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STATUS IN SOCIO-ENVIRONMENTAL FIELDS: RELATIONSHIPS, EVALUATIONS, AND OTHERHOOD

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ABSTRACT

Status distinctions matter among heterogeneous organizations within a socio-environmental field. This is exemplified in the food waste field, where six types of organizations employ different excess strategies to address the issue. Theoretically, we propose that status is constructed internally through advice relationships and externally through evaluations. We posit that organizations conducting evaluations and advocating legitimate principles based on expertise (i.e., Others) are status winners. Our mixed-method study confirms that Others hold privileged positions and identifies status inconsistencies. By critically illuminating these status dynamics, we contribute to a better understanding of the roles of organizations and status in tackling socio-environmental issues.

Keywords: Organization; food waste; network; Others; excess; organizational field

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1. INTRODUCTION

Status is considered one of the most sociological concepts (Podolny, 2005, p. 11), encompassing esteem, admiration, and deference given to or achieved by an actor (Boudon & Bourricaud, 1992). It is used to explain social order and to critically reflect on social differences and inequalities (Ridgeway, 2014). Notably, Max Weber explained that social positions in society are not only based on economic power but also honor, respect, and deference (or defiance, dishonor, and disrespect), resulting in the formation of privileged and marginalized groups.¹ These status hierarchies are neither naturally given nor objectively justified, as status is self-reinforcing (Merton, 1968), and one can observe strategies of distinction and conflicts over social positions (Bourdieu, 1987). Consequently, in sociological thinking, the notion status helps to investigate critically the construction of social order.

Complementarily, organizational scholars have demonstrated the value of “status” in enhancing our understanding of organizational life and survival as well as interorganizational collaborations and relationships (Chen et al., 2011; Piazza & Castellucci, 2014; Sauder et al., 2012). The construct has gained a foothold in organizational research due to Podolny’s (2005) seminal work applying status to markets and detailing that market participants in situations of uncertainty rely on producers’ status to make inferences about the products’ and services’ quality. The identification of status effects on organizations is a core topic in organizational research, with particular emphasis placed on its associated benefits (Chen et al., 2011).² Hence, organizational scholars put emphasis on the desired effects of status on organizations, such as reducing uncertainty, facilitating transactions, accessing better opportunities, or minimizing costs (Sauder et al., 2012).

However, in light of sociologists’ critical analysis of status, it is essential to acknowledge that status does not solely generate desirable effects but establishes order among organizations by constructing privileged and marginalized groups. The objective of this paper is to delve into the role of status in creating such hierarchical orders within socio-environmental fields that are burgeoning in response to escalating awareness of social and planetary boundaries (e.g., Rockström et al., 2009). These fields are characterized by a variety of organizations that unite around a socio-environmental issue (Hoffman, 1999; Wooten & Hoffman, 2017). As they emerge and grow, these organizations develop a shared understanding of the field’s purpose and relationships with one another (Fligstein & McAdam, 2012). To date, interorganizational status differences have typically been examined between similar organizations such as wineries (Croidieu & Powell, 2024, in this volume; Malter, 2014), colleges and universities (Bühlmann et al., 2022; Chu, 2021; Sauder, 2006), or restaurants (Borkenhagen & Martin, 2018). Thus, there is limited knowledge of how status establishes order among heterogeneous organizations. Against this backdrop we ask: what are the determinants of organizational status in a heterogeneous socio-environmental field? Which organizations are the privileged ones, and which are the marginalized ones? In answering these questions, we will provide findings that are of interest to sociologists and organizational scholars concerned with the role of organizations and

status in addressing socio-environmental issues, specifically determining the types of organizations that inhabit the dominant center of the field.

In the empirical spotlight of this paper is the specific socio-environmental issue of food waste. Following [Abbott \(2014\)](#), food waste can be considered a problem of excess, as most will agree that it is “too much” when approximately one-third of all food produced in the world is lost or wasted every year ([FAO, 2019](#)). Looking at the emerging food waste field in Switzerland, we will demonstrate that heterogeneous organizational types (*food save charities, food save businesses, plants and tech companies, alternative producers, and distributors* as well as *public and political organizations* and *interest groups*) are proposing different excess strategies to tackle the issue. Nevertheless, driven by a national policy push, they interact and exchange. To explore the status dynamics among these organizations, we will draw from sociological literature on status (especially [Lazega et al., 2012](#); [Sauder et al., 2012](#)) and assume that status is constructed endogenously through advice relations among field inhabitants (i.e., relational status), as well as exogenously through evaluations (i.e., evaluative status). In addition to this conceptual distinction, we will pay specific attention to those organizations that advocate abstract, legitimate principles based on expertise (referred to as Others) because, according to institutional theory, these organizations are held high in esteem in current society ([Meyer & Jepperson, 2000](#)).

Our empirical results from a mixed-method study will confirm that Others (*public and political organizations* and *interest groups*) inhabit a privileged position in the food waste field compared to other types of organizations that distribute food waste and avoid this by establishing alternative value chains or transforming waste into new food products and energy. As we critically illuminate Others’ status-laden position, we will also uncover status inconsistencies and spillover effects of Others’ status-relevant evaluations that create additional disadvantage for people who rely on food supplies from *food save charities*. These findings will support the relevance of studying status in socio-environmental fields and, more importantly, indicate where to shift analytical focus when grappling with interorganizational status dynamics in the context of socio-environmental challenges.

Next, we will develop our conceptual framework and introduce our case and methods in Section 3. In Section 4, we present empirical findings sequentially, focusing first on the relational and then on the evaluative status hierarchy. We discuss our findings in Section 5 and conclude with a brief reflection on the implications for further studies on organizational status dynamics in socio-environmental fields.

2. STATUS AND SOCIO-ENVIRONMENTAL ISSUES

The contemporary world faces manifold socio-environmental challenges such as massive pollution, overfishing, waste accumulation, or deforestation. As these problems worsen and attract growing attention, individuals, businesses, non-profit organizations, and governments are taking responsibility to mitigate them. Addressing socio-environmental issues can enhance social status, as evidenced by

ethical consumption (Fifita et al., 2020) or the awarding of environmental certificates (Carlos & Lewis, 2018). At the same time, however, these issues also lead to the formation of new fields inhabited by multiple, heterogeneous organizations (Hoffman, 1999; Wooten & Hoffman, 2017). Status flows on these interorganizational relations, and we elucidate hereafter how to grasp these status constructions and distinctions analytically.

Using different terms, authors refer to two fundamental components in the construction of status hierarchies (e.g., Gould, 2002; Sauder et al., 2012; Sharkey, 2014), which we distinguish with the terms *evaluative* and *relational* status. In both cases, organizations do not achieve status on their own, because status is an attribution by other actors. An organization’s status can emerge endogenously from field relationships with other organizations (i.e., relational status) and be exogenously imposed by the evaluation of other actors (i.e., evaluative status). Looking at socio-environmental fields, we address these two forms of status in turn by directing attention to their underlying social process, their social basis, and their operationalization. In doing so, we assume that evaluative and relational status dynamics are not necessarily congruent and may differ, resulting in status inconsistencies (Sauder et al., 2012; Zhao & Zhou, 2011). Table 1 summarizes the key assumptions of our conceptual framework.

In any field, a status order emerges endogenously from the relations between its inhabitants. In this sense, relational status highlights the fact that an organization’s status is dependent on with whom the organization is connected to and with whom it builds relationships (Sauder et al., 2012). Given that “status leaks through linkages” (Podolny, 2005, p. 15), actors seek linkages to those with high status in hopes of benefiting from their prestige and esteem. That is why high status brings benefits and advantages, as pointed out by the seminal Matthew effect (Merton, 1968). We know that status flows through exchange relationships, but who the specific organizational status winners and losers are in the context of socio-environmental challenges needs to be explored (Blau, 1964; Lazega et al., 2012). Determining who gives and seeks advice is beneficial to illuminate how status is distributed in networks of relationships (Podolny, 2005). Against

Table 1. Types of Organizational Status in Fields Formed Around Socio-Environmental Issues.

	Relational Status	Evaluative Status
Social process	Endogenous, emergent from field relationships (Blau, 1964; Lazega et al., 2012; Podolny, 2005)	Exogenous, typically imposed by Others that evaluate organizational performance and quality (Correll et al., 2017; Sauder et al., 2012)
Social basis	Perceived competence in taking responsibility for the socio-environmental issue	Conformity to policy expectations relevant to the socio-environmental issue
Operationalization	Interorganizational networks (esp. advice networks)	Evaluative devices (e.g., rankings, ratings, standards, certificates)

Source: Authors’ own.

this background, we assume that those organizations that are considered to be competent in taking responsibility for socio-environmental issues are asked for advice by other organizations and gain relational status. To acquire a more precise understanding of the dynamics of relational status, one must therefore study interorganizational networks, especially advice networks (Lazega et al., 2012).

By searching for organizations that are asked for and giving advice, we hypothesize that status winners are those organizations that possess knowledge and expertise and are specialized in gathering information and making recommendations. Identifying the types of organizations that are relational status winners is congruent with arguments from institutional theory about actorhood (Meyer, 2010, 2019; Meyer & Jepperson, 2000). Meyer and Jepperson (2000, p. 106) explain that the “capacity for responsible agency” is central to the construction of actorhood, whereby actors (including organizations) construct agency not only for themselves and other actors but also for abstract principles and cultural standards. In the latter case, otherhood is observed, meaning that actors do not act as self-interested agents for their individual concerns and priorities, but serve abstract and theoretical principles that are mobilized to guide and orient action. These actors are labeled as Others – a term that identifies a particular way of being an actor that requires education, training, and knowledge. In modern, globalized society, these Others receive the highest status, because “otherhood, rather than successfully interested actorhood, ranks at the top of the prestige system, worldwide” (Meyer, 2010, p. 10). That is, “the most admired actors in contemporary society are mostly such Others, carrying disinterested commitment to very general goods, and transmitting these” (Meyer, 2019, p. 283, own capitalization of the term “Others”). In the case of socio-environmental issues, the organizational Others are those that advocate legitimate principles and standards that help protect the planet and society (e.g., environmental protection and justice, biodiversity, solidarity, and fairness).

However, status differences do not result solely from the dynamics of field relationships. Others also evaluate organizations in a status-relevant way (Correll et al., 2017; Sauder et al., 2012). Others typically assume their intermediary function in an expertise-based way and with references to societally legitimate principles (Meyer, 2019). To evaluate these parties, for example, Others develop ratings and rankings, award prizes and certificates, or publish indicators that assess organizations’ performance and quality. Consequently, we assume that formal evaluations matter for the construction of evaluative status, although informal evaluations may also influence status dynamics. However, it is formal evaluations that have intensified in the organizational world (Dahler-Larsen, 2011), and they also enjoy high acceptance in dealing with socio-environmental challenges. For example, an increasing variety of standards and certificates assess the socio-environmentally relevant actions and inactions of organizations (Carlos & Lewis, 2018; Loconto & Arnold, 2022), while indicators measure organizations’ contribution to a socio-environmental transition (Bexell & Jönsson, 2017). Typically, these evaluative devices check conformity with policy expectations relevant to the particular issue, with good and positive evaluations increasing status and poor evaluations working in the other direction. Given that evaluative status depends on how much

value is attributed to organizational performance and quality, it is exogenous, and we assume that Others are relevant evaluators. Yet, their evaluations are not objective but contingent, and the high status of those being evaluated may positively influence the evaluation (Lamont, 2012). Consequently, evaluations can produce status hierarchies that tend to reproduce themselves.

In a nutshell, we assume that a status order in a socio-environmental field is constructed endogenously by advice relations and exogenously by evaluations. Therein, Others play a key role because, on the one hand, they rank at the top of the societal status hierarchy, and, on the other hand, they shape status differences through their formal evaluations.

3. THE SWISS FOOD WASTE FIELD

As a socio-environmental issue, food waste started to receive global attention when the Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO) of the United Nations unveiled that about one-third of all food produced worldwide for human consumption is wasted (Gustavsson et al., 2011). This quantification has provoked lively scientific and policy debates (Reynolds et al., 2020), for example, being reflected in the setting of the UN Sustainable Development Goal 12.3, which states that food waste must be dramatically reduced by 2030. However, food waste continues to accumulate and the 931 million tons of food that end up in the garbage annually is indisputably too much (FAO, 2019). Hence, food waste is undoubtedly an “excess problem” (Abbott, 2014), but it is based on other problems of excess. In particular, excessive consumption (Evans, 2014; Packard, [1960] 2011) and exorbitant standards that define expectations about the quality, safety, and appearance of the food drive its accumulation (Arnold, 2022). Both excessive consumption and standards are pronounced in Western industrialized countries such as Switzerland where we put our empirical focus.

In Switzerland, 330 kg of food is wasted per year per citizen (Foodwaste.ch, 2019). The food waste debates are still young, but they are gaining continuous momentum, making Switzerland a suitable setting for examining status dynamics in an emerging field. Specifically, the food waste debates started no more than 10 years ago, when the Federal Office for Agriculture called for a stakeholder dialogue on the issue in 2013, opening a conversation among all actors interested in the issue. This stakeholder dialogue can be considered a major field-configuring event, as various organizations have exchanged their ideas and perspectives on the issue and started to build relationships (Lampel & Meyer, 2008). While Switzerland has been committed to the sustainable development goals (SDGs) (including food waste reduction) since the beginning, the Swiss government did not become active until a corresponding postulate was submitted and officially accepted by the Swiss Parliament in March 2019 (Die Bundesversammlung, 2018). Following this, a nationwide action plan was adopted in 2022, which provides a two-step plan on how to achieve the goal of halving food waste by first taking voluntary measures, which, if they are not effective enough, can then be supplemented by government measures (Schweizerische Eidgenossenschaft, 2022).

For our research purpose, the Swiss food waste field is appealing, because a growing number of organizations, heterogeneous in nature, are involved in addressing the problem. Our first empirical goal and challenge were to track and identify the organizational field inhabitants before turning to their status hierarchies. To do so, we used a mixed-methods approach, in which we collected first qualitative and then quantitative data in two phases (Leech & Onwuegbuzie, 2009). The identification of all organizations that take responsibility for food waste was a crucial part of both approaches. This undertaking has garnered the interest of policymakers, who utilized our information to ensure they have not overlooked any pertinent actors for their stakeholder dialogue in developing the food waste action plan. The limited knowledge of policymakers about who is part of the field underscores that the Swiss food waste field is thoroughly emergent and hardly stabilized (Fligstein & McAdam, 2012). In line with our sequential approach, we next present our methods and emphasize that our subsequently obtained data iteratively enriched each other during data interpretation. Thus, the sequential approach has dissolved during the research process.

4. METHODS

4.1. Drawing the Field Boundaries

In 2018, we started to conduct semi-structured interviews with key players in the Swiss Food Waste field to learn which organizations address this issue, what approaches they propose, and with whom they collaborate and/or compete. To start a snowball sampling process, we conducted the first interview with a natural scientist who quantifies Swiss food waste volumes and raises broad attention from the media. At the end of each interview, we asked for other key players. With this snowball system approach, we reached 29 interviewees with an average duration of 60 minutes as of April 2023. Interviewees included politicians, chefs, consultants and lobbyists, activists, biogas plant operators, as well as managing directors of food banks and consumer organizations. Alongside the interviews, we conducted participant observations in different organizational settings (e.g., food waste restaurants, food banks, food saving activities, urban food waste events) to observe and familiarize ourselves with what taking responsibility for food waste means in everyday life.

The qualitative data were used to set up a database of Swiss food waste organizations. By triangulating information from interviews with information from newspaper articles, we identified a total of 102 organizations. These organizations can be categorized into six different organizational types, all of which can be assigned to one of Abbott's (2014) four excess strategies (defensive, reactive, adaptive, and creative).

- The first group combines those organizations that apply a defensive strategy. That is, they do not solve the problem, but they “transform it (excess) into a problem of scarcity” (Abbott, 2014, p. 18). These include *food save charities* (1) that redistribute food waste for human consumption to those in need. By

redistributing food waste for free or very cheap, these organizations generate a high demand for such waste, rendering food waste a scarce resource. *Food save businesses* (2) save and mostly process food waste to sell it in conventional markets for human consumption. This introduction in conventional markets is a classic defensive strategy that aims at taming the problem. Similarly, *plants and tech companies* (3) that generate energy from food waste make food waste a scarce supply for energy production.

- Those organizations with a reactive strategy form the second group. Like the first group, these organizations also aim to reduce excessive food waste, but instead of making it scarce, they seek to create order in excess, for example, through prioritization or hierarchization. *Public and political organizations* (4) that study food waste, provide information, and work toward regulation belong to this group. Additionally, *interest groups* (5), who campaign privately to reduce food waste, provide information, and make policies, apply a reactive strategy. Both organizational types (*public and political organizations* and *interest groups*) are Others because their strategies are based on expertise, education, and training and give guidance and evaluation of what should be done with food waste.
- The third group consists of those organizations that use an adaptive strategy that “focuses less on ignoring or reducing excess [as the defensive and reactive strategy do] than on finding it more desirable and less disturbing” (p. 20). This group includes only one organizational type, *the alternative producers and distributors* (6), which create new, inclusive production and trade chains. In doing so, *alternative producers and distributors* scale excess as they produce and trade even more food (waste).

Although we do not observe the fourth, creative strategy, the listing above proves the heterogeneity of organizations and their strategies in the food waste field.³ When stressing the heterogeneity, it is important to add that these organizations can be compared because they all take responsibility for food waste and are therefore concerned with food safety issues and logistics, as well as standards and regulations, relevant to food production and trade. Further, they actually know each other and engage in mutual exchange, as we will show later.

4.2. Designing the Survey

Our database on heterogeneous organizations provided an excellent opportunity to invite the organizations to participate in a self-completion survey that collected systematic information about their characteristics and relationships. In May 2020, we invited persons with good organizational knowledge (e.g., owners, founders, managers) to fill out the survey on behalf of their organization. Two respondents informed that their organizations no longer exist, eight clarified that their activities have nothing to do with food waste, and two explained that their organizations formally constitute one organization. As a result, we corrected our reference population to 91 organizations. In total, 84 completed our survey, giving us an outstanding response rate of 92% (84/91). We achieved this by sending

personalized letters and then motivating non-respondents (first by email and then by phone) to complete the survey online (Qualtrics) via a QR code or by hand on paper.

Questions in the survey addressed three domains: *organizational characteristics* (year of foundation, industry, canton, specialization, number of employees/volunteers, funding, legal form, target audience), *organizational practices* (quantity and types of food processed), and *attitudes* (definition of the food waste problem). Most importantly for this study, the survey included a sociometric module about relations of awareness, advice, exchange of food and personnel, taking inspiration from the interorganizational networks literature (DiMaggio, 1986; Lazega, 2014; Lazega et al., 2012). Given that status refers to the accumulated acts of deference that are intangible per se, organization scholars generally infer status from exchange relations, such as syndication, strategic alliances, patent citations, or PhD exchanges (cf. Sauder et al., 2012).

4.3. Conceptualizing and Measuring Status

Lazega et al. (2012) proposed to measure status via the exchange of advice and resulting relationships. We follow this suggestion for three main reasons. First, inferring relational status from advice relationships is significant, because we can explain the origins of status with social exchange theory, considering that advice gives exchange advice for status (Blau, 1955) and accumulate it as capital (Blau, 1964). Second, advice-seeking implies deference. When reaching for advice, advice seekers signal their deference to more competent actors (Lazega et al., 2012). Third, numerous studies confirm that actors tend to seek advice from those perceived to have higher status, as evidenced by Lazega et al.'s (2012, p. 2) citation of 19 relevant studies. While some literature simply argues that advice is sought from status winners, we follow Lazega et al. (2012) and approach seeking advice as a way to measure status. The specific measure of status we used for the quantitative analysis is the response to the following question from the sociometric module: "Would you [i.e. ego] call this [i.e. alter] organization if you needed advice?" To account for the elements of desire and admiration in the concept of status, we formulated the question in a conditional mode and did not ask who has been asked for advice in a past period of time, as Lazega et al. (2012) did in their study.

In a next step, we concatenated each bilateral advice relation among all organizations to get an advice network. Indegree centrality refers to the number of ties received by an organization in this network. This variable was taken as a measure of status: the more central an organization is in terms of indegree in the advice network, the more status it has. This operationalization of status has external validity, as we asked a supplementary question in the survey to capture organizational status in another way: "List the three most important organizations that deal with the issue of food waste in Switzerland." The answers given to this question corresponded to our results from the network analysis, giving us high confidence in our measure of status with indegree centrality in the advice network (see the Appendix).

Building on our network analysis, which confirmed Others' dominant position in the food waste field, we finally compared our empirical findings on

the relational status hierarchy with the status-relevant evaluations in the field. Specifically, we used our qualitative data to analyze how Others evaluate existing food waste strategies while influencing status distinctions in the field. For this purpose, information from the interviews with those organizations that provide field-relevant evaluations was particularly helpful. Of our 29 interviews, we conducted 7 interviews with members of *public and political organizations* and 3 interviews with employees from *private interest groups*. These 10 interviews, along with information given by the dominant Others (especially BAFU and Foodwaste.ch) on their websites, were helpful in identifying their formal, hierarchizing evaluations of food waste approaches and understanding how they shape the evaluative status hierarchy in the food waste field.

5. STATUS HIERARCHIES IN THE FOOD WASTE FIELD

Following our framework, we detail what organizations receive and are given high/low status through relationships and formal evaluations given by Others. Table 2 summarizes our results and anticipates that status differences are not consistently constructed. Given that Others are the evaluators rather than the ones being evaluated, Others’ evaluative status is not specified in Table 2.

5.1. Relational Status

Despite their heterogeneity, the organizations present in the food waste field mutually know each other and actively exchange food, personnel, and advice. This is shown by the upper network in Fig. 1, which provides evidence that we are dealing with, indeed, an organizational *field* (Panel a). However, given our research question, we zoom in on the advice relationships as they provide information about status (Panel b).

When examining advice relationships, we find that organizations taking responsibility for food waste form a dense network. The lower network in Fig. 1 shows that all organizations are connected via advice seeking, meaning that all organizations are sending or receiving at least one advice tie to or from another.

Table 2. Status Hierarchies in the Swiss Food Waste Field.

Relational Status		Evaluative Status
Not specified		Public sector organizations; interest groups
High	Interest groups	Food save business; alternative producers and distributors
Intermediary	Public sector organizations; food save charities; food save businesses, plants and tech companies	Food save charities
Low	Alternative producers and distributors	Plants and tech companies

Source: Authors’ own.

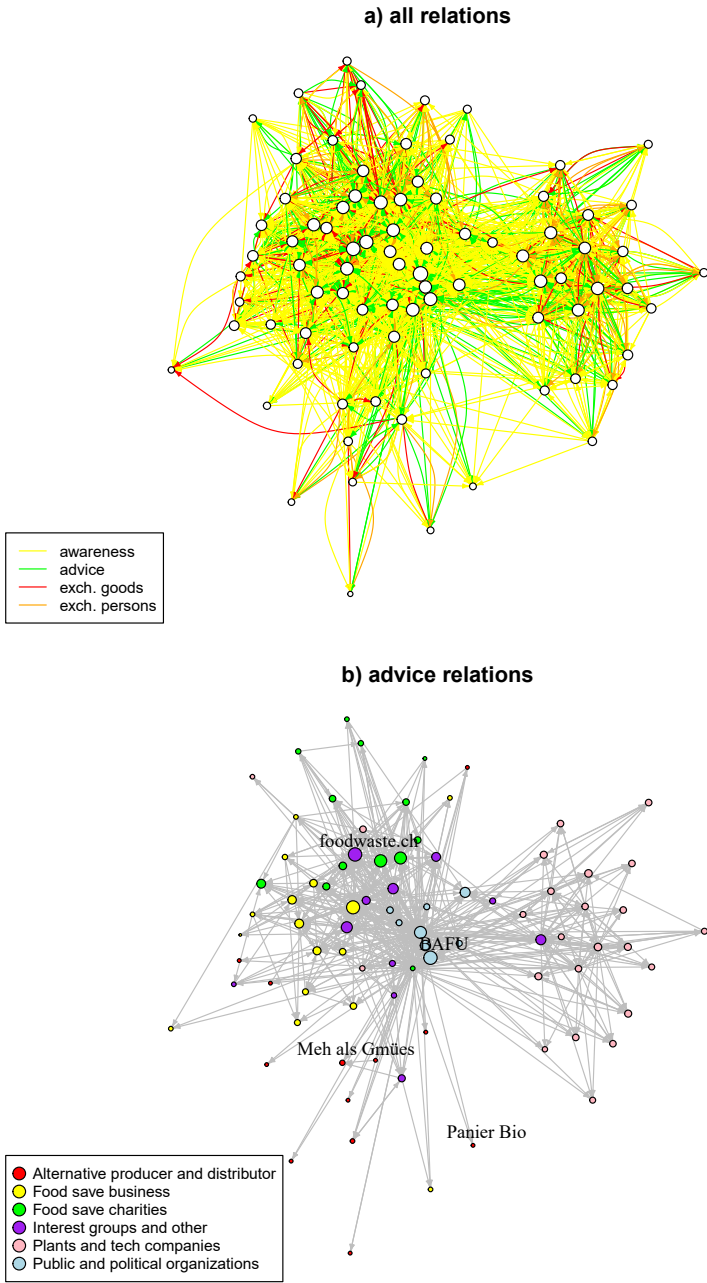


Fig. 1. The Network of Relationships in the Food Waste Field.

Source: Food waste survey ($n = 84$, $l = 2,503$). Notes: This figure represents the network of relations in the Swiss food waste field among the 84 organizations that

The two most sought-after organizations are Foodwaste.ch (*interest group*) and the Federal Office for the Environment – BAFU (*public and political organization*). The Swiss Federal Institute of Technology – ETH Zürich (*public and political organization*, not shown in the figure) is less central (20 incoming ties) but has a “star-like” relational profile because it sends a lot of ties to diverse parts of the network. Crucially, these organizations that inhabit the center belong to the organizational groups *public and political organizations* and *interest groups*. Building on their reactive strategy to excessive food waste, they construct otherhood by providing knowledge-based guidance and advice on how to approach and manage food waste excess in a way that benefits society, the environment, and the climate.

The dispersion of relational status among Others is shown in Fig. 2, which highlights that Others do not all have high scores of indegree centrality. This implies that *public and political organizations* and *interest groups* do not systematically have very high indegree scores. Nearly 50% of *public and political organizations* have quite a low score of indegree. Among those who are not popular in terms of advice are political parties and some interest groups, such as La Fédération Romande d’Agriculture Contractuelle de Proximité (FRACP), which is the network of French-speaking contract farming initiatives.

If we focus on the top of the relational status hierarchy, we notice that it is dominated by two Others: Foodwaste.ch (*interest group*) and the BAFU (*public and political organization*). However, some *food save charities and businesses* also have a very high relational status: Äss-Bar, Tischlein deck dich, and Schweizer Tafel/Table Suisse. This means that the status elite is composed of both Others and a subset of rather large-size and well-known *food save businesses and charities* (see Table 3). This status elite forms a dense network of advice giving and receiving, of which *plants and tech companies* and *alternative producers and distributors* are excluded. While *plants and tech companies* form their dense network aside, the *alternative producers and distributors* (e.g., Panier Bio or Meh als Gmües) are at the margins of the network (see Fig. 1).

As a measure of status received from relationships, we took the number of advice ties received by an organization (indegree centrality). This variable is unequally distributed: although all organizations receive at least one advice tie, only

responded to the survey. Panel a represents the network of all 2,503 relations of: awareness in yellow ($l = 1,464$), advice in green ($l = 582$), exchange of goods in red ($l = 245$), and exchange of persons in orange ($l = 212$). White nodes represent organizations. The size of nodes is proportional to their overall degree. Panel b displays the network of advice relations only. The color of nodes in Panel b depends on their organizational type, and their size is proportional to their (advice) indegree.

In Panel b, we observe that BAFU (public and political organization) and Foodwaste.ch (interest group) are central organizations, in contrast to Meh als Gmües and Panier Bio (alternative producers and distributors), which appear peripheral in the network. Color descriptions are *not* present in the figure, and the digital version contains color figures.

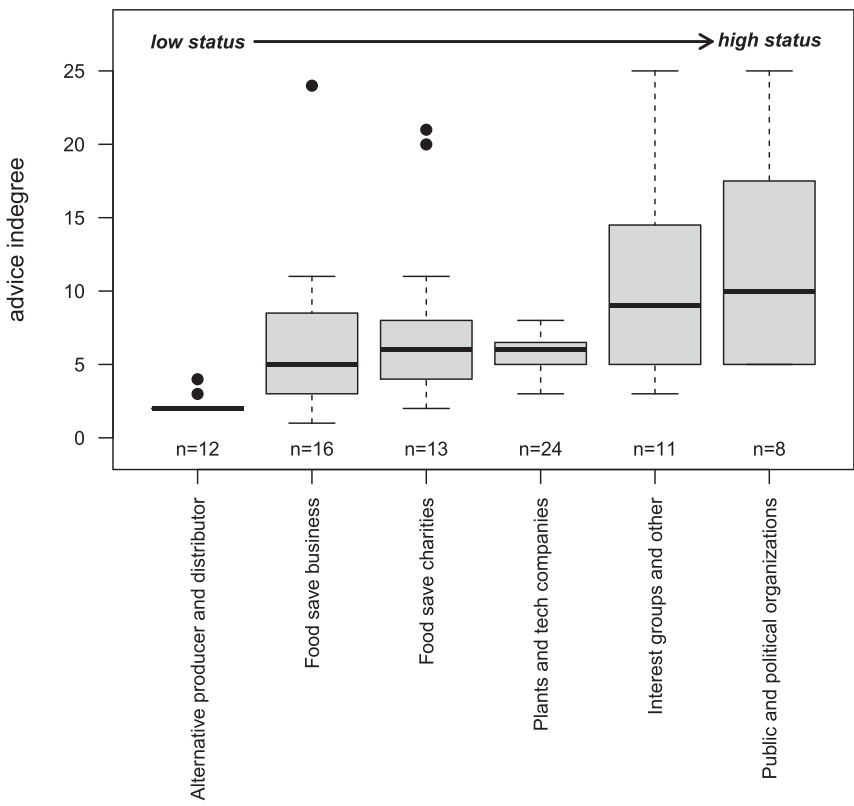


Fig. 2. Distribution of Relational Status According to Organizational Type.
Source: Food waste survey ($n = 84$). *Notes:* This figure presents a boxplot that displays the distribution of status among organizational types. The variable used to measure status is the indegree of each node (i.e., organization) within the advice network. Indegree refers to the number of ties a node receives from other nodes. Each box displays summary statistics for the distribution of this variable for each type of organization: the first decile (lower line), the second quartile (lower end of the box), the median (thick line in the middle of the box), the third quartile (upper end of the box), and the last decile (upper line). Outlier values are represented as points outside the boxes. The median value orders the types of organizations from lower status to higher status. We can see that status is relatively concentrated for certain types (i.e., plants and tech companies) and more dispersed for others (public and political organizations).

15 organizations (18%) receive more than 10 advice mentions, while 57 (or 68%) receive less than 7 mentions. When comparing indegree among organizational categories (see Fig. 2), the results indicate that relational status is concentrated among public and political organizations and interest groups, whereas alternative producers and distributors are given very low status through advice relationships.

Table 3. Relational Status Hierarchy in the Swiss Food Waste Field (Top 15).

Name of the Organization	Organizational Type	Advice Indegree
Foodwaste.ch	Interest groups and other	25
BAFU (Sektion Konsum und Produkte)	Public and political organization	25
Äss-Bar	Food save business	24
Tischlein deck dich	Food save charities	21
Schweizer Tafel/Table Suisse	Food save charities	20
ETH Zürich	Public and political organization	20
OGG (Ökonomische Gemeinschaft Bern)	Interest groups and other	17
Pusch	Interest groups and other	15
Berner Fachhochschule	Public and political organization	15
Biomasse Suisse	Interest groups and other	14
Fachhochschule Nordwestschweiz	Public and political organization	14
Zum guten Heinrich	Food save business	11
Slow Food Youth	Food save organization	11
United against waste	Interest groups and other	11
Mein Küchenchef Restaurant	Food save business	10

Source: Authors' own.

Other organizational categories, such as *food save businesses*, *food save charities*, as well as *plants and tech companies*, have intermediary scores in terms of indegree (see Fig. 2). As shown in the Appendix, these findings on the most central organizations (*interest groups* and *public and political organizations*) in the advice network correspond with the ranking of “most important” organizations in the field, as declared in the questionnaire. This means *interest groups* and *public and political organizations* are on top of both lists. In particular, these include Foodwaste.ch (ranked 13 times #1, five times #2, and four times #3), the Federal Office for the Environment – BAFU (ranked seven times #1 and four times #2), or United against waste (ranked six times #1, two times #2, and two times #3). When other types of organizations are rated as important to the field, they are primarily food save charities (e.g., Tischlein Deck Dich, Schweizer Tafel) or food save businesses (e.g., Too good to go, Grassrooted, Mein Küchenchef). They are not plants and tech companies nor alternative producers and distributors.

To test this finding and understand which factors most explain the distribution of status resulting from advice relationships, we performed a Poisson regression on indegree, with organizational categories as the main independent variable. Given that *food save charities* have an intermediary status, we made them our reference category. In Table 4, Model 1 analyzes the impact of *organizational type* (e.g., *public and political organization*, *interest groups*) on status, without controls; Model 2 has control variables that could be correlated with the dependent variable (for example, the high status of *public and political organizations* could be due to its public funding or its location in urban areas). One should note the extremely good fit of the models: in Model 1, we can describe almost 70% of the variation of relational status by only five modalities of the same variable. In Model 2, some observations are dropped due to missing values, but the quality of the model improves, as its fit increases by 10 points.

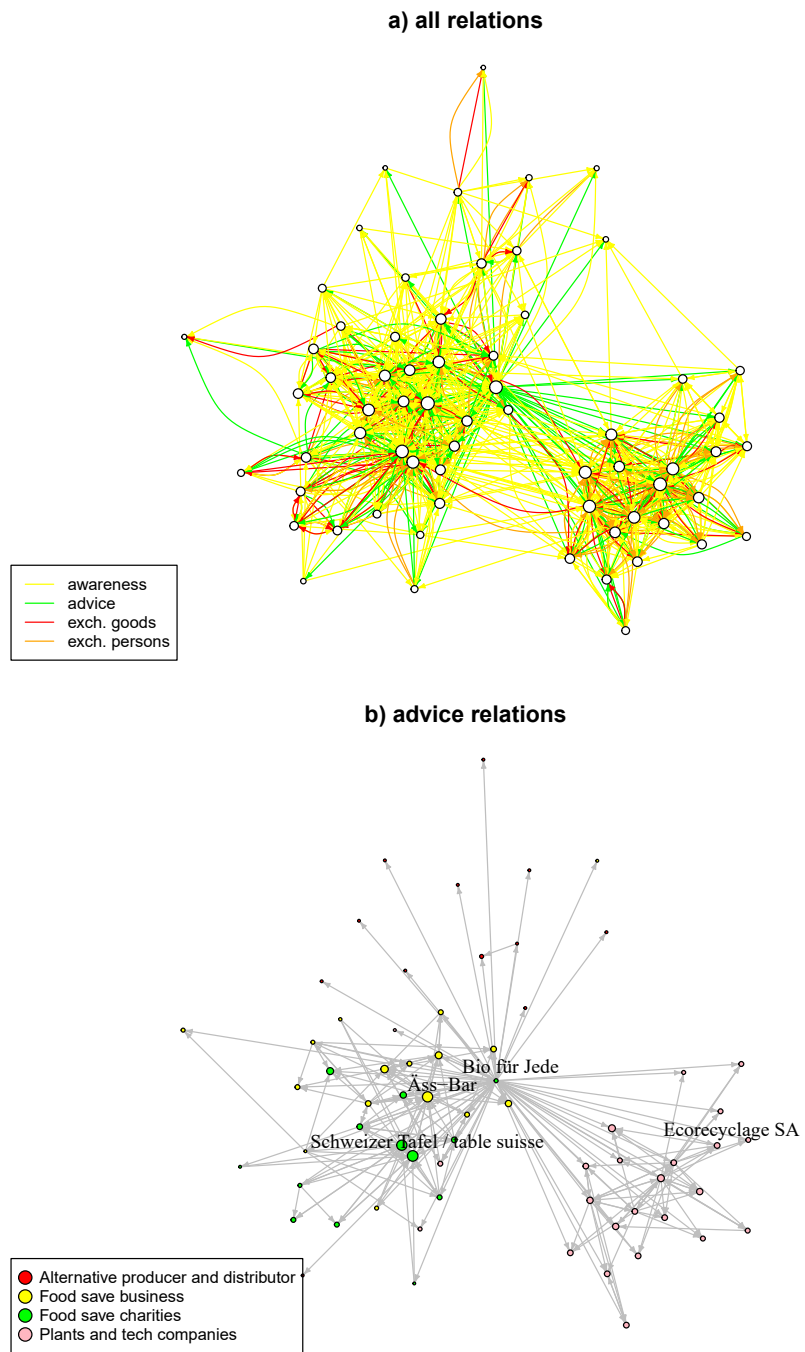


Fig. 3. The Network of Relationships Without Others (Interest Groups and Public and Political Organizations). *Source:* Food waste survey ($n = 65, l = 1,090$).

One result of major relevance is consistent across both models: being an *alternative producer and distributor* has a negative impact on relational status while being an *interest group* has a positive impact. *Public and political organizations* also receive high status, but their impact becomes nonsignificant when we control for other variables (e.g., funding, size, language). The fact that *public and political* organizations receive less esteem than the *interest groups* might reflect that the Swiss prioritize private initiatives for solving socio-environmental issues over public government-initiated attempts (Steinberg, 2015). However, *interest groups* are the winners: according to Model 2 for instance, they have suppress two times more in-coming ties compared to *food save charities* (reference category). *Alternative producers and distributors* have 42% fewer incoming ties compared to those organizations.

While *interest groups* are the relational status winners in the field, it is important to note that their relevant role in the field goes beyond being sought for and giving advice. Together with the *public and political organizations*, the *interest groups* have a real impact on the structure of the network and the field formation process. By removing the *public and political organizations* and *interest groups* from the network, our data show Others' impact on the field. This is shown in Fig. 3, in which all the nodes belonging to the *public and political organizations* and *interest groups* are removed. On the top (Panel a), we see that the network is much more fragmented between the *plants/tech companies*, on the one hand (exemplified here by Ecorecyclage SA), and the *food save charities and businesses*, on the other hand (Table Suisse/Schweizer Tafel). These two worlds are aware of each other but do not exchange persons, food, or advice. This is seen more precisely in Panel b when we display only the advice relations. If we take out Bio für Jede (which has the strange behavior of asking everyone for advice), the network would be disconnected. Others are therefore status winners as well as powerful integrators and organizers of this food waste field, which would be fragmented into two worlds if they were not involved. Thus, the social role of Others and their reactive strategies lies in integrating the field (Fligstein & McAdam, 2012).

Notes: This figure represents the network of relations in the Swiss food waste field after excluding the 19 organizations classified as public and political organizations, as well as interest groups. This results in a network with 65 nodes. Panel a represents the network of all 1,090 relations of: awareness in yellow ($l = 618$), advice in green ($l = 222$), exchange of goods in red ($l = 126$), and exchange of persons in orange ($l = 124$). White nodes represent organizations. The size of nodes is proportional to their overall degree. Panel b represents the network of advice relations only.

The color of the nodes in Panel b depends on its organizational type and its size is proportional to its (advice) indegree. In Panel a, we can observe that the graph is polarized into two subnetworks in the absence of public and political organizations and interest groups. In Panel b, we see that plants and tech companies (such as Ecorecyclage SA) are relatively disconnected from food save business and food save charities (such as Table Suisse/Schweizer Tafel and Bio für Jede). Color descriptions are not present in the figure, and the digital version contains color figures.

Table 4. Poisson Regression of Indegree on Selected Variables.

	Model 1	Model 2
(Intercept)	2.05*** (0.10)	5.88** (2.16)
Alternative producer and distributor	-1.24*** (0.22)	-0.87** (0.27)
Food save business	-0.18 (0.14)	0.26 (0.17)
Interest groups and other	0.30* (0.14)	0.88*** (0.22)
Plants and tech companies	-0.29* (0.13)	0.17 (0.21)
Public and political organization	0.42** (0.14)	0.03 (0.24)
Year of founding		-0.00* (0.00)
City area		-0.25 (0.20)
Rural area		-0.07 (0.23)
French-speaking canton		-0.39* (0.18)
German-speaking canton		-0.05 (0.11)
Size (log ₁₀)		0.28*** (0.07)
No funding		-0.10 (0.16)
Private funding		0.41* (0.19)
Public funding		-0.11 (0.22)
<i>N</i>	84	73
AIC	500.61	407.28
BIC	515.20	441.63
Pseudo <i>R</i> ²	0.69	0.79

Source: Authors' own.

****p* < 0.001; ***p* < 0.01; **p* < 0.05.

5.2. Evaluative Status

Given the excess of food waste and the multiple organizations and strategies to tackle it, the systematizing efforts of Others to establish order and hierarchy in the field are appreciated. In this vein, an interviewee highlighted the need for orientation and systematization, explaining that they “desired a prioritization of what should be done with the [food] leftovers” (interview, March 21, 2018). To provide this guiding evaluation, Others (*public and political organizations and interest groups*) draw strong inspiration from the international debates around the so-called waste hierarchy, which is a policy that has diffused throughout Europe and is implemented locally (Hultman & Corvellec, 2012). This means Others

reproduce the food waste policy that evaluates waste-relevant interventions in a hierarchical order from desirable to avoidable (Arnold, 2021; Papargyropoulou et al., 2014). One of the many reproductions of this evaluative policy is published by the Federal Office for the Environment (BAFU) – the organization that is at the very center of the advisory network:

For ecological and social reasons, it makes more sense to primarily avoid food waste. If, exceptionally, this is not possible, *we recommend, in this order*, giving away food that is not needed, feeding it to animals, fermenting it to produce biogas, composting it, and only lastly incinerating it. (Website BAFU, May 22, 2022, own emphasis)

Similarly, the private *interest group* Foodwaste.ch, which also boasts high status, proclaims on one of its educational posters for Swiss citizens: “1) Avoid food waste. 2) If you do have food waste, feed your pets, compost it or dispose of it in the organic waste garbage. 3) Avoid incineration and sewage” (Foodwaste.ch, 2023). While the BAFU refers to both “ecological and social reasons,” ecological considerations dominate the prioritization given by Foodwaste.ch, as Foodwaste.ch does not account for the possibility of sharing or giving food surplus to others. This exemplifies that food waste is mainly assessed as an ecological issue that “leads to unnecessary CO₂ emissions, biodiversity loss, and land and water consumption,” as the status-laden public organization BAFU announces on its website (BAFU, 2023). The dominant Others, therefore, evaluate which organizations and strategies take responsibility for food waste in the most ecologically valuable way. This is also reflected in the latest national action plan that evaluates and grades interventions for their “current range, environmental potential, scaling potential” (Schweizerische Eidgenossenschaft, 2022), passing over social benefits and potential. Thus, ecological considerations inform Others’ evaluations, which result in an evaluative status hierarchy that negatively affects the *food save charities*, as we explain after having named the evaluative status winners.

Evaluative status winners are those organizational groups (*food save businesses* and *alternative producers and distributors*) that help avoid food waste by ensuring that food waste is purchased and consumed by humans. In this sense, a well-known natural science food waste researcher from a public organization praised the chef of the first Swiss food waste restaurant (*food save business*), which also operates a small store selling food waste products. The scientist acknowledges the chef’s remarkable cooking skills that make excessive food waste scarce and valuable, expressing admiration in the following manner:

The zero-food-waste chef [...] is really good. The menus are sealed in plastic bags, vacuumed, and cooked in them [...]. This gives the opportunity, firstly, to avoid food waste by sourcing directly and processing the products that do not meet the standards [...] or the market does not demand. And secondly, [the vacuumization enables] durable products [...]. It can be kept for one, two, three months. (Interview, January 30, 2018)

Apart from *food save businesses* that receive high evaluative status by valorizing discarded food in consumption markets, *alternative producers and distributors* also rank high in the evaluative status hierarchy. From an evaluative perspective, *alternative producers and distributors* receive high status because they prevent food waste by creating trade and sales channels for humans that include food that

would otherwise be discarded. The underlying reason why the two organizational types meet with outstanding positive responses is that their strategies help to establish food systems that prevent waste. In the words of the managing director of an interest group, their approaches are best evaluated because they develop a “fundamental idea of making a transformation” (interview, February 12, 2018). On a higher level of abstraction, we can summarize that an adaptative strategy to the problem of excess is evaluated best.

Interestingly, the high evaluative status of *alternative producers and distributors* contradicts their marginalized position in the hierarchical network of relationships that we illuminated earlier in this paper. An explanation for this inconsistency is that *alternative producers and distributors* are small, young, and receive no funding, whereas size, age, and funding are associated with status in this particular field (see Table 3). However, these factors are not sufficient to explain their marginalization, because being an *alternative producer and distributor* has an independent effect from these other causes (see Table 3). One fundamental reason is that this organizational group has obvious difficulties in determining the number of kilos of food saved due to their adaptative strategy, which is, notably, a strategy of scaling rather than reducing (Abbott, 2014). While *alternative producers and distributors* can hardly quantify the waste they reduce, because they prevent it by establishing more alternative food value chains, other organizational groups (especially *food save businesses and organizations*) invest a lot in quantifying the food volumes they save. For example, a bakery that sells bread from the previous day, announces that thanks to their approach, “several *hundred tons* have already been ‘saved’” (Website Ässbar, May 21, 2021, emphasis on website). Reduction-oriented strategies that allow for quantification thus make organizations well-recognized advisors for how to tackle food waste in the field, while, on the other hand, adaptive strategies bring little recognition and low relational status, even though this approach is given the highest admiration through Others’ formal evaluations.

While one might expect that giving food waste to marginalized people and groups is status enhancing (Meyer & Jepperson, 2000), *food save charities*, which follow this approach, receive only intermediary evaluative status. Paradoxically, the reason for this lies in what the *food save charities* themselves are proud of, namely “to collect and redistribute for free, [as] it is not about making a profit on unsold goods” (interview, March 21, 2018). This free distribution is not a priority by the Others in the food waste field and the internationally adopted food waste policy (Papargyropoulou et al., 2014). Following the belief “what costs nothing is worth nothing,” it is assumed that giving away food for free further reduces the value of food and thus further drives waste (Arnold, 2021). Rather, food and also food surpluses should have a (high) price so that consumers value and appreciate it instead of discarding it. This is a dominant formal evaluation in the field from which an employee of a public organization interestingly distanced herself informally. Emphasizing that this is her own, personal standpoint, she explained:

This [whether food waste must have a price] is a discussion that has to be conducted at the political level and binding instruments suitable for the masses have to be found [...]. You can not burden this discussion on an individual and certainly not on one [...] with a small budget. (Interview, October 7, 2022)

This quote illustrates that evaluations are contingent and could always turn out differently (Lamont, 2012). Nevertheless, the fact that *food save charities* obtain only an intermediary (evaluative and relational) status already negatively affects their work. During a field trip, an experienced regional manager of a food bank stated:

The food bank will no longer exist in this form in 20 years [...]. There are fewer and fewer boxes from the supermarkets because they are working better and better. There is less and less surplus food. (Field protocol, March 13, 2019)

This means, the loss of status that *food save charities* experience due to the status-relevant formal evaluations by Others appears to be causing a reduction in surplus food that *food save charities* redistribute to those in need. A recent newspaper article underpins:

Every year, thousands of people with demonstrably little money benefit from the work of the Swiss food bank. The demand for saved food is at an all-time high [...]. To meet the increasing demand, the foundation made some investments in 2021 [...]. Nevertheless, the share of processed fresh products directly from the retail trade, the largest food donor, declined – the reason was, among other things, commercial organizations that also process surplus food. (Newspaper *Tagblatt*, March 15, 2022)

Thus, our data indicate that food save organizations' intermediary status materializes in a reduction of food volumes that they can distribute to those in need.

For the sake of completeness, we add that Others give least evaluative esteem and admiration to the *plants and tech companies*. By typically generating energy (biogas) from food waste, these evaluative status losers (*plants and tech companies*) are taking responsibility for food waste as they are saving it from incineration. In doing so, they reduce food waste and make it a scarce resource for “green” energy production. However, this approach is little appreciated by the formal food waste policy. In this sense, a researcher from a public organization highlights in an exemplary manner: “I do not think that [biogas] is a solution. It's just damage control. It is nothing more than that” (interview, February 11, 2019). This evaluation is reflected in legal guidelines from the public organization BAFU, which only allow the transformation of food into energy if the food cannot be used in any other way. The biogas *plants and tech companies* accept that the transformation of food to energy achieves little admiration and do not show any efforts to climb up the evaluative status ladder (Arnold, 2021). However, in the advice network, *plants and tech companies* receive intermediary relational status (see Fig. 2), because they often represent the last possible option to obtain something from waste (i.e., energy) and are therefore consulted. However, when we look at the network graph, especially when removing Others, we see that they are exchanging advice mostly among themselves, forming a small world of their own (see Fig. 3).

6. DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

Driven by the motivation to better understand status distinctions between heterogeneous organizations committed to a shared socio-environmental concern, we explored the construction of status hierarchies in the Swiss food waste field.

Conceptually, we assumed that one can distinguish between evaluative and relational status and hypothesized that organizations that engage in otherhood (i.e., Others) are status winners while shaping evaluative status hierarchies. Indeed, our study provided empirical evidence that Others (*public and political organizations, interest groups*) inhabit the privileged position and integrate the emerging field. Drawing on [Abbott's \(2014\)](#) excess strategies, we thus find that Others deploying a reactive strategy, which reduces excess by hierarchizing and ordering it, occupy the field center. Other organizations (*food save charities, food save businesses, and plants and tech companies*) that also tame excess but use a defensive strategy that does not tackle the problem, per se, receive less status. Lowest relational status, however, is given to *alternative producers and distributors* that apply an adaptive strategy and “rescale excess [...] in a subtle and nuanced way” ([Abbott, 2014](#), p. 20). Although this approach achieves high evaluative status, the *alternative producers and distributors* experience only low relational status, positioning them at the periphery of the field. Hence, an adaptive strategy may be judged as profitable and valuable, but it seems to lack direction-setting influence in the field, as the organizations employing it (*alternative producers and distributors*) are rarely sought for advice. Building on these empirical findings, we first discuss the status-laden role of Others and then outline the implications of studying interorganizational status relations in socio-environmental fields.

Our study empirically substantiates that Others rank at the top of the status hierarchy ([Meyer, 2010](#); [Meyer & Jepperson, 2000](#)). While it has been argued that high status positively influences evaluation and vice versa ([Lamont, 2012](#)), our results suggest that those who evaluate and avoid evaluation (i.e., Others) are the true status winners. In this sense, the food waste literature hardly evaluates the strategies of Others but tends to adopt their standpoint and investigates the actions of other organizational types such as *food save businesses or charities* (e.g., [Reynolds et al., 2020](#)). This provokes the question of who evaluates the status winners and holds them accountable, a question one can assume the winners avoid because of accountability-induced status anxiety ([Jensen, 2006](#)). We thus encourage sociologists and organizational researchers to critically examine the role of Others, while paying close attention to how evaluations shape the construction of status in a socio-environmental setting – a focus that is required because evaluations are not only relevant in the area of food waste but are proliferating in general in the context of organizations and socio-environmental problems ([Dahler-Larsen, 2011](#); [Ratner, 2004](#)).

Moreover, capturing the prestigious role of Others can help explain why socio-environmental transformation is not progressing as desired. [Blühdorn et al. \(2020\)](#) argue that despite an intensification of discourse around socio-environmental challenges and the countless efforts of various organizations (political parties, social movements, and civil society organizations, etc.), the necessary transformation does hardly occur. Rather, these efforts sustain the unsustainable, as stated in [Blühdorn et al.'s \(2020\)](#) line of argument. The strategy in which Others take responsibility for socio-environmental issues tends to fit into this picture; with reference to well-accepted abstract principles and based on knowledge and expertise, Others try to induce socio-environmentally friendly changes without directly tackling the issue. Specifically, in the case of food waste, Others do not get their

hands dirty and take indirect responsibility for the issue (e.g., researching, campaigning, lobbying, and policy-making). If we seriously believe that this approach receives the most esteem, one must critically question the extent to which calls for more responsibility and accountability contribute to solving socio-environmental issues (e.g., [Arnold et al., 2022](#)). At best, these demands motivate existing actions to be more socially and environmentally friendly or lead to regulations that force change. In the worst case, the calls for more responsibility only lead to more otherhood, as this promises the highest status.

At this point, we should reiterate that Others do not achieve their privileged position by themselves, since status always results from relationships ([Boudon & Bourricaud, 1992](#)). Consequently, the study of status contributes to understanding that not only do organizations matter in society ([Besio et al., 2020](#)) but also that their societal influence unfolds through their relationships with one another ([DiMaggio & Powell, 1983](#); [Wooten & Hoffman, 2017](#)). In socio-environmental fields, these relationships concern organizational heterogeneity, which we could capture and systematize in our study based on [Abbott's \(2014\)](#) excess strategies. The extent to which these strategies are also helpful in other fields in order to grasp heterogeneity and differences needs to be examined. However, and more importantly, accounting for the role and impact of interorganizational relationships between heterogeneous organizations can complete existing research that prioritizes the study of a particular type of organization – that is, for example, businesses' role in socio-environmental (non-)transformations (e.g., [Ergene et al., 2021](#)). Examining heterogeneous interorganizational relationships allows us to draw a bigger picture of what is going on in a socio-environmental field, which in the case of food waste includes status inconsistencies and spillover effects – two themes with which we conclude.

The fact that status inconsistencies occur in socio-environmental fields has been exemplified by the case of *alternative producers and distributors*. In particular, our data showed that the *alternative producers and distributors* who achieve high esteem in the evaluations occupy marginalized positions in the advice network (relational status). One possible reason for this status inconsistency could be that we examined an emergent field for which we know that stability and order turn out to be low ([Fligstein & McAdam, 2012](#)). Future research, therefore, should illuminate the long-term changes in organizational status hierarchies to illuminate how evaluative and relational status relate to each, and whether there are stabilization and consistency trends. Of particular interest would be to better understand whether and how exogenous status attributions through evaluations (e.g., rankings, standards, and certificates) translate into endogenous status hierarchies. In the case of food waste, this means examining whether the *alternative producers and distributors* will receive higher status from relationships in the longer term as a consequence of their good, status-enhancing evaluations.

Finally, we have to reckon with the relevant spillover effects of Others' status-relevant evaluations in socio-environmental fields. This has been indicated by the case of *food save charities*. The lack of priority given to *food save charities* as advisors, and the limited evaluative recognition they receive for distributing valuable food surplus for free, has significant consequences. Particularly, non-intended

consequences result from the evaluations (Lamont, 2012) that are given by Others and prioritize environmental concerns. The *food waste charities* have reduced food waste volumes by distribution which negatively impacts those people who rely on cheap or even free food. Organizational status dynamics might thus trickle down to the individual level and do not only materialize bottom-up in organizational structures (Ridgeway, 2014). Others have pointed to these spillover effects of organizational status dynamics (Borkenhagen & Martin, 2018; Chu, 2021), and they require special attention in socio-environmental fields because prioritizing environmentally motivated strategies risks fueling social inequalities. In the context of food, this brings into focus the relationship between environmentally sound food, on the one hand, food security and justice, on the other hand, and the question of how status dynamics affect this relationship. A sociologically informed look at the status relations between organizations will have much to contribute to this.

NOTES

1. The marginalized low-status groups, for example, are studied by Nancy Fraser (2000), who argued that individuals with low status are negatively affected by misrecognition and maldistribution. The privileged groups, on the other hand, are examined by Thorstein Veblen (1992), for example, who stated that individuals achieve social status through conspicuous consumption that signals wealth.

2. For example, we know that high status helps organizations to be selected as a trading partner (Jensen & Roy, 2008), allows them to price their products higher (Malter, 2014), positively impacts jurisdiction (McDonnell & King, 2018), or might stimulate collective learning (Bunderson & Reagans, 2011).

3. An example of the creative strategy was to be found at the climate conference in Glasgow COP26, where an installation rendered food waste visible (Chaplin, 2021).

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**APPENDIX: ANSWERS TO THE QUESTION ABOUT
“MOST IMPORTANT” ORGANIZATION IN THE
FOOD WASTE FIELD**

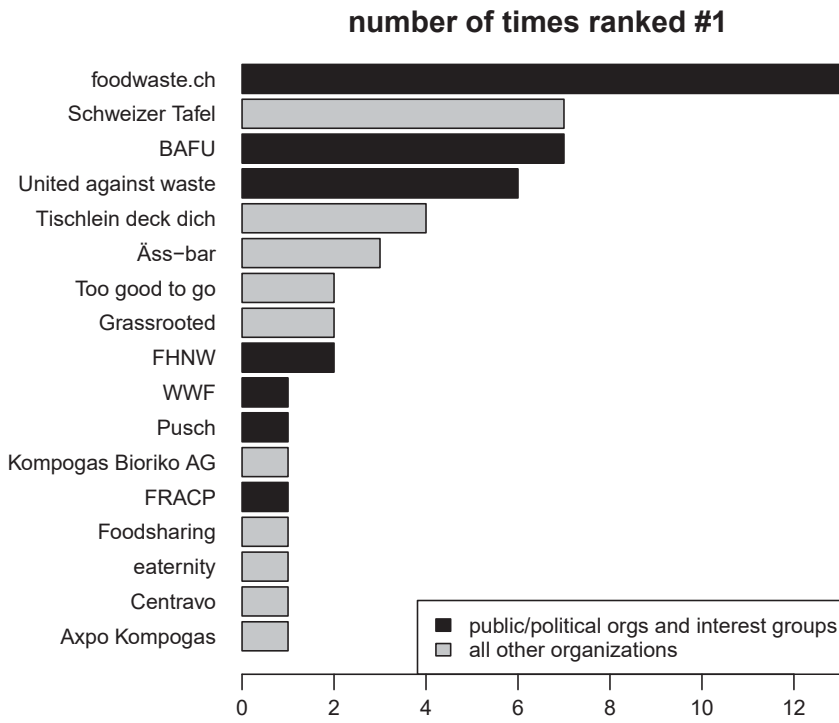


Fig. A1. Number of Times an Organization Is Ranked as First Most Important.

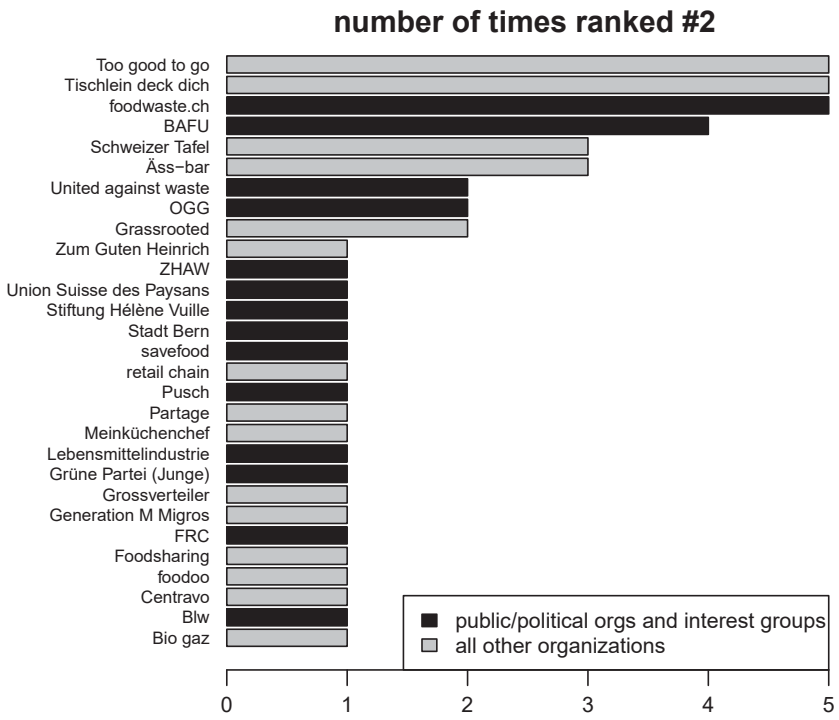


Fig. A2. Number of Times an Organization Is Ranked as Second Most Important.

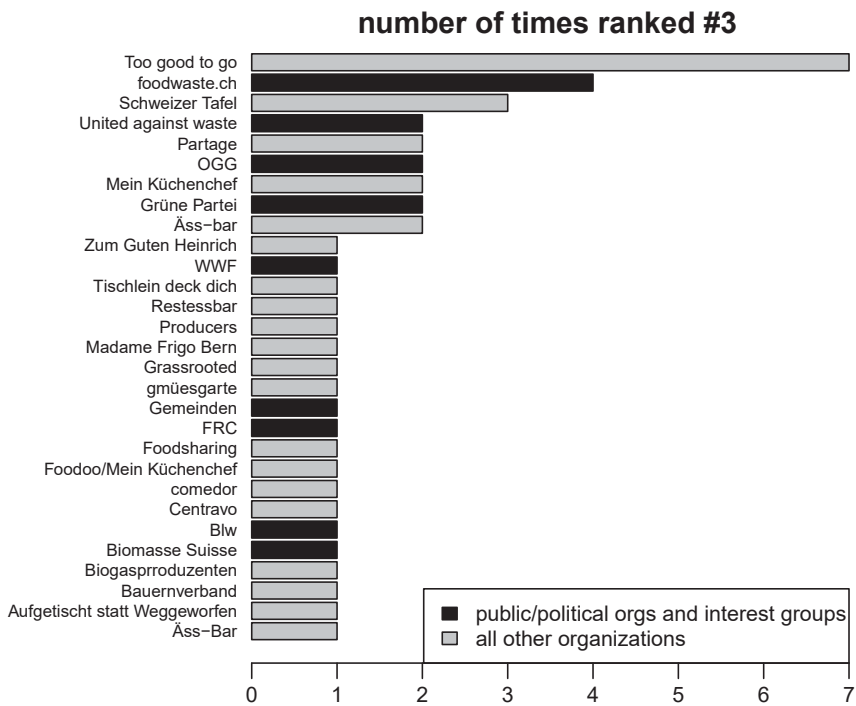


Fig. A3. Number of Times an Organization Is Ranked as Third Most Important.