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Strategies for Legitimizing Regeneration in Supply Chain Fields

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ABSTRACT

In view of escalating environmental degradation, regenerative business has been proposed to restore social–ecological systems. However, as regeneration fundamentally departs from mainstream approaches and lacks commonly accepted standards, it suffers from a liability of newness that hampers its broader legitimation and adoption. While prior research has studied legitimation strategies for individual organizations, less is known about how legitimacy is built in supply chains—a necessary condition given the systemic aspiration of regeneration. This paper explores the legitimation strategies used by pioneering regenerative producers to legitimize regeneration in supply chain fields. Drawing upon case studies of regenerative farmers in Spain, this study identifies six legitimation strategies, aiming at (i) consolidating the regenerative agrifood supply chain field or (ii) connecting it to wider agrifood supply chain fields. Contributing to the emergent literature on regenerative supply chains, the study explains how producers seek to legitimize regeneration in nested supply chain fields by unpacking their adaptive and systemic approaches targeted at different actors in the narrow regenerative agrifood supply chain field and the wider agrifood supply chain field.

1 | Introduction

The degrading health of life-supporting ecosystems (Rockström et al. 2024; Steffen et al. 2015) has given rise to the nascent concept of regenerative business (Gualandris et al. 2024; Hahn and Tampe 2021). Due to its close dependence on ecosystems, agriculture is a prime area for the application of regenerative practices and principles (Morsetto 2020). With its aim of restoring the health of social and ecological systems through regenerative agricultural practices (Schreefel et al. 2020), regenerative agriculture (RA) adopts a systems-oriented perspective that reflects its embeddedness in larger social–ecological systems (Hahn and Tampe 2021; Slawinski et al. 2021; Vlasov 2021), departing from mainstream business principles and practices. Moreover, regenerating social–ecological systems goes beyond the capacity of single organizations but requires regenerative principles and practices to extend throughout entire supply chains (SCs) (Gualandris et al. 2024; Hsu et al. 2025; Meyer et al. 2025).

However, the acceptance of RA by actors in SCs is hampered by a liability of newness (Aldrich and Fiol 1994) that follows from its fundamental departure from taken-for-granted mainstream assumptions and that jeopardizes the legitimacy of RA among actors in the agrifood SC.

While the legitimation of novel business practices has been studied extensively at the organizational level (for a review, see Überbacher 2014), less is known about how regeneration is legitimized in SCs and, more specifically, SC fields, a set of relevant market and institutional actors that share common meaning and understanding about a sector—in this case, agrifood (Sauer and Seuring 2018; Wu and Jia 2018). This gap is particularly relevant for two reasons. First, the disruptive nature of RA increases its need for legitimation because it fundamentally departs from dominant and taken-for-granted approaches in the wider agrifood SC field. Second, gaining legitimacy at the organizational level might be insufficient

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given the SC-spanning nature of RA (Gualandris et al. 2024). The limited extant research on legitimation in SC fields has largely focused on the legitimation efforts of powerful incumbents (e.g., Wu and Jia 2018) who are rarely the main drivers of disruptive new RA approaches. What has remained understudied is how actors without this incumbent status, typically small pioneering actors fully dedicated to RA, seek to legitimize RA in the agrifood SC field. Therefore, this study asks the following question: How do regenerative agricultural producers seek to legitimize regeneration in SC fields?

Accordingly, the purpose of this study is to theorize the legitimation strategies used by pioneering regenerative actors in agrifood SC fields. The SC field perspective adopted in this paper provides a theoretical lens to capture the focal actors' efforts to establish RA, directed toward a range of relevant actors beyond the traditional buyer–seller dyad (Sauer and Seuring 2018; Wu and Jia 2018). As SC fields represent the relational space where relevant actors wrangle about shared meanings and accepted practices (Bag et al. 2025; Wooten and Hoffman 2017), such a perspective is well suited to examine regenerative farmers' legitimation efforts.

Based on this perspective, this study draws on six in-depth case studies of dedicated RA producers in Spain. The findings show that producers address the liability of newness of RA by adaptively deploying two complementary types of legitimation strategies: (i) *consolidating the regenerative agrifood SC field*, which targets actors within the emerging regenerative SC field and (ii) *connecting it to the wider agrifood SC field*, which targets actors who are not aligned with or even skeptical of RA. Each of these two types includes three strategies, depending on the targeted actors. Within the RA SC field, producers (1) *build identity* (to farmers), (2) *create a dedicated market* (with buyers), and (3) *foster belonging* (with institutional actors). When addressing actors belonging to the wider agricultural SC fields, they (4) *demonstrate outcomes* (to farmers), (5) *align product attributes* (with buyers), and (6) *seek recognition* (from institutional actors). The findings show that regenerative producers deploy complementary legitimation strategies based on a range of legitimation approaches, ranging from cognitive and instrumental to relational and moral, depending on the different target actors in nested SC fields.

The findings contribute to the literature by offering a typology of strategies that regenerative producers use to legitimize RA in nested agrifood SC fields. Instead of assessing the effectiveness of such strategies, this study provides deep empirical insights that explain how regenerative firms respond to the need to legitimize RA in SC fields through an adaptive and systemic approach. These results extend prior work on SC fields (Sauer and Seuring 2018; Wu and Jia 2018) by showing how producers *systemically* target the entire agrifood SC field to legitimize regeneration while leveraging different legitimation approaches for the narrow regenerative agrifood SC field versus the wider agrifood SC field. They also *adaptively* use legitimation to target specific actors, with a legitimation approach tailored to them. These insights also have important practical and societal implications for understanding how regenerative businesses can navigate legitimation challenges and strengthen regenerative SCs.

2 | Theoretical Background

The concept of regenerative business has gained traction among scholars and businesses alike (Hahn and Tampe 2021; Slawinski et al. 2021; Vlasov 2021). Defined as “businesses that enhance, and thrive through, the health of social–ecological systems in a coevolutionary process” (Hahn and Tampe 2021, 456), regenerative business adopts a systems-oriented perspective that reflects embeddedness in larger social–ecological systems (Whiteman et al. 2013; Williams et al. 2021; Winn and Pogutz 2013). Regeneration thus seeks to go beyond limiting damage to ecosystems (Robinson and Cole 2015), aiming at achieving net positive effects on the health of ecosystems and human well-being (Holden et al. 2016; Zhang et al. 2015) and rebuilding natural and social capital (Konietzko et al. 2023; Muñoz and Branzei 2021).

Among the diverse areas in which regenerative business has been studied (Konietzko et al. 2023), this study focuses on agriculture, a particularly suitable context because of its direct relationship with natural ecosystems (Morseletto 2020). RA has been described as “an approach to farming that uses soil conservation as the entry point to regenerate and contribute to multiple provisioning, regulating and supporting ecosystem services, with the objective that this will enhance not only the environmental, but also the social and economic dimensions of sustainable food production” (Schreefel et al. 2020, 5). Regenerating ecosystems cannot be achieved by any single organization; rather, “being regenerative is a supply chain-wide trait” (Gualandris et al. 2024, 56). Accordingly, the benefits of RA for enhancing the health of social–ecological systems depend on multiple actors at all stages of the agricultural SC (Bag et al. 2025; Gualandris et al. 2024). To capture the SC-spanning nature of RA, this study leverages the notion of SC fields (Wu and Jia 2018).

2.1 | A Supply Chain Field Perspective on Regenerative Agriculture

Adapting the definition from institutional research on organizational fields (Wooten and Hoffman 2017), Wu and Jia (2018, 29) have defined SC fields as “recognized areas of institutional life, including key suppliers, resource and product consumers, regulatory agencies and other organizations that produce similar services or products.” SC fields thus go beyond the traditional buyer–seller dyad (Sauer and Seuring 2018; Wu and Jia 2018). They comprise the set of market and institutional actors that share common meaning and understanding about a sector—in the case of this article agrifood. They represent cognitively constructed relational spaces where actors “share a common meaning system and interact more often and more fatefully than with actors outside the field” (Sauer and Seuring 2018, 563), developing shared understandings of matters that are consequential to their activities (Wooten and Hoffman 2017). Accordingly, agrifood SC fields are constituted as relevant actors (such as producers, suppliers, distributors, regulators, buyers, and industry associations) take note of and reference one another in developing shared understandings of the norms, practices, and beliefs in the agrifood sector (Bag et al. 2025; Wooten and Hoffman 2017).

TABLE 1 | Key differences between wider and regenerative Agrifood SC Field.

Agricultural fields	Wider Agrifood SC Field	Regenerative Agrifood SC Field
Dominant logic	Strong focus on maximizing short-term yields and profitability based on using/exploiting natural resources and land	Strong focus on coevolution of ecosystem health and organizational survival based on symbiotic embeddedness in the land and its ecosystems
Norms and regulation	Extensive regulatory frameworks at different levels (local, national, EU) that prioritize and incentivize large-scale intensive agricultural practices Well-established and widely used quality standards and labels based on conventional criteria	Lack of established regulatory framework Emergence of partly competing standards for regenerative agricultural practices and/or outcomes
Technology use	Dependence on chemical inputs (fertilizers, pesticides, herbicides, etc.) Use of heavy machinery (tractors, mowers, etc.)	Avoiding chemical inputs (apart from minimal interventions on a case-by-case basis); pest management via natural predators preferred. Minimal or no use of heavy machinery to avoid soil compaction
Legitimate practices	Livestock raised predominantly indoors; manure as waste product or as nitrogen-heavy fertilizer Monocrop cultures	Livestock raised predominantly outdoors with rotational, short duration grazing strategies; manure contributing to increasing soil organic matter Rotational and diverse crop and agroforestry systems, including multi-species cover crops to reduce bare soil; use of perennial species over annual species
Taken-for-granted assumptions about place	Land clearing aimed at eradicating native vegetation, heavy reliance on tillage Land as resource that is used or exploited Place as an exchangeable commodity that allows for a relatively standardized approach	Land use retains and fosters native species, reduced or no tillage Land as a host that is enhanced Place as a unique local area that requires an adaptive approach

Source: Authors' elaboration based on Byrnes et al. (2018), Cusworth et al. (2022), De La Cruz and Dessein (2021), Giller et al. (2021), Gosnell et al. (2019), Luján Soto et al. (2020, 2021), Morseletto (2020), Newton et al. (2020), Schreefel et al. (2020), and Sumberg and Giller (2022).

However, SC fields are not stable, but rather represent arenas for contestation and debate, where different actors deploy purposeful action to instrumentally transmit their interest to the field to influence institutionalized norms, practices, and beliefs in their favor (DiMaggio and Powell 1991; Seo and Creed 2002). Therefore, SC fields are not uniform but comprise nested and embedded subfields with partly conflicting norms, practices, and beliefs, especially when marginal or peripheral field members make alternative claims (Quirke 2013). From this perspective, RA represents a nested subfield of the wider agrifood SC field. The regenerative agrifood SC field (henceforth *regenerative SC field*) promotes norms, practices, and beliefs that deviate from being well established and taken for granted in the wider agrifood SC field (henceforth *wider SC field*). Most fundamentally, regenerative business departs from the dominant business logic of private wealth maximization (Bansal and Song 2017). It promotes a systems-level orientation that requires an adaptive management approach to respond to the dynamics and needs of the social–ecological system (Giller et al. 2021; Morseletto 2020; Newton et al. 2020). The regenerative SC field also deviates from the wider SC field regarding other constitutive elements of organizational fields, including norms and regulations, technology use, legitimate practices, and taken-for-granted assumptions about place (Wooten and Hoffman 2017). Table 1 provides a

summary of the differences between the regenerative and the wider SC field.

The regenerative SC field still represents a nascent field marked by a lack of internal coherence. While the main goal is clear and shared, there is no general agreement on regenerative practices, for example, about the use of chemicals (Giller et al. 2015), the integration of livestock (Cusworth et al. 2022), the use of no-tillage, or on how to measure RA impacts (Luján Soto et al. 2020, 2021). As a result, while aiming for radical and disruptive changes in the agricultural system, the regenerative SC field remains a contested field (Diebel et al. 2024; Thomas and Ritala 2022) that lacks a shared understanding of what concretely constitutes RA and is characterized by heterogeneous practices. Consequently, it is beset with a liability of newness (Singh et al. 1986) that jeopardizes its legitimacy among actors from both the regenerative SC field and the wider SC field (Aldrich and Fiol 1994).

2.2 | Legitimation of Regenerative Agriculture in Supply Chain Fields

Gaining legitimacy in organizational fields has been identified as a fundamental precondition for the success and adoption

TABLE 2 | Cases of regenerative producers.

Case	Name	Location/climate zone	Main activities	Regenerative since
C1	AgroRegenerativa	Bolea, Aragón/Mediterranean continental climate with hot summers	Cherries, almonds/sheep	2020
C2	Txema Isábal's farm	Binéfar, Aragón/Mediterranean continental climate with hot summers	Sheep (milk and meat production)/corn	2013
C3	Curly Creek Ranch	Oskotz, Navarra/Oceanic climate	Chicken (meat and eggs), goats (meat)/vegetables	2017
C4	EnRama	Cabanilla de la Sierra, Madrid/Mediterranean continental climate with hot summers	Cattle and chicken/edible or food forest	2018
C5	La Junquera	La Junquera, Murcia/Mediterranean arid and semi-arid climate	Almonds, cereal, aromatics, wine, vegetables and fruit/cows	2015
C6	Pomona Fruits	Ivars d'Urgell, Catalonia/Mediterranean continental climate with hot summers	Apples, pears, peaches/donkeys	2019

of novel and disruptive practices (Thomas and Ritala 2022). Legitimacy has been defined as a “generalized perception or assumption that the actions of an entity are desirable, proper or appropriate within some socially constructed system of norms, values, beliefs and definitions” (Suchman 1995, 574). It entails getting accepted by actors in relevant organizational fields (Brown and Toyoki 2013) and “reinforces organizational practices and mobilizes organizational members around a common ethical, strategic or ideological vision” (Drori and Honig 2013, 347). Legitimation can proceed along four dimensions: *moral* legitimation, which offers normative evaluation against standards, values, and norms; *instrumental* legitimation, which appeals to the evaluator's self-interest; *relational* legitimation, which affirms actors' social identities; and *cognitive* legitimation, which rests on comprehensibility and taken-for-grantedness to make accounts coherent and intelligible.

Legitimacy is not a stable feature of organizational fields (Thomas and Ritala 2022; Suchman 1995) but is constantly reassessed (Johnson et al. 2006; Suddaby et al. 2017). Actors participate in the ongoing renegotiation of legitimacy (Aaltonen and Turkulainen 2022) by implementing a wide range of strategies to facilitate legitimation (Suchman 1995; Thomas and Ritala 2022). Such purposeful and instrumental negotiations occur within (nested) SC fields as actors seek to influence norms, practices, and beliefs in their favor. This process is relevant for developing and consolidating a collective rationality within a nascent field (Scott 2014), and applies to the regenerative SC field with its conflicting institutional expectations compared with the wider SC field within which it is nested and embedded (Sauer and Seuring 2018; Wu and Jia 2018).

At the same time, SC fields also gain legitimacy through actors from outside the subfield who recognize the SC field by establishing boundaries that delineate the regenerative SC field from the established wider SC field (Thomas and Ritala 2022). As new entrants seek to gain acceptance and membership in the wider SC field, they challenge existing taken-for-granted norms, practices,

and beliefs, and thereby establish closer interactions with actors from the wider SC field (Wooten and Hoffman 2017). With their alternative claims for legitimacy (based on RA) as marginal members in the wider SC field (Quirke 2013), regenerative actors face the need to legitimize RA and its disruptive norms, practices, and beliefs in the regenerative SC field and the wider SC field.

This study seeks to unearth the strategies—in the sense of the purposeful instrumental action of marginal field members (DiMaggio and Powell 1991; Quirke 2013; Seo and Creed 2002)—to legitimize disruptive regenerative practices in the regenerative SC field and the wider SC field. Therefore, the study addresses the research question: *How do regenerative agricultural producers seek to legitimize regeneration in agrifood supply chain fields?*

3 | Methodology

Given the nascent state of regenerative business literature and the exploratory nature of the study, a qualitative case study methodology (Edmondson and McManus 2007; Yin 2018) and an inductive approach (Corbin and Strauss 2014; Eisenhardt and Graebner 2007) were used. These methods were chosen with the goal of contributing to nascent theory building on legitimation strategies in SC fields (Edmondson and McManus 2007). This study used a multiple-case study approach, focusing on six regenerative agricultural firms in Spain (see Table 2) to assess the consistency of emergent findings across cases and to contribute robustly to theory development through incorporating varied empirical evidence (Eisenhardt and Graebner 2007).

3.1 | Case Identification

The sampling involved multiple steps because no comprehensive map of the universe of RA producers in Spain existed at the time of data collection. First, a list of potential RA producers was compiled based on desk research on leading RA

TABLE 3 | Data sources.

Case	Interviews			Audiovisual entries	
	Interviewee position	No. of interviews	Average length interviews	No. of audiovisual entries visits	No. of audiovisual entries diaries
AgroRegenerativa (C1)	Manager	5	104 min	179	72
Txema Isábal's farm (C2)	Owner	5	58 min	107	31
Curly Creek Ranch (C3)	Owners	5	80 min	164	91
EnRama (C4)	Owners	5	100 min	133	61
La Junquera (C5)	Manager	5	78 min	270	21
Pomona Fruits (C6)	Owners	5	70 min	124	30
Total		30	82 min	977	306

organizations (e.g., *Asociación de Agricultura Regenerativa Ibérica*, *De Yerba*, EIT Food, *Basaldea* project, *Alvelal*, *AlmaNatura*, *Alejab*, and *Abrego*), yielding 50 potential cases (see Table S1). Second, interviews with the directors of three of those organizations identified a subsample based on maturity and commitment to RA, resulting in 12 cases. Third, the final sample was formed by the six producers who agreed to participate, allowing for in-depth data collection, as explained next. Cases span different climate zones, ranging from semiarid to oceanic climates, and produce diverse crops, such as almonds, cherries, cereals, aromatics, apples, pears, and peaches, with some also specializing in meat and milk production.

3.2 | Research Design and Data Collection

The research design included various qualitative research methods: interviews, participatory observations and diaries (see Table 3 for details), triangulating evidence emerging from different sources. The first wave of data collection took place from June 2021 to July 2022. Each farm was visited four times, once per season, to accompany producers and observe their day-to-day practices. During each visit, open-ended interviews were conducted with the farm's owner or manager. The open-ended format allowed producers ample opportunities to elaborate freely, enabling the emergence of unanticipated insights. For each interview round, an interview guide was prepared to explore distinct dimensions. The first two rounds focused on an overview of the case. As legitimation emerged as a relevant topic, the third and fourth rounds surfaced legitimation strategies via understanding networks, institutional context, and commercial aspects, addressing questions that enabled producers to speak about legitimation strategies they used with peers, agricultural associations, regulators, research centers, and buyers (see Table S2 for details). A second wave of interviews with each producer took place in the fall of 2024 to validate and refine the emerging analysis. In total, 30 interviews were conducted, which were fully transcribed.

To gain further insights, a diary method approach was applied using photo response (Alam et al. 2018). According to Alam et al. (2018, 258), via a camera, producers have a chance

to experience and become aware of diverse contact zones with nonhuman others in their settings. Each producer was invited to send photographs or videos related to regenerative practices, which were accompanied by audios explaining the visual register. On a few occasions, the producers sent texts with no visual material. Based on these registers, the first author created a regenerative diary for each farm. The expected frequency of registers was once a week; however, the actual frequency was heterogeneous. For validity and trustworthiness, each audiovisual entry was logged in a spreadsheet with a unique ID, date, file type (photo/video), and descriptive notes (Pratt et al. 2020). Audio files were transcribed and classified. The purpose of this data collection was to corroborate the evidence emerging from the interviews and to capture behaviors and practices from everyday practices on the farm.

Table 3 summarizes key information regarding the interviews, direct observations, and diaries collected for each farm.

3.3 | Analytical Approach

In line with standard approaches in qualitative studies, the analyzed data evolved through several iterative steps of coding (Lee 1999), iterating between data and literature (see Figure S1 for a visual summary of the research process).

In the first step, the first author used NVivo for descriptive coding. When starting the coding process, the focus was on two aspects: (i) the need for legitimacy that the regenerative producers perceived and (ii) the varied efforts that they deployed to address this need. To that end, an inductive coding process was applied based on the first, third, and fourth rounds of interviews and the connected entries from direct observation and diaries. As a result, almost 120 descriptive codes were obtained.

In the second step, the data were coded regarding the target actors of the producers' efforts to legitimize RA. These codes showed that the producers targeted three main groups of actors: other farmers, buyers, and what in the literature has been termed institutional actors (Marques et al. 2020), such as agricultural

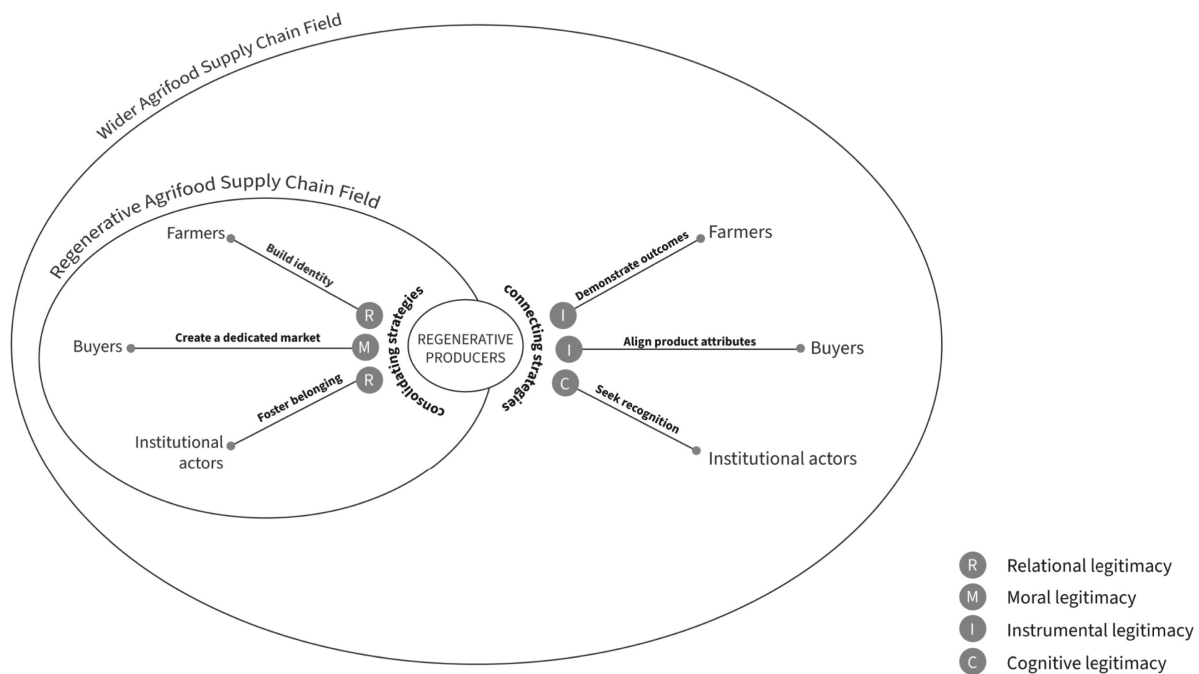


FIGURE 1 | Legitimation strategies for consolidating and connecting regenerative agriculture in supply chain fields.

associations, local regulatory and administrative entities, and research centers.

In the third step, several sessions were held for axial coding among all authors. The analysis revealed a *need for consolidating* in the regenerative SC field related to the polyphony of RA practices and definitions, limited knowledge of RA, and limited support for RA. It also showed a *need for connecting* RA to the wider SC field, given the rejection, disregard, and reluctance shown toward RA. Furthermore, axial coding resulted in six second-order codes that delineated six different legitimation strategies that the producers deployed: *build identity*, *demonstrate outcomes*, *create a dedicated market*, *align product attributes*, *foster belonging*, and *seek recognition*. These legitimation strategies were characterized according to the underlying legitimation approach from the literature (moral, cognitive, instrumental, and relational) (Bitektine and Haack 2015; Suchman 1995; Tost 2011). Table S3 presents quotations that portray the differences between the regenerative SC field, to which actors dedicated to RA belong, and the wider SC field.

In the fourth step, the validation interviews were coded using the coding scheme from the previous rounds. The analysis revealed that producers adaptively used the six legitimation strategies depending on the actors they targeted. The patterns from these interviews validated the emerging evidence that each strategy addressed a specific category of actors (farmers, buyers, and institutional actors) and was tailored to the field to which they belonged. Table S4 presents the final coding structure, and Table S5 summarizes the key constructs and representative data.

To ensure the reliability and validity of the analysis, the authors followed the criteria suggested by Yin (2018). Table S6 describes how the reliability and validity criteria were applied

to this study, distinguishing between different research phases.

4 | Findings

Two overarching legitimation strategies emerged from coding our data: (i) *strategies for consolidating the regenerative SC field* and (ii) *strategies for connecting it with the wider SC field*. Legitimation strategies for consolidating addressed the perceived need to strengthen RA within the regenerative SC field—among actors who share common beliefs about RA benefits for enhancing the health of ecosystems, improving farmers' livelihoods, and revitalizing rural areas. Legitimation strategies for connecting RA targeted actors in the wider SC field and aimed at gaining acceptance of RA beyond the narrow and nascent regenerative SC field. Each comprises three more specific strategies, depending on whether they target other farmers, buyers, or institutional actors, resulting in a framework of legitimation strategies for RA in SC fields that is further detailed in the following (see Figure 1).

4.1 | Legitimation Strategies for Consolidating the Regenerative Agrifood Supply Chain Field

4.1.1 | Perceived Need for Legitimation

For the regenerative producers in this study, RA represented viable ways of living in rural areas that could address the ecological crisis, as indicated in the following quotes.

I think it's a whole new way of looking at our production model, understanding its impacts, and deeply reflecting on how we interact with and

perceive our environment. This means we need to re-evaluate many concepts and face significant paradigm shifts.

(C5)

I think it goes a little beyond just the regeneration of soils and ecosystems. I believe that as a society, we're at a point where we need fundamental changes, because we're facing an irreversible collapse of nature.

(C2)

However, despite its shared purpose, the regenerative SC field was characterized by a polyphony of approaches, practices, and definitions. As there are no clear formal standards and no long-lasting legacy, a common understanding of what RA entails was lacking; thus, producers struggled to be identified as regenerative farmers. As a result, there was a perceived need for legitimation within the regenerative SC field that became apparent when addressing other regenerative farmers, buyers, and institutional actors.

Regarding other regenerative *farmers*, the data suggest that RA producers see a need for a shared understanding of exactly what RA and being a regenerative producer means. This understanding was seen as important to protect the regenerative approach from being misused, as more and more large corporations are adopting the term for characterizing their production yet entailing a typically looser concept than the one developed by fully dedicated pioneering regenerative producers.

The fight among regenerative movements over which one is the “pure” or the “right” one ... They can all work.

(C3)

Regenerative agriculture is still a very abstract concept. Anyone can claim to be doing it, even if they just add compost. There's no official certification or regulations. Different organizations have different standards. While I know what it means to practice regenerative agriculture, the lack of a clear definition makes it difficult to promote. It's become a trendy term, and even conventional farmers are using it.

(C6)

Will this all become just another buzzword? Will it end up being a label that replaces four completely ineffective concepts?

(C2)

The need to consolidate the regenerative SC field to overcome polyphony among regenerative farmers was associated with the desire to foster a community around RA with other farmers.

Well, there's a big gap (...) between those who practice holistic management and those who use PRV (Voisin Grazing). I don't understand why, but there's intense competition, like: “my philosophy is better than yours.” You can see this tension. I don't get it, because to me, it's about making the pie bigger, not trying to divide it.

(C3)

Other regenerative farmers are relevant because they inspire you, because they help you, and you won't feel alone too, because when you do something so unique, it can be isolating.

(C6)

The analysis also suggests that regenerative producers also see a need for legitimation toward potential *buyers* who are sensitive to the way food is produced but do not necessarily know what RA is, which is exacerbated by the absence of certifications that could serve as a reference point to legitimize and distinguish regenerative products.

Consumers are sensitive to how we connect and interact with what we use to produce food. But then, the message doesn't get through. For example, that very segment of the market, which is gaining increasing traction, is focused on production processes that are anything but respectful. If consumers, with their sensitivity, knew this, they wouldn't accept it.

(C1)

I think the main commercial risk is, first of all, that there's no certification — that there's nothing you can point to or rely on.

(C5)

In addition, the informants signaled the need to consolidate the regenerative SC field regarding *institutional actors*. The wider SC field has an established institutional framework: “Factory farms have already found their place, their regulations, and hold a position of power” (C3). In contrast, the nascent regenerative SC field has fewer institutional actors that are aligned around regenerative practices and principles that could provide support, boost collaboration, and bring together like-minded actors to consolidate the regenerative SC field.

In reality, who legitimizes these projects—which social agent or actor legitimizes them in the territories? No one.

(C4)

What strikes me about regenerative agriculture is its complete lack of special support.

(C4)

I had no contact with anyone in this field in Spain. Then, a neighbor here in the village gave me information about the *Regenerando* event in Aranzazu three years ago. That's when I started connecting with others who think and work like us, and I entered this world. Then, after I completed the comprehensive training with the Savory Institute—just last year, after getting my qualification—they brought me into these networks, and it's grown much more from there.

(C3)

Overall, the data indicate that regenerative producers saw a need to consolidate the nascent regenerative SC field. Against this backdrop, the analysis revealed that regenerative producers deployed three specific legitimation strategies to consolidate the regenerative SC field, as detailed below.

4.1.2 | Build Identity

The legitimation strategy “build identity” was targeted at other regenerative farmers. It aimed to create and reinforce a strong sense of community grounded in shared values and a shared vision around RA. While these farmers agreed on the need to transform the food system to avoid ecological degradation, there was still a lack of shared understanding and standards on how to implement and practice RA. Therefore, the legitimation strategy of *building identity* aimed at creating convergence around what it takes to be a regenerative producer and what RA is, cocreating and reinforcing a taken-for-granted understanding of regeneration, both as an idea and as a practice. Collaboratively defining regenerative methods created a shared understanding of relevant indicators and practices for ecosystem health, which increased cohesion among RA farmers.

At the beginning we talked a lot about the need to define what our indicators are, to be able to see if we were on the right track or not. Now, a lot of this has been defined. In other words, thanks to what these networks have been doing, the issue of what [indicators from the ecosystem] we need to observe [...] has been already defined.

(C1)

Beyond the personal satisfaction of meeting people with more or less similar interests, I believe there's a reciprocal enrichment.

(C2)

There isn't enough written *text* yet to simply “copy and paste” and put together a new project. We don't have enough pre-built projects. So, right now, we're all writing *text*. The *text* we're writing for our project will be useful because, at some point, someone will

be able to cut and paste paragraphs from our work for other projects.

(C1)

Having a shared understanding enables protecting the nascent regenerative SC field from greenwashing. Big corporations are increasingly using the term RA, setting goals to apply these practices, and using it in their communications. Regenerative producers perceived this as a threat. To reverse ecological degradation, they sought convergence around RA principles and practices to define a clear identity for fully dedicated regenerative farmers and distinguish from diluted understanding of RA, which would convert regeneration into an empty buzzword, similar to what already happened in the past for organic farming, as the following quotes demonstrate:

... large companies that are doing greenwashing with regenerative, they are demolishing the value, decreasing the value, using the term in the wrong way, trying to use the words to mean what they want it to mean, rather than what it actually means. That is my great fight on LinkedIn, against greenwashing, against those who are doing wrong.

(C3)

We don't want the same thing that happened with organic agriculture. Initially, there was a proposal for a unified system: no herbicides, no insecticides, and no other harmful chemicals. So, in all these negotiations and agreements, as things became more institutionalized, the original idea watered down. That's exactly what we want to avoid. (...) Look at Bayer now talking about regenerative agriculture, or Syngenta. Obviously, the name sounds cool. And if it sounds good, it can be sold. Well, that's where the problem starts.

(C1)

With its emphasis on creating a shared understanding and knowledge base about practicing RA rooted in a clear vision of RA, this legitimation strategy aimed to create a nucleus for a shared identity around RA. In turn, building identity was used to strengthen the community of regenerative farmers to overcome feeling loneliness and being marginalized and finding reciprocal support. Building identity stabilized and consolidated RA as a legitimate practice such that it was possible to openly share failures and initiate mutual learning, as the following quotes demonstrate:

We share our failures and thus, together, we are not sad because of them.

(C3)

We talk a lot about peer-to-peer learning. We pay much more attention to other producers than to an advisor or technician. The important thing about this is learning from the mistakes of others. In conventional



PICTURE 1 | Legitimation strategy *build identity*. The pictures show Pomona Fruits producers attending a biofertilizer course with other ra producers, in Pomona Fruits farm. *Source:* Pomona Fruits Regenerative Diary, March 23, 2022. [Colour figure can be viewed at [wileyonlinelibrary.com](https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com)]

agriculture and in the vast majority of industries of any kind, people don't like to talk publicly about their mistakes, but in regenerative agriculture, part of our mindset and how we work is to focus on those mistakes and share those mistakes.

(C3)

I feel very accompanied. Before, in conventional, when we had a question, we had just one person to call, our technician. Now we have 30 people, we have our five ADV technicians, we have the biodynamics group that is 30 people. We have a group of biofertilizer instructors, which is 30 more people.

(C6)

Another example of this strategy is illustrated by [Picture 1](#): One producer is hosting a course on biofertilization, bringing together other regenerative farmers to learn and collaborate.

This strategy entails a relational legitimacy content, as it aimed at “affirming individuals’ social identities and bolster their sense of self-worth” (Tost 2011, 693) of the group of regenerative farmers versus nonregenerative farmers, reinforcing shared beliefs and knowledge for reassuring the community around RA based on peer recognition and community validation.

4.1.3 | Create a Dedicated Market

This strategy aimed at *creating a dedicated market*—a market segment around buyers who value RA as a legitimate approach to producing food. It sought to resonate with buyers who value how food is produced and are willing to pay a fair price in recognition of producers’ efforts to protect the environment, making them aware of the value of regeneration. To build a legitimate market for regenerative products, farmers actively sought to allude to buyers’ sensitivity to how food is produced.

We're aiming for a market where people know what regenerative means, or are at least interested in it, where they appreciate it and are willing to pay for it, basically.

(C5)

Our company is not just about producing; it is also about delivering fruit to people who value it.

(C6)

Instead of focusing on the producer-consumer pair, which is how we usually approach in this sector, I see myself more embedded within a collective process. A collective process where those who consume our products also form part of that collective process.

(C1)

To legitimize RA toward buyers with ecological sensitivity, producers went beyond commercializing regenerative products or merely creating distribution channels. Rather, they raised awareness about RA practices and principles and explained how it works, organizing dedicated events to help buyers understand what regeneration truly means and what happens behind the scenes. By doing so, they tried to overcome the novelty and associated lack of knowledge around RA in the market and legitimize it as an acceptable approach for conscious buyers.

The customers who appreciate it and know about it—like Veritas, for example, who know it very well—I explain it to them, I show them photos. But I see that many customers still don't know this concept.

(C6)

What do customers usually have in mind? Organic. So you have to explain very clearly what the difference is between organic and regenerative. And do it with very simple things—talk about biodiversity. Don't talk about carbon absorption.

Talk about how we need to improve the soil, that it's being washed away by the rain. That it rains less now, that water is becoming a problem. That we're losing a lot of biodiversity ... These are things anyone can more or less grasp.

(C5)

When you do things differently, you also have an educational duty; you have to know how to communicate it. They'll say, 'Look at the model they have and how they do it.' A consumer who already knows this feels like a participant.

(C5)

Accordingly, this strategy was mainly built on moral legitimacy, as it is aimed at ensuring that RA is perceived as “the right thing to do” (Suchman 1995, 579). It appeals to the moral convictions of buyers, seeking to educate and convince them of the (moral) superiority of RA, as it entails practices that are more respectful of the environment.

4.1.4 | Foster Belonging

Producers implemented the strategy of “foster belonging” to bolster a nascent network of institutional actors centered specifically around RA, such as associations and research institutes. It aimed to gain legitimacy by strengthening a network of actors dedicated to RA that could support regenerative producers in several respects. Farmer associations are perceived as sites of mutual learning that help offset the lack of specialized knowledge and institutional support. By actively engaging in both formal and informal industry associations centered around RA, the producers not only learned about best practices in RA but also took part in codefining what RA is—and what it is not. Being visible and perceived as part of these networks enhanced their legitimacy and enabled new connections. Taking on leading roles within these recognized associations was a means to acquire and project legitimacy within the regenerative SC field, both as producers and for the practices and projects they developed.

It's our association. This association has technicians who advise all of us. It also means we learn from one another. If something works for me, my technician shares it with the other technicians, and they pass it on to other producers.

(C6)

The Savory Institute network. Since I'm an official educator, that will allow me to take part in trainings led by people with much more experience, and I think that will help us a lot, really a lot.

(C3)

If my initiative receives attention, that very attention will channel support toward my initiative. (...) “Being in the loop” within the regenerative project itself

is attracting people who otherwise wouldn't have known this project was trying to get off the ground. They learn about it, and that makes them include us in their networks. This can provide an extra burst of energy to the proposal. A really powerful extra. It's not a small bonus; it's a strong boost.

(C1)

These associations also served as platforms for field-shaping activities and policy influence. By being part of such collectives dedicated to RA, the producers codeveloped documents aimed at policy audiences to promote shared definitions and institutional recognition. In this way, RA actors seek institutional anchoring, which helped them to consolidate the regenerative SC field, as regulation signals acceptance and legitimation (see also Thomas and Ritala 2022).

The community we have here locally, and also at the European level and through other kinds of movements we're engaged in with different organizations, is starting to become relevant — in a way that's perhaps not exactly political, but rather one of advocacy. It's about defending certain principles: ensuring that regenerative agriculture follows the path it should.

(C5)

On Thursday, for example, I'm going to attend — representing *Avelarte*, the association — the presentation of a new document, a hugely important and thorough piece of work on all the challenges we face regarding food sovereignty, but focusing on extensive production and reaching the market ... How the government is making things difficult for us with current policies, what policies need to change. This document is really aimed at the Government of Navarra and local councils and such. So, being able to collaborate together to influence policy is also important.

(C3)

This legitimation strategy of fostering belonging is built on what has been defined as relational legitimacy (Tost 2011). Through participation in dedicated associations and networks, the producers aimed to be perceived as part of the nascent RA community. Through collective action, for example, toward policymakers, this strategy sought to strengthen the regenerative SC field as a recognized and relevant community of practice.

4.2 | Legitimation Strategies for Connecting RA With the Wider Agrifood Supply Chain Field

4.2.1 | Perceived Need for Legitimation

The RA producers perceived rejection and unfavorable legitimacy judgments from actors from the wider SC field. The idea of using agriculture to improve the health of ecosystems was seen as outlandish by conventional agricultural actors, reflecting a

lack of understanding and knowledge about RA practices and their incompatibility with established and taken-for-granted rules, norms, and beliefs. This perceived rejection—rooted in RA's novel and disruptive nature—originated from conventional farmers, buyers, and institutional actors from the wider SC field. As a result, regenerative producers felt the need to legitimate RA vis-à-vis the wider SC field.

Regenerative producers perceived conventional *farmers* as deeply entrenched in traditional dogmatic approaches to farming that create path dependencies, rendering RA unthinkable and non-practicable. Accordingly, the regenerative producers felt lonely and felt like they were perceived as hippies, freaks, or crazy people when they tried to explain RA to conventional farmers.

The agronomic dogma, the dogma of the NPK (nitrogen, phosphorus, potassium), the dogma of monoculture, is a tremendously established dogma and in some way, it is a dogma that conditions certain rural economies with a level of total and absolute technological dependence, a spiral of tremendous indebtedness of farms. Well, many people truly, even if they want to, cannot change today because they are totally tied to one way of doing things.

(C2)

I tried to talk with many people and raise awareness, but this is not unidirectional, people also have their views: “Who are these freaks to teach me when I’m doing agriculture just like my grandfathers did for 100 years.”

(C3)

Many people are resistant, obviously. Mostly I would say. When you talk to in the bar about these projects, well, I still think that most people in the agronomic world think ... that you are crazy, that this is mental nonsense and that if Monsanto says that things are like this, how can you dare to question those who know?

(C2)

The regenerative producers also experienced a need for legitimation with mainstream *buyers*. They faced challenges in differentiating their products, as mainstream buyers were not familiar with or did not value the concept of regeneration or saw regeneration as conflicting with other product features, such as aesthetics, making market acceptance difficult.

I’m uncertain about the potential market for regenerative agriculture. It’s something I question.

(C1)

We need to figure out how we differentiate ourselves and who’s willing to pay for that differentiation. Right now, with the cherry campaign, we have a clear differentiator—our cherries are organic. Yet, we often

end up selling on the conventional market because we simply can’t distribute our product with that organic distinction. (...). We’re certainly not selling products labeled as “regenerative.”

(C1)

Before, organic consumers would take all the fruit, but now they only want the pretty ones. They don’t want the ones that are also good but don’t look perfect. Before, yes; now, no. It’s because we’re increasingly copying the conventional model, with big, beautiful fruit.

(C6)

Finally, the regenerative producers perceived the need to legitimate RA with *institutional actors* that represent conventional agriculture. They realized that existing policies and regulations were at odds with RA and were largely designed to accommodate conventional farming practices. Hence, they struggled to be recognized as legitimate agricultural actors, particularly by local governments responsible for issuing permits and supervising agricultural activities. This lack of legitimacy went so far as their regenerative practices were hindered or obstructed by regulations:

Sometimes you have to remove things from your project because people [the administration] won’t understand them, and because the report doesn’t fit into the categories they use at the local government. So, we’re a bit in no man’s land. If that regulatory framework doesn’t change and doesn’t account for new categories adapted to a real transition process, then we’re stuck in limbo.

(C4)

The regulations aren’t helping us; they’re harming us because they’re designed for big companies. And they have rural agents who go around the countryside and slap you with a 3,000€ fine.

(C6)

The legal and regulatory framework has been so detrimental to these mixed systems—which, by definition, are what we aspire to: highly complex systems where interactions add up rather than detract. Yet, in that area, the regulations are simply crushing.

(C2)

Overall, the regenerative producers saw a need to legitimize RA vis-à-vis the wider SC field. To gain broader acceptance as legitimate agricultural actors despite RA's novel and disruptive approach, they sought to connect with conventional producers, mainstream buyers, and established agricultural institutional actors. The analysis revealed three specific legitimation strategies for this purpose, as described below.

4.2.2 | Demonstrate Outcomes

To overcome the skepticism of conventional farmers, regenerative producers use the strategy “demonstrate outcomes” to show the effectiveness of regenerative farming practices compared with conventional ones. This strategy explicitly focused on explaining and teaching practical knowledge and skills to foster a better understanding of what RA is and how it works through participating as speakers in workshops or educational programs, providing technical assistance, preparing dissemination materials, or appearing in the press.

In some cases, emphasis was placed on demonstrating the superiority of RA in terms of ecological impacts. [Picture 2](#) presents farmers visiting a producer’s farm, enabling experiential learning. These activities were open to any interested producer, particularly to conventional farmers who showed openness. The picture shows how regenerative practices are implemented for cattle grazing and the positive impact of these practices on soil health.

In some cases, this strategy went all the way to proving a higher productivity of RA, especially when targeting neighboring farmers who could witness firsthand the benefits of RA in terms of climate resilience and yield. These strategies were deployed to counter the rejection experienced by regenerative producers.

We’re talking about for example these last three years that have gone from bad to worse because of the drought, and a conventional farmer sees that you haven’t *died*. Here’s when you also see the type of agriculture you’ve done. With water [availability], obviously, it can’t be noticed. But when you’re cultivating below 100 liters per year in dryland farming, I can tell you that here everyone is equally



PICTURE 2 | Legitimation strategy *demonstrate outcomes*. The picture shows conventional farmers visiting the farm as part of the experiential learning in the EIT Food training program on regenerative agriculture, in Binéfar. *Source:* Txema Isábal’s Regenerative Dairy, November 12, 2021. [Colour figure can be viewed at [wileyonlinelibrary.com](https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com)]

having a bad time, and we, we’re still alive and we’re producing, and we sell more expensive, we spend less. They start to be interested in seeing what this is. Is this about hippies or not?

(C5)

There are people, farmers, who criticized us before, they didn’t understand what you were doing. Now, there’s even admiration. Well, they think we haven’t gone bankrupt, that the farms look nice, and even the fact that we have grass, the fruits are beautiful.

(C6)

The implementation of this strategy focuses on gaining legitimacy for RA by alluding to conventional farmers’ interests (i.e., the effects on productivity). Rather than emphasizing the underlying principles of RA, the producers let the farm’s results speak for themselves:

I mean, they just look at us and say: “Wow, they’re not that crazy. I mean, it’s true that what they do works. We don’t really know what they do, but ...!”

(C1)

The years of water deficit, for example, these soils with more organic matter behave much better and are more resilient. Last year, for example, which was a very bad year in terms of the water restrictions in the area, well, we had significantly better results than in neighboring fields. I think that common sense, in the end, will prevail, and we’ll call it regenerative or whatever we call it.

(C2)

Accordingly, the legitimation strategy of demonstrating outcomes is built on gaining instrumental legitimacy, one that is “rooted in the self-interested calculations of individuals and groups” (Tost 2011, 692). It seeks to gain acceptance of RA by other farmers because of its superior performance—in terms of productivity, economic viability, or resilience—rather than for moral reasons. Through this strategy, the regenerative producers sought to connect to farmers from the wider agricultural SC field, not to convert them to RA but to position it as a legitimate agricultural approach, instrumental to achieving widely accepted and desired outcomes.

4.2.3 | Align Product Attributes

To address the novelty and limited market awareness of RA in the wider SC field, the strategy “align product attributes” targeted buyers who did not yet recognize RA in their consumption choices. Beyond a narrow niche, buyers do not have sensitivity to how food is produced.

They value the quality of the cherry. Not the production method, no. The product’s quality.

(C1)

I think it's the quality—how they perceive the texture, the color of the eggs, how they look. They perceive that it has more value.

(C3)

Many people enjoy buying directly from farmers or farming families. They value the connection to the source of their food and prefer supporting local, family-run businesses over large organic corporations. People appreciate this about us: that we're family farmers.

(C6)

Therefore, rather than highlighting moral or ecological superiority, this legitimization strategy aimed at gaining acceptance by connecting RA to product attributes valued by mainstream buyers, such as nutritional quality, taste, artisanal character, family-based production, and local identity. The producers often deliberately backgrounded the regenerative nature of their products and emphasized product attributes that are more immediately recognized and valued by buyers. Through this strategy, they sought to legitimize RA by leveraging more familiar and tangible attributes that could be better understood in the existing market, thereby aligning regenerative products with established expectations.

We are certainly not selling as regenerative. At the moment, the differentiation element we are leveraging is “organic.”

(C1)

Some producers are primarily focusing on a nutritional quality label that isn't tied to regenerative

farming practices, but rather to the overall quality of the product.

(C1)

How are things sold nowadays? I think things sell better when they're artisanal products, good products ... In the case of, for example, cereal, it sells because it's organic and, above all, it uses very, very authentic varieties.

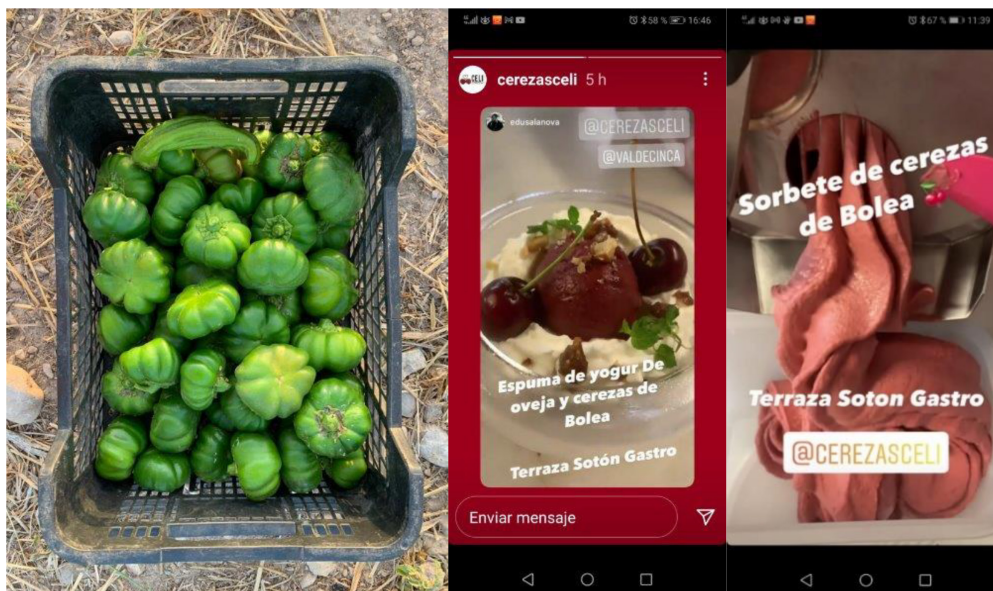
(C5)

Picture 3 shows how regenerative products were presented on social media, emphasizing differentiation as rare varieties or product quality and identity.

The producers often reinforced this strategy through experiential offerings. They invited (potential) buyers to see, touch, taste, and smell the product firsthand, allowing them to recognize its distinctive qualities beyond words. These experiences frequently took place on the farm itself, further strengthening trust and a sense of connection. Activities such as farm tours, tastings, free samples, and guidance on product use aimed at building appreciation—while still avoiding explicit references to regeneration.

We gave him some Asian mustards as a free sample. Today he wrote to me saying he loved them so much that he wants to know how much he can get because he wants to create a new dish for his menu with this as the star ingredient. But he had never tried this product. He didn't know it existed. He was hesitant, and until you give it to him for free and he tries it ...

(C3)



PICTURE 3 | Legitimation strategy *align product attributes*. The pictures show rare varieties and high-quality products positioned accordingly. Source: La Junquera Regenerative Diary, September 23, 2021, (left) and AgroRegenerativa Regenerative Diary, July 13, 2021 (right). [Colour figure can be viewed at wileyonlinelibrary.com]

These customers open up based on trying the product. And after trying the product, they say: well, yes, I am interested in having this product on my shelves.

(C1)

We've done several open days; we've tried to organize several events so they would come. Some have come and now they know how we work. We tried to create an event where we invite them to come, have some snacks here. Different types of preparations.

(C3)

By catering directly to those aspects that are most valued by the targeted actors, with this strategy of aligning product attributes, the producers sought to gain instrumental legitimacy (see Suchman 1995; Tost 2011). Rather than explaining regeneration or claiming moral superiority as compared with conventional products, the producers strategically connected their products to widely accepted attributes that were valued by buyers and that could be credibly addressed through regenerative practices.

4.2.4 | Seek Recognition

With the legitimation strategy “seek recognition,” regenerative producers addressed institutional actors to reinforce the idea that RA deserves recognition as a valid approach within the wider SC field, although it fundamentally deviates from the taken-for-granted assumptions and entrenched rules and norms of conventional agriculture.

To that end, the producers sought to build connections with established institutional actors to gain legitimacy toward those who could influence the rewriting of future rules. For instance, they collaborated with universities to validate their practices, which is relevant for gaining credibility in the wider SC field because it can generate measurable data regarding regenerative practices and their impact on the environment. Collaboration with universities promised legitimacy spillover through the academic validation of regenerative practices by highly legitimate institutions.

The connection with the academic and scientific side is important because, in the end, it's what validates what you're doing, right? It validates that what you're doing actually regenerates the soil, regenerates biodiversity, that it has a regenerative impact.

(C4)

Clearly, the university brings added value — ultimately, it brings legitimacy or credibility to the project.

(C4)

As another example, one of the producers applied for public funding. Applying for established funding programs as part of a consortium of established partners helped the producer to be perceived as a relevant and legitimate actor who would be considered a good partner for a European funding application.

Due to funding issues, that is, European projects, etc. we need European partners. For example, now we are going to get an Erasmus Plus to export a course that we design and develop. So, we need three partners, three farms, but thanks to that network we have – Life House Farm – we can get those partners.

(C4)

In a similar way, the producers tried to achieve legitimacy spillovers by connecting to existing broadly accepted standards endorsed by institutional actors from the wider SC field (such as accreditation bodies). Despite applying disruptive agricultural principles and practices, following standards and frameworks that were available and legitimate helped the producers claim acceptance in the field and downplay their otherness.

We follow the free-range regulations. That's a form of self-regulation. And obviously, not using chemicals.

(C3)

We do biodynamic farming practices. ... We currently meet all of these requirements, except for being certified. I have requested certification for this July.

(C6)

Regarding the regulatory context of organic farming, there are things we are doing because the regulations require us to, but if we didn't have that framework obliging us, we wouldn't be doing them that way.

(C1)

Some producers also tried to participate in mainstream agricultural events not specifically dedicated to RA. The intention was for RA to be recognized as an acceptable agricultural approach by building connections with established actors and organizations beyond the regenerative niche. Engaging in established and recognized agricultural networks provided greater acceptance and visibility, as they connected to established and accepted groups and activities:

They called us to be speakers in September, at a fair, at a conference about rural alternatives. (...). Participating and having visibility these days is already opening up the entire network of people who are linked to that place. And this was not the first conference, they have been around for years. Many ranchers and farmers have participated there.

(C1)



PICTURE 4 | Legitimation strategy seek recognition. The pictures show members of La Junquera and of IMIDA (Murcian Institute of Agricultural and Environmental Research and Development) starting a collaborative project to recover local varieties of vegetables (left), and members of EnRama presenting their project at an International Forum of Cultures and Realities (right). *Source:* La Junquera Regenerative Diary, June 6, 2022, and EnRama Regenerative Diary, June 6, 2021. [Colour figure can be viewed at [wileyonlinelibrary.com](https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/10.1111/jscm.70019)]

Picture 4 further illustrates this strategy, showing the launch of a project with a regional public research center focused on recovering local varieties of vegetables, and the presentation of another producer's regenerative project at an international conference.

The strategy of seeking recognition alludes to what Suchman (1995) and Tost (2011) referred to as cognitive legitimacy. The regenerative producers sought recognition for RA by validating its practices and impacts against established standards and by gaining approval from established organizations, making RA more comprehensible within the wider SC field. Again, the aim was not to convert conventional actors but to reduce rejection by connecting RA to widely understood standards and taken-for-granted institutions (such as universities), thus overcoming the liability of newness that stems from the disruptive nature of RA.

4.3 | Complementarity Between Consolidating and Connecting Legitimation Strategies

While a systematic analysis of complementarities or tensions among those strategies is beyond the scope of this article, the analysis also suggests that legitimation strategies for consolidating and connecting are not independent but can be complementary. For instance, regarding strategies targeting farmers, the RA producers used the legitimation strategy “demonstrate outcomes” to get conventional farmers’ acceptance (i.e., they needed to demonstrate that they “didn’t lose their business trying [to do RA],” as one producer put it). However, that demonstration of positive outcomes would suffer if RA farmers were too divided among themselves over what constitutes appropriate regenerative practices, which they sought to address through “build identity” strategies. Conversely, conventional farmers’ acceptance of regenerative practices as legitimate reaffirms regenerative producers’ identities. Hence, the “build identity” strategy targeted at regenerative farmers to consolidate the regenerative SC field was complementary to the “demonstrate outcomes” strategy to connect to conventional farmers in the wider SC field. Similarly, regarding institutional actors, being recognized as reliable

farmers within the wider SC field reinforced the belonging of producers to the regenerative SC field. Furthermore, complementarities of strategies targeted at different actors, within or across SC fields, occurred as well. For example, the presence of a dedicated market in the regenerative SC field that appreciates the qualities of RA products appears to further strengthen the efforts of RA actors to demonstrate outcomes to conventional farmers in the wider SC field. These complementarities are remarkable because consolidating and connecting strategies are based on different legitimacy approaches that are not necessarily aligned but could give rise to tensions. However, the data suggests that regenerative producers did not highlight these tensions but were able to leverage complementarities, nonetheless.

5 | Discussion and Conclusion

This paper unpacks the legitimation strategies that regenerative producers deploy toward different actors in nested SC fields to gain legitimacy for RA. The analysis shows that to address the liability of newness of RA and the resulting need for legitimation, regenerative producers pursue a two-pronged approach. On the one hand, they seek to consolidate RA among actors from the regenerative SC field (being nested in a wider SC field) by building an identity with peer farmers, by creating a dedicated market for buyers, and by fostering belonging with institutional actors from that field. On the other hand, these actors pursue strategies to connect with the wider SC field by demonstrating the positive outcomes of RA to conventional farmers, by aligning product attributes for mainstream buyers, and by seeking recognition from institutional actors that are not associated with RA.

5.1 | Main Contributions and Implications

5.1.1 | Legitimation of Regeneration

This study contributes to the literature on regenerative business (Hahn and Tampe 2021; Konietzko et al. 2023; Muñoz and Branzei 2021; Slawinski et al. 2021) and to the nascent area of regenerative SCs (Gualandris et al. 2024; Hsu et al. 2025; Meyer

et al. 2025) by explaining how regenerative actors seek to legitimize regeneration in nested SC fields.

As its main contribution, this study unpacks the systemic and adaptive approaches that regenerative actors adopt to legitimize regeneration and offers important implications for addressing the liability of newness of highly disruptive approaches to sustainability. As for the *systemic* approach, the findings show that in order to live up to the systemic and holistic aspiration of regenerative business (du Plessis and Cole 2011; Robinson and Cole 2015), gaining acceptance with selected actors is insufficient. Rather, acceptance is sought in the entire SC field because regeneration requires collective and widespread buy-in (Gualandris et al. 2024). The legitimation strategies account for the nestedness of the regenerative SC field within the wider SC field (Sauer 2021; Sauer and Seuring 2018), thereby espousing the systemic embeddedness of RA. This dual focus addresses different challenges that follow from the novelty of RA. For the regenerative SC field, the nascent state of RA translates into a polyphony addressed by strategies for consolidating RA. There, regenerative producers seek to strengthen the cohesion of the regenerative SC field from within. From a systems perspective, this inward focus corresponds to “zooming in” on the inner relationships of a subsystem (Schad and Bansal 2018). In the wider SC field, the novelty of RA triggered rejection because of its disruptive nature compared with conventional agriculture. The strategies for connecting with different conventional actors correspond to a “zooming out” to identify larger interrelations and dependencies (Schad and Bansal 2018). Even if regenerative principles are backgrounded, they play an important role in legitimizing regeneration. They aim at turning outright rejection and ignorance from the wider SC field into recognition for RA, thereby delineating, but also acknowledging, RA vis-à-vis other established approaches (Thomas and Ritala 2022).

The *adaptiveness* of legitimation strategies has two related dimensions: (1) the actors targeted and (2) the legitimation approach. First, the framework resulting from the analysis shows that in nested SC fields, the legitimation of RA builds on actor-specific legitimation strategies (for farmers, buyers, and institutional actors). Regenerative producers not only adapt to different types of actors but also further distinguish whether these actors form part of the regenerative SC field or the wider SC field. This adaptability directly results from the radical departure of RA from conventional agriculture that dominates the wider SC field (Giller et al. 2021; Newton et al. 2020) as regenerative producers cannot deploy their legitimation strategies from a position of strength.

Second, the findings elucidate the adaptiveness of legitimation strategies regarding underlying legitimation approaches. Regenerative producers adaptively use different—and sometimes seemingly contradictory—legitimation approaches (instrumental, cognitive, moral, and relational ones) to target different actors. For the regenerative SC field, regenerative producers drew on moral or relational legitimation approaches, while for the wider SC field, they used instrumental or cognitive approaches. These findings expand beyond extant research on the legitimation of disruptive sustainability approaches (see, e.g., de Boer and Aiking 2021; Press et al. 2014) that mostly portrays the legitimation of sustainable practices as adopting a moral

approach, that is, “an affirmation of moral values, [against] the domain of the incumbent industry system, marked negatively as a violation of moral values” (Weber et al. 2008, 538). The findings also extend van Bommel and Spicer's (2011) work on the importance of creating an ideological framework that binds actors together by showing that strategies for consolidation (of the regenerative SC field) and for connecting (to the wider SC field) are complementary. Together, the systemic and adaptive approaches to legitimation strategies represent a pragmatic but robust approach (Etzion et al. 2017; Ferraro et al. 2015) that seeks to gain legitimacy among a multitude of actors by foregrounding or downplaying moral legitimation strategies, depending on the suitability of the legitimation approach for the targeted actors.

5.1.2 | Regenerative Supply Chain Fields

This study also contributes to the nascent literature on regenerative SC fields (Bag et al. 2025; Hsu et al. 2025; Meyer et al. 2025) by moving beyond extant studies that focus on powerful actors only (e.g., Diebel et al. 2024; Sauer and Seuring 2018; Wu and Jia 2018), to offer a better understanding of bottom-up strategies for the legitimation of regeneration in SC fields. This also has implications for understanding diffusion of regenerative practices in SC fields. Literature on the governance of the greening of SC (see Koeborg and Longoni 2019 for a review) mostly focus on the different mechanisms that firms—especially large powerful buyers—implement for governing the greening of their SC, which are mostly based on market power (e.g., Ahmed and Shafiq 2022; Touboulic et al. 2014) and coercive pressure (Villena and Dhanorkar 2020). For such powerful and central actors, legitimacy is considered a given and leveraged source of influence (Ahmed and Shafiq 2022; Diebel et al. 2024), where diffusion and adoption mechanisms mostly leverage existing standards for example, through certifications (e.g., Kauppi and Hannibal 2017). This study complements prior research by explaining how less powerful noncentral actors try to legitimize disruptively novel approaches, such as regeneration, without a strong power base. Unlike powerful multinationals who orchestrate entire SCs from a dominant downstream position (e.g., Krishnan et al. 2023), regenerative producers compensate for their lack of coercive power by deploying an adaptive and pragmatic approach. As gaining legitimacy is a prerequisite for the acceptance and diffusion of green innovations (Li et al. 2018; Markard et al. 2016; Thomas and Lamm 2012) in SCs (Glover et al. 2014; Kauppi and Hannibal 2017), this adaptive approach offers an alternative for overcoming the trade-off between disruptive change with a high risk of rejection and safer yet insufficient incremental change for fostering the diffusion of regeneration in the SC field.

Moreover, this study adds more broadly to the understanding of strategies for overcoming the liability of newness of disruptively new approaches to achieving sustainability. Prior research has focused on individual organizations' efforts to gain legitimacy for their own operations and offerings (for a review, see Überbacher 2014). It offers ample evidence of different strategies to overcome the liability of newness by seeking legitimacy for new ventures and disruptive practices. For instance, Zhang and White (2016) identified three strategies (leveraging existing sources of legitimacy, aligning with established

institutional rules, norms, and beliefs, and enacting the institutional environment) through which newcomers in the photovoltaic industry sought to gain legitimacy. Recently, Rhee et al. (2025) studied how plant-based meat producers sought to gain legitimacy in the market by (i) reconfiguring established categories, (ii) replicating established expectations, and (iii) instilling the superiority of the novel practice. The findings of the present study suggest that efforts to legitimize disruptive approaches, such as regeneration, go beyond the individual organization but aim at nested SC fields and their various actors. These insights underpin the relevance of an SC field perspective for understanding the mechanisms and dynamics of legitimizing disruptive approaches, such as regeneration (Sauer and Seuring 2018; Wu and Jia 2018).

5.2 | Practical and Societal Implications

A more informed understanding of legitimation strategies can help businesses in agriculture and other sectors advance regenerative business efforts, despite the disruptive and nascent nature of regeneration and its systemic aspirations. The findings provide three practical recommendations for managers to foster the diffusion of regeneration and strengthen the regenerative SC field.

First, regenerative businesses need to be aware of the need for legitimacy as a precondition for the acceptance and diffusion of regenerative initiatives. Such legitimation depends on multiple actors, as their rejection could undermine the systemic aspiration of regeneration. Accordingly, regenerative businesses, especially those that do not have a powerful position in the industry, to address a comprehensive set of actors from the entire SC field to legitimize regeneration—including actors who are already supporting regeneration but also distant or skeptical ones. Second, legitimizing regeneration requires engaging with different legitimation approaches simultaneously (moral, instrumental, cognitive, and relational), depending on the specific targeted actors. Third, relying solely on moral arguments—promoting regeneration as “the right thing to do”—may not be suitable for all audiences. Rather, regenerative businesses should be strategic in how they legitimate regeneration. For example, when addressing actors who are unfamiliar with, or resistant to, regeneration, businesses may want to emphasize product attributes that resonate with those actors’ interests by adopting an instrumental approach.

The findings also offer practical implications for legitimating other innovative approaches for sustainability, such as circular economy (e.g., Kumar et al. 2023) or decarbonization (Hettler and Graf-Vlachy 2024), which heavily rely on collaborations across SC. The adaptive legitimation strategies identified in this study in the context of RA can inform these areas as well, particularly regarding “when” and “to what extent” legitimation efforts should target specific versus wider SC fields.

5.3 | Limitations and Future Research

Similar to all studies, this analysis has limitations. Most importantly, it does not assess the effectiveness of legitimation

strategies or how they are received by various SC field actors. Future studies could extend this analysis by examining SC actors’ perceptions of RA legitimation strategies to capture their perspectives on RA and their susceptibility to and reception of these strategies. Such work would be particularly relevant in explicitly addressing the social implications of RA, as they are central to RA’s aim of restoring social–ecological systems. This paper focused mostly on environmental practices and outcomes, as the ones that inductively emerged as predominant, and touched upon social aspects, such as producers’ livelihoods and rural revitalization, only tangentially. Future research is needed to broaden the understanding of social implications and to understand interactions, complementarities, and trade-offs with environmental implications in SCs (Pagell and Wilhelm 2025). Another limitation is that the analysis does not distinguish between short-term and long-term strategies, which invites future research to theorize the temporal dynamics of legitimation. Furthermore, it deliberately focuses on fully committed pioneering regenerative producers. As an increasing number of multinationals are adopting the language (and some practices) around RA, future studies could juxtapose these powerful actors’ legitimation strategies with those of powerless pioneering regenerative producers.

Additionally, the analysis could be expanded, inspiring an understanding of legitimation dynamics in other empirical settings. Our analysis is grounded in a specific industry—agrifood—and a specific country—Spain. While the specific types of targeted actors and legitimation strategy details might vary across sectors or countries, the underlying framework might remain informative. Further studies could verify how the framework might be adapted to other industries and other regional contexts and determine whether and under what circumstances an adaptive approach entails the risk of watering down or blurring the nascent notion of regenerative business (Tittonell et al. 2022).

This study addresses how actors legitimize regeneration in SC fields using the case of RA. Most importantly, it shows how regenerative actors adaptively and systemically deploy a set of legitimation strategies to seek acceptance, offering empirical evidence of the versatility required to consolidate the nascent core of regenerative SC fields while connecting to the wider SC field. This versatility builds on the ability to make regenerative practices acceptable to diametrically opposed beliefs and practices while staying true to and consolidating the radical systemic aspirations of regeneration, weaving together SC fields. Future research could investigate how this ability can be developed despite the underlying tensions between opposed beliefs and practices in SC fields and the diverse set of strategies used to legitimize regeneration in SC fields.

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Conflicts of Interest

The authors declare no conflicts of interest.

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Supporting Information

Additional supporting information can be found online in the Supporting Information section. **Figure S1:** Research Process. **Table S1:** Potential