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LOCAL/GLOBAL ENCOUNTERS

The Indispensable Territorial Dimension of Food Supply: A View from Brazil During the COVID-19 Pandemic

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Abstract
The research-activists network 'Collective Action on Real Food' analyzed alternative food supply initiatives formed in response and/or expanded due to the pandemic in Brazil and identified more than 260 examples. Despite this dynamism, the policy processes of the UN Food System Summit were not able to—or might not even have tried to—break the mechanisms that make such initiatives politically invisible.

Keywords Short circuits · UN food system summit · National pathways · Alternative food systems · Food supply dynamics

Food supply dynamics have been characterized by a significant process of increasing corporate concentration, similar to tendencies observed in other stages of agro-industrial food systems. Data from the European Union, for example, demonstrates that just ten supermarkets account for over half of all food retail sales (Willoughby and Gore, 2018). The effects of growing concentration in supply chains are expressed as a reduced number of suppliers, unfair contract and negotiation practices and prices, and unfair and inhumane working conditions. Willoughby and Gore (2018) indicates that over a period of 16 years, there has been a strong change in the proportion of value that is captured by farmers across food systems: supermarkets had an increase of 11.5% in their profits, while farmers had a reduction of 13%. The pandemic has further exacerbated this unfair dynamic, particularly for women farmers (Franck and Prapha 2021).

Concentration in food supply chains in the Global South is a consequence of development processes over the past decades which incentivized large-scale food production accompanied by the fast expansion of supermarkets and other major retailers. While this transformation took more than five decades to occur in the United States of America, in Latin America, it took just 1 decade (Reardon et al. 2019). Currently in Brazil, 92.9% of food retail is dominated by supermarkets, while only 7.1% is supplied by alternative chains, such as farmers' markets, small grocery stores and fruit shops, local butchers, etc. (Belik 2020).

This food supply transformation has also dramatically impacted food consumption patterns. According to the Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO 2021), there are 73.3 million people suffering severe food insecurity (hunger) in Latin America and the Caribbean, while obesity affects 106 million adults. The most recent data from Brazil published by the research network Rede Penssan (2021) indicate that 55.2% of national households are food and nutrition insecure (116.8 million people), and 19 million Brazilians are experiencing hunger (equivalent to 9% of the population). The results also show that food insecurity is relatively worse in rural areas (affecting 12% of the rural population) and between family farmers (affecting 14.3% of this group), highlighting an unfair paradox: the group most responsible for food production in the country is also the one which is suffering most from hunger.

The Brazilian National Council of Food and Nutrition Security (CONSEA) conceptually understands that food supply should be seen *as the set of diversity activities that mediates production and consumption of food, and promotes socially equitable, environmentally sustainable, and culturally adequate production models, thus expanding access to*

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adequate and healthy food (2014). In contrast to this definition, there are dominant practices of Brazilian food supply models, where one observes a clear dominance of private sector-led food systems with prices and products determined without any intervention of the public. These dominant and interest-based views ultimately lead to urban and rural areas with widespread lack of fresh and healthy foods, and if available, at inaccessible prices and low diversity.

Food supply dynamics are, therefore, essential elements of food system governance. The constraints and possibilities found in food supply dynamics mediate how populations access food, whether producers offer diverse food, whether and how quality and conditions are regulated, and other factors that ultimately indicate if adequate and healthy food is accessible and by whom. These dynamics are also important determinants for social inclusion and income generation for family farms. Different studies (IPES-Food 2016; HLPE 2019) have confirmed that short food supply chains present more mutually advantageous interactions between producers and consumers by establishing more direct, fairer, and more autonomous commercial relationships between the parts, while also expanding the diversity of fresh, 'in natura' and seasonal foods. As physical and financial access to these foods is strongly linked to general food and nutritional security, short supply chains should play stronger roles in improving food supply overall.

In the context of the UN Food Systems Summit (UNFSS), food supply dynamics, the distribution of power between different actors of food systems, and the political dimensions of food access and supply could form part of the agendas of Action Track 1 (Ensure access to safe and nutritious food for all) and Action Track 2 (Shift to sustainable consumption patterns), at least. Nevertheless, due to the profile of actors that dominated discussions in preparation for the Summit (and already extensively analyzed in Canfield et al. 2021; Nisbett et al. 2021), the topic of food supply was addressed from an excessively reductionistic perspective. The focus was on the offer of technical 'solutions' (e.g., access to technologies—Solution Cluster 1.1.1, or biofortification—Solution Cluster 1.2.2) and on following business as usual approaches (e.g., increase funding for development cooperation—Solution Cluster 1.1.3).

Some emphasis was given to promote public policies with already extensively documented effectiveness (e.g., social protection measures—Solution Cluster 1.1.4, school feeding—Solution Cluster 2.1.3), which might attenuate the social impacts of food systems' industrialization but offer limited transformative potential. Even in the discussions on territorial development (Solution Cluster 4.3.3) or on local production and consumption (Solution Cluster 5.2.1), few if any attention is given to discussing the different power relations between food systems actors. Thus, topics such as production and power concentration in corporate food systems are absolutely marginal discussion points in the Summit's agenda, and efforts to shift those to the central stage have been consistently rebuffed by the Summit's Secretariat (CSM 2021).

Seeing food systems from a territorial perspective allows for acknowledging the variety of relationships between actors within those systems. Territorial approaches to food systems observe the space and assets of a given territory (cultural, political, institutional, natural assets) as key variables to understand development processes such as the building of sustainable food systems (Valencia et al. 2018). Territorial approaches value how local actors organize those assets in strategies that coordinate the delivery of public goods, build differentiated markets, explore rural–urban linkages, articulate territorial plans, and explore multidimensionality of a territory (Valencia and Favareto 2020). This multidimensionality of a given territory is thus understood as the relationships between society and nature, between political action, economy and culture, and between materiality and identity (Haesbaert 2004).

Interactions found in territories can be of exchange and complementarities between rural and urban areas or be composed of multidimensional aspects reaching beyond the agricultural sector alone, i.e., cultural relationships, sense of belonging, of knowledge, of forming part of nature, and also income generation. In food system transformations, one expects that the territorial actors themselves are the ones who have agency to decide what to produce, how to produce, distribute, process, and consume food, thus effectively participating in governing those food systems.

Short supply chains allow for more opportunities to emphasize these multidimensional aspects of food systems, since they represent food systems in a given and localized spatial scale, generally also offering other meanings for food and valuing alternative ways of marketing and consuming food. Throughout these exchanges, urban and rural areas are more strongly connected, not only through trade chains, but by offering producers and consumers the possibility of upholding cultural, ecological, and political values to food.

Against this background, the project 'Collective Action on Real Food: drawing lessons from the pandemic'—ACCV (*Ação Coletiva Comida de Verdade: aprendizados em tempos de pandemia*), was formed in 2020–2021 to analyze food supply initiatives led by organizations, networks and civil society movements that were formed and/or expanded in response to the pandemic in Brazil. The project had a special interest in identifying if these mushrooming alternative initiatives could indicate foundational elements for a new (and possible) food supply reality in the country.

Methods

The exploratory study combined two distinctive qualitative and quantitative data collection methods.

First, with the objective of identifying and understanding how civil society organizations and social movements organized food supply initiatives during the COVID-19 pandemic, a semi-structured online form was launched. Information collected through this form included initiatives' main characteristics, administrative structures, institutional arrangements and support, actors involved, food circulated, target populations, among others. This online form was widely disseminated with an active team present in the five macro-regions of Brazil. Data was collected from late July to late October 2020, and 267 initiatives were registered in the platform. Data was later systematized and analyzed with the support of Statistical Package for the Social Science (SPSS).

Second, five thematic webinars with a dialogue format were organized to foster group discussions and reflections about the main transformations observed in Brazilian food systems during the pandemic. These included hundreds of participants: academics, public officials, farmers, consumers, social movement, and civil society organizations active in food systems. Different guiding questions were proposed by the ACCV coordination committee, and all dialogues were recorded, transcribed and consequently systematized.

Results and Discussion

Food Supply Strategies

Initiatives were categorized in four main groups, according to different food supply strategies pursued by actors: (i) alternative market chains (157 initiatives), (ii) direct support to vulnerable populations (83 initiatives), (iii) public policies (20 initiatives), (iv) subsistence (7 initiatives).

The high number of initiatives found focusing on alternative market chains (i) for the public (examples include farmer's market, produce deliveries, Community-Supported Agriculture and similar schemes, specialized small retails, etc.) suggests that in the first month of the pandemic new marketing opportunities emerged and were successfully captured by food system actors that did not 'occupy those spaces' before. The urgency and the emergency of the pandemic brought new opportunities for these food system actors, allowing them to better organize, learn new approaches for contacting communities, improve their digital inclusion, and address administrative and other organizational challenges. For example, many family farmers started to sell food through digital markets with home delivery, in many cases having a greater demand than the markets where they previously commercialized their products. Despite some positive effects on sales and income, entering digital markets poses a series of challenges, especially considering the extensive inequalities in Brazil in terms of access to technologies and different levels of digital literacy. Becoming efficient in these new trading channels can be very work intensive and requires an extensive experience building process. In other cases, there was no change in trading channels, as many street farmers markets kept on working during the outbreak. In those cases, farmers had to show strong organizational skills to implement the set of security measures put in place, such as: bigger distance between stands, stronger hygiene measures, supply of cleaning and sanitizing materials, usage of masks and communication on how to prevent contamination and infection. It is important to stress that these initiatives involved much more than consumer-buyer relationships: in most situations, they led to the strengthening of personal linkages and relationships, stronger solidarity among actors, and other aspects characterizing supply chains marked by short circuits and geographical proximity. In these initiatives, there is a constant struggle for governing territories and controlling production and distribution channels, thus re-territorializing food systems.

The research also suggests that the successes in digital inclusion, even though promising, are still incipient and challenging in the long run. Access and use of digital technologies by small farmers are still highly unequal. In Latin America and the Caribbean, only 37% of the rural population have access to a stable internet connection, and only 17% or less have specific digital abilities (CEPAL et al. 2021).

The second category refers to initiatives that support socially vulnerable groups by delivering food aid (ii), while also opening or strengthening solidarity networks and dialogues between actors that share social marginalization. Political reflection exercises and the development of new alliances between rural and urban communities also formed part of this group. Different initiatives of farmers cooperatives have made food donation to low-income families living in slum areas or indigenous communities that could not provide themselves with their own production. Also, different urban movements, such as the homeless workers movement (MTST), have established communitarian kitchens to cook food provided by farmers organizations and civil society, and distribute lunchboxes for homeless and workless population.

Only 20 initiatives (7%) identified in this research were linked with food supply policies (iii) promoted by the State, mostly through the National School Feeding Programme (*Programa Nacional de Alimentação Escolar—PNAE*) and

the Food Acquisition Programme (*Programa de Aquisição de Alimentos—PAA*). Nevertheless, a more in-depth investigation of the composition of organizations that promoted these initiatives reveals that 40% of those declared supporting institutional purchasing programmes such as those mentioned above. Public food procurement with institutional structures and legislation that supports the participation of family farming in local, diversified, nutritious, healthy and culturally appropriated food supply systems fulfil a double role (Swensson et al. 2021). In one hand, such policies foster economic inclusion, while on the other hand, they can promote critical awareness and political consciousness in food production practices and choices, thus impacting in environmental, economic, social, and cultural patterns of food production.

Thus, while some initiatives may have emerged outside the scope and reach of this study, data confirms the striking slowness of public authorities in responding to the deteriorating living conditions due to the pandemic, also exacerbated by political setbacks in food security policies in the country. Many food security and nutrition policies have been progressively weakened by budgetary cuts and eroding institutional support, and even the extinction of governance bodies for social participation and monitoring—the CONSEA's extinction being the most emblematic one. As one example, PAA has suffered a dramatic budgetary cut from R$ 1.2 billion in 2011 to R$ 253 million in 2018 (IPEA 2019). After much pressure from social movements amid the dramatic crisis caused by the pandemic, this was slightly attenuated in 2020 with an increase to R$ 500 million, still far from meeting the needs of rural populations (Campos and Goldfard, 2021).

The remaining 3% (7 initiatives) identified in the scope of this study were composed of subsistence strategies (iv) self-mobilized by communities, for example, urban community gardens. Even though this represents a relatively small number of initiatives, different studies have been pointing to the relevant of these food supply dynamics for improving diet quality, especially among low-income urban populations (Carneiro et al. 2016; Filippini et al. 2018; Pulighe and Lupia 2020).

Territorial Coverage, Organizational Capacity, and Changes in Food Demand

The initiatives mapped in this study suggest important discussion elements in terms of their territorial scale, organizational capacity, and food consumption changes. 49% of the initiatives declared that they reach regions beyond one single municipality. Equally important is the number of food supply strategies executed in very short circuits, as 45% of the initiatives declared supplying food that is produced and consumed in the same locality. This data is convergent with Tittonell et al. (2021), which analyzed the reactions of family farming in Latin America in the first three months of the pandemic. The authors stressed the highly adaptive organizational capacity of the family farming sector in different countries of the region, a strong indicator of resilience. It is important to note that the vast majority of rural populations in the region are family farmers where agricultural production is, still, their main source of income. Equally relevant are high poverty and food insecurity numbers still concentrated in this group of the population. These numbers are partially explained by the decades of low interest of public authorities in rural areas, represented by a highly unequal supply of public services in these localities vis-à-vis more affluent urban areas, thus leading to precarious living conditions in the rural world and associated massive rural–urban migration. As proposed by Caron et al. (2020), the promotion of regional food systems must consider the revitalization of rural areas, as an essential component for changing food production and consumption patterns and mitigation of environmental changes.

Most of the initiatives (70.4%) declares that the pandemic has brought increases in food demand. Data indicates that 96.6% of the food distributed through these initiatives are 'in natura', with a large majority being exclusively (63.7%) or partially (25.5%) organic/agroecological. These numbers reinforce the relevance of locally produced food, marked by quality-driven demand, alternative production and distribution practices, close proximity between urban and rural producers and eaters, and healthy diets (CEPAL et al. 2021). The results also support the growing evidence that food environments should facilitate individual choices, thus making healthy diets more accessible and affordable, and generating positive impacts on food and nutrition security, as well as on family farming units and local development (Grisa et al. 2018).

Concluding Remarks

To respond to the rising numbers of hunger in Brazil during the pandemic is urgent and imperative. Different alternatives in food supply have been emerging in response to this adverse context, but more attention is needed to their mid- and long-term effects. Emergency actions should be followed by their consolidation and strengthening, with the aim of catalyzing transformative change towards more sustainable and territorialized food systems. While the initiatives identified and analyzed in this study demonstrate great potential in this regard, additional reflections and social dialogues are needed to keep their momentum and promote their further development. It will not be an easy task, considering the extremely adverse and disputed social struggle for control over food supply dynamics and the continued

growth of hegemonic corporate-led food systems nationally and internationally.

One promising strategy is to increase the visibility of these initiatives, supporting their political capacity in confronting and disputing narratives and imaginaries of development. While these initiatives routinely build new practices in food supply with practical results, their voices and faces still face structural challenges in being heard and seen.

Indeed, political invisibility can take many forms, and without supportive policies and genuine openness to diversity, invisibility reproduces itself in political dialogues, as demonstrated in UN Food Systems Summit debates. Policy processes under the frame of this Summit have not been able to—or might not even have tried to—break the mechanisms that make invisible initiatives such as those described in this study. In the case of Brazil, even though some non-hegemonic narratives and positions did find ways of being reproduced in specific Independent Food System Dialogues,[1] the format chosen by the current government for the National Food System Dialogues reproduced a cynical practice of inviting participation without any supportive mechanism to address meaningful inclusion, transparency, and accountability.

Little is known about how—or if—critical contributions submitted in the 'consultation' process led by the Brazilian diplomacy were effectively considered for the building of the country's official position, i.e., its National Food System Pathway. This cynical denial and the broken participatory process is yet another reproduction of invisibility. And it can be explained partly by the clear political orientation of the current administration in supporting corporate-led food systems, and partly by the recent dismantling of the governance structures that supported participatory-policy making in food and nutrition policies.

The importance and relevance of the family farming sector, traditional and indigenous peoples, agroecological practices, and alternative food supply dynamics made a practically invisible appearance in Brazil's official documentation for the UNFSS, which gave clear emphasis on supporting a 'tech-led, trade-boosted, industrial and corporate-based food system', and focused on large-scale yet low quality food production. Even worse, Brazilian representatives insisted on a shameful narrative of promoting these food systems as 'examples of sustainability', while the international community has few if any reasons to believe in such fraudulent statements, considering these food systems' records on environmental and social performance.

Paradoxically, despite its political invisibility, the pandemic has generated better opportunities in increasing the recognition of the public of the relevance of the family farming and associated sectors to national food supply. It has also offered more possibilities to these initiatives to express their differences in contrast with hegemonic agribusinesses, strengthening linkages between food movements and populations in social vulnerability shaped by solidarity between equals.

As food supply is a key component of food systems to consider when promoting more equitable and sustainable food systems, it is regrettable that dominant systems are still those appropriated by the private sector without meaningful public regulation. Absence of public and inclusive governance in regulating hegemonic and globalized food systems generates negative social, environmental, and health consequences that are not accounted for in food prices and values, costs which are ultimately and increasingly externalized to the society.

Declarations

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