverse crop systems; Procurement requires soil organic matter $>3\%$; Emissions capped at carbon budget thresholds; Design for disassembly/reuse	Crop variety indices (Shannon diversity); Soil organic matter tests (% by weight); kg CO ₂ -eq per ton km tracked; Material recovery rate (%)
Democratic Participation (Agency)	Inclusive decision-making; Representation quotas; Knowledge pluralism; Capacity building support	MSPs mandate seats for smallholder/Indigenous groups; Voting rights proportional to impact, not capital; Traditional knowledge integrated into risk models; Funding for marginalized groups’ participation	-% of decisions with marginalized group approval; Representation ratios in governance bodies; Knowledge sources documented/cited; Capacity-building budget allocation
Equity	Fair value distribution; Living wage standards; Progressive procurement; Access to resources	Farmer share of retail price tracked/improved; Supply contracts include minimum price floors; Public procurement reserves % for smallholders; Credit/technical assistance provided	Value share analysis (% to producer); Wage audits against living wage benchmarks; Procurement spend by farm size category; Resource access indices

Instead of being external critiques, these principles become the internal logic that guides the application of managerial functions. This allows for a synthesis that leverages the analytical power and scalability of management science to achieve the transformative goals of food justice [45]. This insight enables us to move beyond a simple call for “synthesis” and to theorize the specific mechanisms of integration.

3.2. Core Propositions for Transforming Food Systems

This theoretical move allows us to formulate a set of core propositions that guide the development of our framework. These propositions, derived from review and conceptual analysis, express the specific transformations that occur when justice principles are integrated into the core functions of management. They serve as the central, testable theoretical claims of this paper.

Proposition 1 (Strategy & Governance): *The integration of food sovereignty principles transforms strategic management from a firm-centric, market-positioning exercise into a process of participatory governance aimed at building systemic resilience and equitable value distribution. This shifts the focus of strategy from the corporate boardroom to the multi-stakeholder platform (MSP).*

Proposition 2 (Operations & Ecology): *The integration of agroecological principles transforms supply chain management from a model optimizing linear efficiency and cost reduction into a model designed for circularity, localization, and ecological regeneration. This redefines operational excellence to include positive social and environmental externalities.*

Proposition 3 (Power & Agency): *The integration of food justice principles transforms stakeholder management from a risk-mitigation function for dominant actors into the central mechanism for enacting agency, redistributing power, and decolonizing knowledge within the food system.*

3.3. Reconfiguring Managerial Functions for Food Justice

This section elaborates on each proposition, providing a detailed account of how the integration of justice-oriented principles reconfigures the logic and practice of key managerial functions.

3.3.1. Strategy & Governance

In traditional management theory, strategic management has typically been seen as the art and science of making decisions that help an organization achieve its long-term goals, usually by carving out a sustainable competitive edge in the marketplace or by executing top-down mandates efficiently within the public sector [46]. This approach keeps its primary focus on the organization itself, treating the external environment as a landscape to scan for risks and opportunities that may affect its singular success. Governing food systems today requires more than top-down control or isolated strategic plans. As the literature demonstrates, effective food system governance is shaped by the ability to coordinate diverse actors—ranging from market stakeholders and public agencies to local communities and advocacy groups—across multiple levels of decision making [5]. Rather than treating management as a purely technical task, there emerges a need to recognize governance as a dynamic and participatory process, where formal policies intersect with informal practices and power relations are constantly negotiated [31,41].

The most promising approaches to governance in this context move away from a singular focus on efficiency or command and control. Instead, they prioritize inclusiveness, transparency, and adaptability—qualities that are essential for navigating the complexity and uncertainty inherent in contemporary food systems [4,5]. Multi-stakeholder platforms, participatory councils, and collaborative networks are increasingly recognized for their

ability to bridge institutional divides, enabling not just coordination but also the genuine co-production of knowledge and priorities among varied system actors [5].

A critical finding in the reviewed literature is that strategic choices in governance are deeply political and value laden. They are shaped by contestation over “whose voices matter” and “how benefits and resources are distributed”—questions that lie at the heart of food justice [4,47]. When power imbalances persist, or deliberation is limited to surface-level consultation, governance structures risk reinforcing existing inequalities rather than enacting real change [31]. The integrative approach advocated here calls for a shift in strategic mindset—from paternalistic direction to shared stewardship, where governance frameworks enable adaptive learning, mutual accountability, and the nurturing of agency among those most affected by food system decisions [41].

However, when principles of food sovereignty are meaningfully integrated, this conventional way of seeing strategy changes at its core. The process of setting strategic direction is no longer limited to a single organization or a handful of decision-makers. Instead, strategy becomes a collective, participatory process coordinated through multi-stakeholder platforms (MSPs). The central goal evolves from maximizing an individual entity’s interests to strengthening the equity, resilience, and adaptability of the entire food system [48,49].

This transformation happens in two ways. First, it leads to a greater emphasis on participatory governance, where MSPs—including actors from government, business, civil society, and academia—take center stage not as mere forums for perfunctory consultation, but as genuine venues for shared strategic design [50]. In this model, the aim is not simply to “tick the box” of inclusion, but to ensure groups that have traditionally lacked power—like smallholder farmers, Indigenous peoples, and women’s collectives—are not just heard but hold meaningful decision-making authority. In this way, “Agency” as a pillar is actively operationalized: people are no longer passive recipients of policy, but cocreators in shaping their food future [51]. Second, this reconceptualization also changes the state’s role. The state is no longer just a policy maker or a regulator of competition but evolves into a convener and steward—what some now describe as a guarantor of “food democracy” [52]. Its responsibilities become those of enabling partnerships, safeguarding the fairness and transparency of the process, providing resources and rules that ensure no single actor can dominate, and supporting less powerful groups with the tools and capacity needed to participate fully and effectively. Rather than retreating from its responsibilities, the reimagined state becomes a builder of democratic and distributed governance, deliberately shifting power so collective solutions can thrive. In summary, strategy and governance must be understood as a collective, evolving practice, one that builds legitimacy through engagement and anchors resilience in democratic processes. This perspective not only advances theoretical debates but also offers actionable guidance to practitioners and policymakers seeking to transform food systems toward greater equity and sustainability [5].

3.3.2. Operations & Ecology

Conventional supply chain management (SCM) in food systems is built around the idea of linear, optimized flow: getting food from farm to fork as quickly and cheaply as possible, using standardized processes to minimize costs, reduce lead times, and maintain consistent safety and quality [53,54]. These systems—often celebrated for their impressive logistical achievements—rely on tightly controlled networks favoring large-scale, uniform producers who can meet exacting requirements, but they also come with significant downsides, including heightened environmental impact, increased waste, and barriers for smaller or more diverse actors. A radically different supply chain is possible when agroecological

principles are brought to the center. Instead of optimizing only for linear efficiency, the focus shifts toward circularity, local integration, and the regeneration of ecological and community value [32]. In this reimagined system, excellence means not just lowering private costs but actively creating public benefits—supporting stronger communities and healthier ecosystems alongside profitable enterprises. The first big shift is embedding agroecology directly into supply chain design. These agroecological supply chains are intentionally crafted to nurture biodiversity, rebuild soil health, and conserve water—as much as, or even more than, to deliver products efficiently. This means designing shorter, locally rooted chains that can work with multiple, smaller farms and handle a diversity of crops, investing in distributed infrastructure (like small-scale processing and community storage), and developing participatory direct-to-consumer pathways. Evidence from “values-based food supply chains” shows this approach can deliver reliable returns and more stable livelihoods for producers, while also offering transparency and connection for consumers [31]. Another core shift involves the purpose of procurement. Traditional procurement seeks the lowest price; in the food justice model, procurement is a tool for broad systems change. Schools, hospitals, and public agencies can shape markets by favoring food grown locally, ecologically, and under fair labor standards. Through these choices, public dollars directly support producers aligned with justice and agroecological principles, turning routine purchasing into a force for positive transformation [18]. Finally, the concept of resilience is redefined. Standard SCM treats resilience as diversified sourcing within a globalized, linear supply web, aiming to absorb shocks without systemic change [55]. In contrast, an agroecological model builds resilience at the source—through diverse, adaptable farms and distributed food networks less dependent on global markets or uncertain logistics. Modern risk management in the food sector is sophisticated, harnessing data-driven tools and expert knowledge to anticipate and control dangers such as climate events, market volatility, or foodborne hazards [56]. Yet, this approach often narrows the lens: it mostly solves risks to the system itself, not the risks it creates—like inequality or the loss of biodiversity [57]. Furthermore, technical expertise often dominates, sidelining the lived, local, or Indigenous knowledge that could help identify blind spots or deeper vulnerabilities [41]. The Managerial Architecture of Food Justice proposes a different approach. Here, risk is reinterpreted—beyond managing hazards, the aim is to reduce the fundamental vulnerabilities in the system. This means broadening “risk” to include social and ecological harm (not just economic loss), creating new metrics for equity and ecosystem health [58,59], and democratizing the assessment process itself. Instead of remote modeling, risk is mapped within and by the communities and knowledge holders who are most directly affected, blending scientific data with local wisdom and participatory methods [60]. This integration systematically compares scientific data with community knowledge to identify convergence (mutual validation), complementarity (different risk dimensions), or divergence (diagnostic of overlooked vulnerabilities), with disagreements triggering participatory investigation that treats local wisdom as legitimate expertise rather than supplementary data [61]. In doing so, the power to define problems—and thus shape solutions—becomes shared, building food systems that are as just and adaptable as they are efficient and safe.

3.3.3. Power & Agency

In traditional management thinking, “stakeholder management” typically refers to a set of practices aimed at identifying, analyzing, and engaging groups who might affect—or be affected by—an organization’s goals. These efforts are usually framed in instrumental terms: the organization’s aim is to secure goodwill, reduce risks, and accomplish its objectives with minimal friction [46]. However, from a food justice perspective, such a narrow

lens fundamentally misses the point. Integrating food justice principles demands a more ambitious and transformative stance. Under this expanded vision, stakeholder engagement becomes the primary route through which power is shared, agency is enacted, and justice is advanced within the food system. Rather than serving as a box-ticking exercise to placate external groups, it emerges as the core political arena where hard questions are confronted, and genuine change is negotiated. Power differences—between large corporations and smallholders, between the global North and South, and among different social groups—are recognized as structural realities, not accidents to be smoothed over. For transformation to be real, stakeholder engagement must directly address and rebalance these inequalities. Concrete measures are required: providing targeted funding and capacity-building for underrepresented groups; setting ground rules to prevent any single voice from dominating; and embedding farmer organizations and community representatives as formal, empowered decision-makers in governance structures [62]. Only with such safeguards can multi-stakeholder processes move beyond tokenism and become credible mechanisms for inclusive, effective food system transformation. This approach also calls for a shift toward decolonizing methodologies, i.e., approaches that recognize indigenous, local, and traditional knowledge as equally authoritative to Western scientific knowledge, rather than treating diverse knowledge systems as supplementary. Mainstream food governance has long privileged Western, industrial forms of knowledge while marginalizing Indigenous and local wisdom [63,64]. Meaningful stakeholder engagement, therefore, means more than simply “welcoming” alternative perspectives. It requires centering the voices, worldviews, and organizational frameworks of those most affected by historic and ongoing exclusion and challenging the ways in which certain forms of knowledge have been systematically devalued [64]. This rethinking of stakeholder management also forces a reframing of power itself. Instead of treating power as another resource to be hoarded or balanced, a justice-oriented approach acknowledges the food system as an ongoing site of contestation and struggle [65,66]. The Managerial Architecture of Food Justice is, by necessity, a political project: its design and operation are underpinned by the intention to shift influence—from corporations to communities, from markets to public good, from technocratic experts to grassroots actors [47]. This critical awareness is essential to prevent the framework from drifting into naïve managerialism, ensuring that it remains anchored in its commitment to genuine, lasting transformation.

4. Discussion: Advancements for Theory, Practice, and Research

The Managerial Architecture of Food Justice offers significant contributions to theory, practice, and future research. By providing a framework for synthesizing two historically antagonistic paradigms, it opens new avenues for scholarships and action aimed at transformative changes in food systems. This section explicitly details these contributions, outlining the advancements in academic theory, the practical implications for managers and policymakers, and a concrete agenda for future research.

4.1. Theoretical Contributions

This framework makes four primary theoretical contributions that advance scholarship across multiple disciplines that are summarized in Table 4.

Table 4. Theoretical contributions of the managerial architecture of food justice.

Contribution	Core Innovation	Theoretical Advancement	Practical Impact
1. Sustainability Integration	Embeds sustainability and agency as primary design principles rather than peripheral considerations	Advances from incremental “greening” to transformative sustainability through critical performativity	Framework actively creates equitable food systems through implementation, not just description
2. Management Theory Advancement	Expands management’s normative scope beyond efficiency optimization to include justice and ecological integrity	Demonstrate how technical tools (supply chain models, risk assessment) can be re-parameterized for equity outcomes	Provides justice-oriented metrics (farmer income share, agrobiodiversity, nutrient density) embedded in operational models
3. Paradigm Bridging	Synthesizes management’s operational rigor with food justice movements’ emancipatory values	Resolves theoretical divide between efficiency-focused management and values-based activism	Creates actionable pathway for justice movements to scale while maintaining normative commitments
4. Governance Enrichment	Provides collaborative governance theories with substantive decision criteria and accountability mechanisms	Moves beyond process descriptions to specify what MSPs optimize for and how values become operational	Enables power-balancing, capacity-building, and enforcement to ensure collaborative decisions advance equity

First, by synthesizing managerial tools with the participatory principles of food justice and agroecology [6], the framework directly addresses the three foundational pillars of sustainability—environmental stewardship, economic viability, and social equity [58]. Our model demonstrates that effective food system transformation requires metrics and managerial processes that align with the Sustainable Development Goals [67], such as responsible production (SDG 12), climate action (SDG 13), and reduced inequalities (SDG 10). This advances management scholarship beyond efficiency or profit, toward a critical performance, where frameworks actively create the realities they envision through implementation rather than merely describing them, that enact sustainability as a primary design principle [45].

Second, it contributes to advancing management theory by showing how essential managerial practices can be adapted to tackle broad societal challenges [68]. It responds to calls for management research to become more relevant and impactful by demonstrating that the tools of management are not immutable; they can be reconfigured and repurposed to serve goals of social justice and ecological sustainability [69]. The framework offers a foundation for critical performativity, where theory moves beyond critique to actively shape fairer and more effective organizations and governance [45]. It moves management theory beyond its traditional focus on the firm and the market to engage with complex, multi-stakeholder systems of societal importance [70]. Critical performativity means the framework actively creates the reality it envisions through its adoption. For example, when a municipality implements the framework’s procurement criteria—mandating percentages for smallholder sourcing and living wages—these requirements immediately restructure markets, incentivize regenerative practices, and redirect public funds toward equity. This implementation generates measurable outcomes demonstrating viability, validating the framework’s principles and facilitating adoption elsewhere, creating a performative feedback loop where application progressively realizes the normative vision [71].

Third, the framework makes a significant contribution to food systems scholarship by providing a conceptual bridge across the deep chasm separating the “food security” and “food sovereignty” camps. For decades, these paradigms have operated in parallel, with

one focused on technical optimization and the other on political transformation [4]. Our framework offers a “third way” that integrates the operational power of the former with the normative vision of the latter [72]. It suggests that food security (access to food) can be seen as a necessary but insufficient outcome of a system governed by the principles of food sovereignty (the right to define that system) [73]. This integration provides a more holistic and actionable theory of change, moving the academic debate from an “either/or” conflict to a “how-to” synthesis [74].

Fourth, the paper contributes to public governance theory. It extends theories of New Public Governance and Collaborative Governance by applying them to the highly complex and contested domain of the global food system. While these theories provide powerful process models for multi-actor collaboration, our framework gives them substantive content [75,76]. While collaborative governance theories describe how stakeholders should interact (inclusive processes, consensus-building, transparency), they often lack substantive guidance on what decisions should optimize for and how abstract values translate into operational criteria. The framework provides this content: it specifies optimization goals (six food security pillars emphasizing agency and sustainability), operational parameters (e.g., $\geq 30\%$ procurement from smallholders, farmer income share targets, agrobiodiversity thresholds), and accountability mechanisms (power-balancing rules, capacity-building support, transparent metric tracking) that ensure collaborative decisions advance equity rather than legitimizing elite preferences. The framework emphasizes the importance of addressing power imbalances and incorporating varied knowledge systems within collaborative governance [77]. It thus provides a rich, empirically grounded case that both utilizes and enriches existing governance theory, showing how these abstract models can be operationalized to tackle a specific grand challenge [24].

4.2. Managerial and Policy Implications

Beyond its academic contributions, the Managerial Architecture of Food Justice provides a practical and actionable framework for practitioners and policymakers. It moves beyond abstract principles to offer concrete guidance on how to re-imagine day-to-day functions and strategic priorities.

For practitioners, adopting the Managerial Architecture of Food Justice provides a toolkit for designing food systems and governance models that actively cultivate sustainability, reducing environmental footprints, promoting agroecological practices, decentralizing decision-making, and redistributing value [78]. The empirical examples in the manuscript, such as values-based supply chains and multi-stakeholder platforms, illustrate how these principles manifest as measurable gains in sustainability indicators [79,80]: carbon reduction, biodiversity, community agency, and equitable food access [81].

For policymakers, the framework offers a blueprint for designing more holistic and effective food policies. It suggests that policies should be evaluated not only on their ability to improve food availability and access but also on their impact on community agencies, social equity, and ecological health. It calls for the integration of these dimensions into national food security strategies and for the creation of enabling policy environments that support collaborative, multi-stakeholder governance rather than imposing top-down, one-size-fits-all solutions [47].

4.3. Practical Implementation Examples

While this paper presents a conceptual framework, its principles are already being implemented in practice. Brazil’s National School Feeding Programme (PNAE) demonstrates supply chain redesign at national scale: by legally mandating that 30% of school meal budgets purchase food from family farmers, the program restructured institutional supply

chains serving 40 million students, creating stable markets for over 100,000 smallholder families while improving child nutrition and strengthening regional food economies [82]. In the United States, La Montanita Food Cooperative in New Mexico operationalizes values-based supply chain principles by prioritizing local producers within 400 miles, using transparent open-book pricing that ensures farmers receive 45–55% of retail price (versus 15–25% in conventional chains), and embedding cooperative governance structures that give producers and consumers shared decision-making authority—demonstrating that justice-oriented models can achieve financial viability while supporting 700+ local producers [83]. Similarly, the MercaTiAmo farmers' markets in Parma, Italy illustrate how shortened supply chains generate local economic multipliers: direct farmer-to-consumer sales increase farmer revenue retention from ~20% to ~85% of consumer price, with local multiplier analysis showing every EUR 1 spent generates EUR 1.76 in regional economic activity compared to EUR 1.15 for supermarket purchases, strengthening both farmer livelihoods and community food infrastructure [84]. These cases demonstrate that the framework's operational principles, re-parameterized optimization criteria, transparent value distribution, and stakeholder governance—are not theoretical aspirations but grounded practices achieving measurable equity, sustainability, and economic viability across diverse contexts.

The NHS Wales hospital food procurement program (2010–2014) demonstrates how the Managerial Architecture of Food Justice translates into practice across all five managerial functions [85]. The implementation of the framework principles to NHS Wales is depicted in Table 5. Serving 10 million patient meals annually with a £35 million budget, NHS Wales redefined strategic priorities by embedding sustainable development goals into procurement policy, establishing the All Wales Menu Framework that integrated nutritional care with sustainability and regional economic development objectives. The program redesigned supply chains through re-parameterized procurement criteria: the 2012 yoghurt contract shifted optimization from lowest cost and longest shelf-life to emphasizing local sourcing (Welsh dairy cooperatives), reduced food miles (from >500 km to <100 km), and fair value distribution to producers while maintaining cost-effectiveness—demonstrating that justice-oriented supply chain models achieve viability within institutional budgets. Risk assessment expanded beyond traditional food safety and cost control to include environmental impacts, regional economic effects, and nutritional quality, assessed through collaborative governance structures involving health boards, nutritionists, patient representatives, and producer organizations. Procurement functioned as development policy, deliberately leveraging public purchasing power to strengthen Welsh agriculture: local food procurement increased from 8% to 47%, supporting small producers and creating economic multipliers in regional food systems. Multi-stakeholder governance ensured accountability through the All Wales Framework's monitoring systems tracking local sourcing percentages, food miles, supplier diversity, patient satisfaction, and economic impact, with regular reporting to Welsh Government demonstrating measurable progress toward justice and sustainability goals. This case validates that the framework's principles—strategic reorientation, supply chain re-parameterization, democratized risk assessment, procurement innovation, and collaborative governance—are not theoretical aspirations but operational realities achieving documented success in cost-constrained institutional settings.

Table 5. Mapping framework principles to NHS Wales implementation.

Framework Component	NHS Wales Implementation	Specific Actions	Documented Outcomes
1. Strategic Management Transformation	Redefined institutional goals to integrate sustainability and regional development alongside clinical/financial objectives	Welsh Government mandate embedding sustainable development in NHS constitution; All Wales Menu Framework establishing nutritional care + sustainability targets; Target: >40% local sourcing	Local procurement increased from 8% to 47%; Sustainability integrated into all health board procurement strategies
2. Supply Chain Re-Parameterization	Shifted optimization from single objective (lowest cost) to multi-objective (cost + local sourcing + sustainability + quality)	2012 All Wales yoghurt contract: specifications prioritized Welsh producers, reduced food miles, fair producer pricing; Supply chain relocalized from >500 km to <100 km transport; Partnership with Welsh dairy cooperatives for aggregation	Yoghurt contract awarded to Glanbia Cheese (Welsh producer); Reduced carbon footprint per meal; Strengthened regional dairy sector; Maintained cost-effectiveness within NHS budgets
3. Expanded Risk Assessment	Integrated environmental, social, and economic risks alongside traditional financial/operational risks	Nutritional care pathways (clinical risk); Cost constraints (financial risk); Supply reliability (operational risk); Food miles and carbon footprint (environmental risk); Regional economic impact (social risk)	Holistic risk framework prevented trade-offs that sacrifice sustainability for short-term savings; multi-dimensional evaluation in procurement decisions
4. Procurement as Policy Tool	Leveraged £35 million public purchasing power as strategic development instrument	Procurement specifications favoring Welsh producers; Support for small farm aggregation; Deliberate market creation for sustainable regional food systems; Integration with Welsh agricultural development policy	£35 million redirected toward Welsh food economy; Created stable markets for regional producers; Demonstrated procurement as economic development driver
5. Multi-Stakeholder Governance & Accountability	Collaborative structures with transparent monitoring and public accountability	All Wales Menu Framework governance involving health boards, procurement officers, nutritionists, patients, producers; Monitoring: % local sourcing, food miles, supplier diversity, patient satisfaction, economic impact; Regular reporting to Welsh Government	Transparent tracking enabled adaptive management; Accountability to multiple stakeholders (clinical, financial, sustainability); Model influenced UK-wide hospital procurement
6. Measurable Justice Outcomes	Framework principles translated into quantifiable improvements across equity, sustainability, agency dimensions	Local sourcing: 8% → 47%; Food miles: >500 km → <100 km average; Patient satisfaction improved; Regional economic multipliers strengthened	Empirical validation that justice-oriented frameworks achieve measurable success; Proof of concept within regulatory/budgetary constraints

4.4. Future Research Agenda

While this paper introduces a new framework to bridge managerial and justice-oriented approaches to food system sustainability, it has some limitations. The conceptual nature of the framework means that empirical validation across diverse geographic and cultural contexts is still needed. Future research should focus on testing the framework's

practical application in real-world settings, using interdisciplinary methods that capture social, environmental, and economic sustainability outcomes holistically. Additionally, exploring how emerging technologies and policy innovations can align with this architecture will be crucial for advancing sustainable food systems globally.

The three core propositions of the framework should be treated as hypotheses for future empirical investigation. Research should be designed to explicitly test whether the integration of justice principles into management functions leads to demonstrably better, more equitable, and more sustainable food security outcomes. This will require a new generation of mixed-methods research that can capture both the quantitative performance and the qualitative, lived experiences of food system transformation.

5. Conclusions

The Managerial Architecture of Food Justice demonstrates that the historical divide between technical management and food justice movements is not inevitable. By repurposing managerial tools, supply chain optimization, procurement planning, risk assessment—to serve equity and sustainability rather than narrow efficiency, the framework provides an operational blueprint for transformative change.

The practical examples of NHS Wales, Brazil’s PNAE, and values-based cooperatives across continents prove that justice-oriented approaches achieve measurable success within institutional constraints: relocated supply chains, strengthened smallholder livelihoods, reduced environmental impacts, improved nutrition—all are financially viable.

The challenge shifts from whether such systems are possible to whether we will construct them. Policymakers, procurement officers, and institutional leaders now possess actionable frameworks. The transformation of food systems from instruments of inequality to engines of equity depends on choices being made today in procurement offices and policy councils worldwide. Operational knowledge exists; implementation requires collective will.

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Abbreviations

The following abbreviations are used in this manuscript:

HLPE-FSN	High-Level Panel of Experts on Food Security and Nutrition
SDG	Sustainable Development Goal
SCM	Supply Chain Management
MSP	Multi-Stakeholder Platform
FAO	Food and Agriculture Organization (of the United Nations)
CSR	Corporate Social Responsibility
UNEP	United Nations Environment Programme
IDRC	International Development Research Centre
SFN	Sustainable Food Network

IPES-Food International Panel of Experts on Sustainable Food Systems
VAM Vulnerability Analysis and Mapping

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