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TERRITORIAL DEVELOPMENT, COVID-19 AND THE NEW STRATEGIES OF PRODUCTION, COMMERCIALIZATION AND FOOD CONSUMPTION OF FAMILY FARMING IN THE SOUTHERN REGION OF RIO GRANDE DO SUL

DESENVOLVIMENTO TERRITORIAL, COVID-19 E AS NOVAS ESTRATÉGIAS DE PRODUÇÃO, COMERCIALIZAÇÃO E CONSUMO DE ALIMENTOS DA AGRICULTURA FAMILIAR NA REGIÃO SUL DO RIO GRANDE DO SUL

Abel Cassol¹
Leticia Paludo Vargas²
Mario Duarte Canever³

Abstract

The article presents the main changes generated by the Covid-19 pandemic in family farming in the southern region of RS. The objective is to analyse how family farmers have been affected and have responded to the health, economic and food crises resulting from the changes brought about by the new coronavirus. The argument defended is that the effects generated by the pandemic may open opportunity for the resumption of territories as the main dimension for rural development processes. Data collection was based on 21 semi-structured interviews with actors linked to family farming. Despite the difficulties imposed on health, production, marketing and consumption of food, the data show a leading role of local actors and organizations in facing the pandemic. In particular, shows how these actors are building a set of practices and processes that have contributed to the cohesion of the social ties, in maintaining the economic dynamism of the territory and, mainly, in the access to food and nutritional security for its inhabitants. However, for these actions effectively be institutionalized in the long term, they need to be connected to a new territorial development agenda that intersects the sustainability debate with local food systems, as presented in this work.

Keywords: Territorial development. Family farming. Covid-19. Food.

¹ PhD in Sociology (UFRGS). Professor at the Federal University of Pelotas (UFPEL), Pelotas, RS - Brazil. E-mail: abelcassol@hotmail.com

² PhD in Rural Extension (UFSM). Professor at the University of Contestado (UnC). Canoinhas - SC, Brazil. E-mail: letipvargas@gmail.com

³ PhD in Administration (Wageningen University). Professor at the Federal University of Pelotas, Pelotas - RS, Brazil. E-mail: caneverm@gmail.com

Resumo

O artigo apresenta as principais transformações geradas pela pandemia da Covid-19 na agricultura familiar na região sul do RS. O objetivo é analisar como os agricultores familiares têm sido afetados e têm respondido às crises sanitária, econômica e alimentar resultantes das transformações profundas e imediatas trazidas pelo novo coronavírus. O argumento defendido é o de que os efeitos gerados pela pandemia podem abrir a oportunidade de retomada dos territórios como principal dimensão para os processos de desenvolvimento rural. A coleta dos dados foi realizada a partir de 21 entrevistas semiestruturadas com atores vinculados à agricultura familiar. Apesar das dificuldades impostas à saúde, produção, comercialização e consumo de alimentos, os dados demonstram haver um protagonismo dos atores e organizações locais no enfrentamento da pandemia. Especialmente, verifica-se como esses atores, estão construindo um conjunto de práticas e processos que tem contribuído na coesão do tecido social, na manutenção do dinamismo econômico do território e, principalmente, na garantia do acesso aos alimentos e da segurança alimentar e nutricional dos seus habitantes. Contudo, para que essas ações perdurem no longo prazo e efetivamente sejam institucionalizadas é preciso que elas sejam conectadas a uma nova agenda de desenvolvimento territorial que interseccione o debate sobre sustentabilidade com os sistemas alimentares locais, conforme se apresenta nesse trabalho.

Palavras-chave: Desenvolvimento territorial. Agricultura familiar. Covid-19. Alimentação.

Introduction

Discussions on rural development in Brazil in the last two decades have experienced the emergence and weakening of the territorial dimension as an intermediate space between local and global for participation, deliberation and construction of public policies, especially those focused on family farming (GRISA; SCHNEIDER, 2015; BERDEGUÉ; FAVARETO, 2020).

From the end of the 1990s, and especially in the first decade of the 2000s, the capacity of the territories to promote the development of rural regions was consolidated among managers, representatives of public and private institutions, social movements and academia. The main finding at the time was that rural development, to be achieved – nodded by reducing the poverty of families – it needed an analytical and normative shift that would set aside sectorial policies and clippings and encompass integrated and intersectoral policies for which the territorial dimension would be the most appropriate (SCHNEIDER, 2004; FAVARETO, 2010a).

This process of territorial emergence of rural development was reflected both in the diversity of approaches that began to deal with the theme in the country, as well as in the construction of a plural set of public policies that had in the territories the center of deliberation and participation of local actors (ABRAMOVAY, 2003; SCHEJTMAN; BERDEGUÉ, 2003; SCHNEIDER, 2004; PIRAUX; CANIELLO, 2019).

However, recent years have experienced a cooling of territorial approaches and a disruption of these processes, especially in the regulatory field of public policies. The causes of this can be found in the change of political bias at the federal level; in the only discursive and rhetorical assimilation of the agents involved with the theme, which was not accompanied by an institutional change that broke with the predominantly sectorial bias of Brazilian public policies; of the difficulties in integrating the diversity of actors (indigenous, quilombola, young people and women) in deliberative councils; of the only consultative character given to the demands of local organizations and actors, without them having effective decision-making power; finally, a governance structure that was not able to engender the planning of consistent actions in the medium and long term that went beyond the promotion of traditional (and sectorial) activities of the territories (FAVARETO, 2010a; 2010b; PIRAUX; CANIELLO, 2019).

However, the emergence of the pandemic of the new coronavirus seems to have put the territory back at the center of the debate on rural development. It is common knowledge that the harmful potential of Covid-19 stems not only from its sanitary dimension, but also from the effects generated in the economic sphere and in the distribution and access to food (CEPAL, 2020). These reflexes, which have generally affected the Brazilian population as a whole, assume specific characteristics in relation to family farmers, the main food producers in the country (FAO, 2020).

If the new interaction dynamics based on social distancing as a way to prevent the spread of the virus have generated significant restrictions on access to numerous marketing channels – closing or suspending family farming fairs; suspension of classes and purchases via the National School Feeding Program (PNAE) – on the other hand brought to the fore the importance of local and regional networks of food production, marketing and consumption to maintain food and nutritional security of urban populations. This importance has been reflected in new food supply dynamics carried out by family farming.

In this sense, the focus of this article is to analyze how family farmers in the Southern Region of Rio Grande do Sul have been affected and have responded to the sanitary, economic and food crises resulting from the profound and immediate transformations brought by Covid-19. In particular, it is intended to demonstrate how local actors linked to family agriculture have developed new productive, commercial and consumer dynamics that reinforce the role of territories for development processes.

The article is divided into six sections from the introduction. In section two we analyze the definitions of rural territorial development and their main approaches. We highlight the need for a new agenda to cope with the effects of COVID-19. Section three presents the project and the research methodology used in the collection of empirical data. Section four discusses the main results found so far. The fifth section is reserved for discussion on the role of the State and the need to build new public food policies that strengthen the ongoing preliminary initiatives. Finally, the sixth section is reserved for some final considerations.

Territorial development, family farming and food

The emergence of the territory dimension as a space for recognizing the diversity of social and economic actors and, therefore, as an indispensable scale for the effective development of societies, goes back to the contradictions generated by the globalization process. Accentuated since the 1990s, this process is characterized by the increasing interdependence of social and economic relations at international scales, with the restructuring of the capitalist economy, through industrial decentralization, the increase in the speed of communication in space-time and the integration of capital at the transnational level (CASTELLS, 1999).

Paradoxically, this growth of the interdependence of social and economic relations at the international level exposed the inefficiency of centralized models of development, carried out by Nation States and international organizations, making room for local and regional initiatives. This restructuring of development models is also a tax on the emergence of civil society and non-governmental organizations that are consolidated at the same time as globalization advances (MARSDEN, 1992).

In the "rural world", territories emerge as a consequence, among others, of the increasingly strong criticism of the dominant technical standards in agriculture incorporated by transnational agri-food chains, through an expressive set of new and diverse alternative processes⁴. At the same time, the role of civil society is expanded and the centrality of the public power and its institutions in rural areas is diluted, as well as environmental issues are no longer residual aspects and become central to the debate on rural development. Even as a comparative economic advantage in the dispute for public resources (SCHNEIDER, 2004).

These processes culminated in a diversity of definitions and approaches on Rural Territorial Development (RTD), which, although divergent in some relevant respects, share at least five common elements⁵: a) territories are socially constructed spaces that include actors, structures and institutions. That is, they are not limited to geographical and/or physical-biological regions; b) rural economies are sector-diverse, including primary activities other than agriculture, such as services, manufacturing and small industries; c) rural spaces need to be analyzed from their relations with the urban, because there is an interdependence between both; d) RTD strategies and policies must

⁴ One of the most visible dimensions of this criticism is the numerous initiatives to restructure local food systems that arise within the framework of the process known as quality turn. For a good review of their different approaches consult Blay-Palmer et al. (2018).

⁵ Due to its origin in the field of geography, depending on the approach the term territory is used either as a theoretical and heuristic concept, or as an empirical and normative reference unit (SCHNEIDER, 2004). In the field of public policies, there is an attempt to synthesize these divergences through the use of the territory as a tool to think about the planning, intervention and development of communities on some scale (local, regional, intercity, etc.). Specifically for the case of RTD, some of these approaches can be consulted in Pérez (2001), Schejtman and Berdegué (2003), Perafán and Schneider (2020).

be carried out "from below", incorporating and giving decision-making power to local actors, even though relations with national policies are relevant to the long-term success of the RTD; e) RTD policies need to build a "collective territorial actor", that is, a coordination of actions that cover the individual and sectorial interests of rural spaces in a collective perspective (BERDEGUÉ; FAVARETO, 2020).

From these points of convergence, territories can be briefly defined as spaces of interaction between human societies and ecosystems through coordination between different forms of social organizations, economic actors and political institutions that have their own history related to their place (ABRAMOVAY, 2003). In the case of rural areas, this definition implies the assumption of the rural as a multifunctional, intersectoral and pluriactive area. Thus, the RTD is undoubtedly linked to discussions on family farming and its role for rural development (FAVARETO, 2020).

This broad and diversified view of the development processes guided by its territorial dimension was responsible for the implementation of a set of public policies for rural development in different Latin American countries that had as main result the strengthening of family farming. More over the way, these initiatives were responsible for the economic development and productive transformation of rural areas with lower comparative advantages compared to international markets, contributing to the poverty reduction of these regions. Finally, the RTD initiatives, in some cases, were able to build new institutional arrangements more democratic, transparent and participatory, giving voice to local social actors (BERDEGUÉ; FAVARETO, 2020).

In the Brazilian case, as attested by Delgado and Leite (2015), the fundamental aspect of the adoption of rural territorial development policies was linked to an attempt to consolidate democracy in rural regions through a new political culture, which had as its bias to generate greater autonomy to family farmers, settlers of agrarian reform and traditional populations.

Despite these positive points, the RTD initiatives were not able to achieve what was expected of them. Among the five main limitations identified for the consolidation of territorial approaches, the failures of coordination between the various actors (public, private, non-governmental), between the different levels of government (federal, state, municipal) and the different activities (agricultural and non-agricultural); as well as the limited power given to local actors in decision-making (preventing the rupture of the sectorial bias of agricultural policies), they are those that best explain the weakening of the territorial approach in recent years, especially in the normative field of public policies (BERDEGUÉ; FAVARETO, 2020)⁶.

Despite the fragility of the territories and territorial policies resulting from such limitations, the advent of the pandemic of the new coronavirus has put the regional/local dimension back at the center of the debate, especially in the discussion on food production and supply. However, this resumption takes place with low presence of the State and with the leading role of civil society and its organizations (FAO, 2020).

It is the territories and local actors that a number of initiatives – such as organizing food basket deliveries for the vulnerable; food deliveries at home; shopping via social networks, applications and digital platforms – which has been successful in softening the negative impacts of Covid-19 (PREISS et al., 2020).

In the case studied, these local responses have been developed by family farmers in the Southern Region of RS, who, in addition to the pandemic, have faced one of the most severe droughts in recent years, directly impacting their productive dynamics. These initiatives have generated new dynamics of commercialization and consumption, which have privileged the territorial dimension and open space for the readjustment of territories under a new agenda that integrates the search for Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) and local food systems.

The effects of the pandemic on family farming and a new agenda for Rural Territorial Development

Recent studies indicate that 55% of the Brazilian population has observed loss of income in the family in recent months due to the achievements of the pandemic (UNICEF, 2020). In family farming, in July/20, 51% of farmers said they had lost revenue, with an average drop of 35% in gross monthly household income. In Rio Grande do Sul the loss was 43% (DEL GROSSI, 2020).

⁶ In the Brazilian case, this weakening is part of a broader set of dismantling of public policies aimed at family farming, which has been occurring since 2014 and which was accentuated since 2016 with the economic and political crises still present (PIRAUX; CANIELLO, 2019).

This fall is related to the effects generated in three interconnected dimensions of family farming: a) difficulties in maintaining the productive and commercial dynamics; b) impacts on production volumes; c) effects on the prices received and, mainly, on the income of family farmers in recent months (IICA, 2020).

The productive and commercial effects arise from the difficulties of transport and distribution of production generated by the pandemic and which has affected the trade in family farming. The lack of access to financial resources and difficulties in hiring labor has also impacted the volume produced. Finally, studies report an increase in the price of agricultural inputs and a decrease in the amounts paid to farmers, especially those inserted in long chains (FAO, 2020; IICA, 2020; BID, 2020).

This scenario of uncertainties and difficulties has been faced mainly through local initiatives of organization and governance. In particular, ensuring the food and nutritional security of the population has obtained better results as territorial enterprises and supply networks linked to family farming are stimulated and supported (PREISS et. al, 2020; PREISS, 2020; FRANCE URBAINE, 2020; FAO, 2020).

In this sense, the pandemic can open the opportunity for a new agenda to the RTD. This new agenda, despite being under construction at the moment, involves the interconnection between three fundamental processes: the territorial dimension of rural development, the Sustainable Development Goals and the new food systems (BERDEGUÉ; FAVARETO, 2020; PERAFÁN; SCHNEIDER, 2020).

This interconnection is based on the finding that the principles of the territorial perspective for rural development are not disputed, but rather their forms of operationalization and instrumentation (PERAFÁN; SCHNEIDER, 2020). In this sense, an effective way to operationalize the RTD is to link it to agenda 2030 and its SDGs. According to Saraiva-Matus and Aguirre (2019) rural spaces are essential to achieve these objectives. These authors state that of the 17 objectives and their 169 goals, around 132 of these (78%) could only be achieved through the actors and organizations present in the rural areas⁷.

Thus, rural territories could serve as spaces for the implementation of policies and development processes acting as a scale of operationalization of the SDGs. This "use" of the territories would help solve the problems of dialogue between the various SDGs – what Nilsson and Constanza (2015) called the "silo approach" – facilitating a better synergy and coordination between sectorial and territorial policies, which would be positive both for consolidating territorial approaches and for achieving the SDGs in the medium and long term.

Another point of interconnection that can strengthen the territories is the fact that in the multidimensional and multisectoral view of development associated with the territorial approach, the regional/local dimension of rural development is a key part to articulate the social and productive diversity linked to the category of family farming. As Perafán and Schneider (2020) attest, a good way to do this may be to incorporate into the debate on territorial development what has been discussed in the context of "food studies". These studies bring the field and city together and see the multi-functionality and multi-sectorality of the rural as necessary conditions for rural development, especially for the family farming group, responsible for the production of much of the food consumed in the country.

According to the authors, there are four components that point to this integration between RTD and sustainable food systems (with family farming as a key actor): a) the need for healthier and more sustainable patterns of food production and consumption; b) ecologically sustainable production models; c) mitigation of the effects of climate change; and d) recognition of rural areas in current development dynamics (PERAFÁN; SCHNEIDER, 2020).

Therefore, it is perceived the relevance of the RTD for the consolidation of sustainable processes of production, marketing and consumption of food that are managed and governed by the local actors themselves. The territories are a privileged space of political action and intervention that can greatly contribute to the challenges to contemporary development, notably those imposed with the Covid-19 pandemic, as we will see below.

⁷ The eradication of poverty (SDGs 01), the reduction of hunger (SDGs 02), gender equality (SDGs 05), sustainable management and efficient use of natural resources (SDGs 12) and its goals, among others, are highlighted as some of the SDGs that would only be achieved through the contribution of the rural and, especially, family farming (BERDEGUÉ; FAVARETO, 2020).

Methodology

The data presented here are part of the extension project *Observatory of The Problem of Drought and Covid-19 in Family Agriculture of the Southern Region of Rio Grande do Sul*. With the advent of the Covid-19 pandemic in the country and the suspension of teaching activities at the beginning of March/20, some of the professors linked to the Department of Agrarian Social Sciences of the Faculty of Agronomy Eliseu Maciel, at the Federal University of Pelotas (DCSA/FAEM/UFPel) decided to create the project⁸.

Its main objective is to evaluate and understand how the sudden transformations generated by the pandemic have affected the productive, commercial and consumption dynamics of family farmers and urban inhabitants of the delimited region. These transformations were accompanied by a historical period of drought that affected the entire territory of RS, aggravating the effects generated in regional agriculture.

The project started in the second week of April and remains active to date. Due to social distancing, the activities developed are carried out through weekly virtual meetings. In these meetings, the themes that will be addressed in the week, which actors will be interviewed and which data collection tools are defined.

The research method used is qualitative. Primary data are collected through semi-structured interviews with open questions. For this, applications of instant messaging and voice calls were used, with the possibility of recording and transcription of audios, for further analysis of the data. Only the interviews conducted with the producers and consumers of the agro ecological fairs were done in person.

So far 21 interviews have been conducted⁹ with family farmers, rural extensionists, social movements, secretaries of agriculture and mayors of various municipalities, consumers and other actors involved with family farming in the Southern Region of Rio Grande do Sul¹⁰. The topics addressed refer to six structuring analytical axes of the project: health, production, marketing, consumption, articulations and public policies and future perspectives. For each of these axes, we seek to understand how the events of the health crisis and drought imposed the need for new articulations, mobilizations and actions to social actors linked to the family agriculture sector of the region and the perspectives they project from this scenario.

Finally, it is important to record that part of these data and analyses were disclosed through fortnightly reports produced by the project¹¹. These reports, which are not scientific in nature, aim to allow family farmers in the region to disseminate their new marketing channels; public managers in municipalities have access to what the cities in the territory are doing to alleviate the pandemic and drought; as well as inform local actors the set of territorial and national public policies that are being implemented and that can be accessed by them.

The results obtained so far demonstrate important transformations generated in the dynamics of production, commercialization, consumption and collective articulations of territorial actors that have mitigated the effects of the pandemic in the region¹². These are the results analyzed below.

The effects of Covid-19 on family farming in the southern region of RS:

The analysis performed below is longitudinal, going through the main transformations found during the months of April to August 2020. The objective of this choice stems from the speed of transformation of the social reality imposed by the pandemic. At each consultation with the actors surveyed, it was possible to perceive new concerns and actions that were not present previously. Likewise, other perceptions and actions ceased to exist to the extent that these dynamics were being modified.

⁸ At the moment, the project also has the participation of graduate students and researchers from rural extension entities in the region.

⁹ This number of interviewees refers to the period from 10/04/20 to 09/07/20.

¹⁰ The municipalities surveyed so far were: Arroio do Padre, Canguçu, Capão do Leão, Cerrito, Cristal, Morro Redondo, Pedro Osório, Pelotas, Rio Grande, São José do Norte, São Lourenço do Sul and Turuçu.

¹¹ To date, 09 reports have been produced, which have been published on digital media and on the Observatory's website. For more information: <https://wp.ufpel.edu.br/dcsa/observatorio-do-dcsa/informes/>

¹² It is emphasized that the effects caused by drought, which are before the pandemic and were added to it, will be analyzed in a secondary way in this article, appearing when considered relevant.

Moreover, it is important to highlight that at the federal level some policies to cope with the pandemic for the family farming sector were created, but that they will not be analyzed in detail¹³. Our focus is limited to the transformations that have occurred in the dimensions of health, production, commercialization and consumption and to the main local initiatives and actions built by the actors linked to family farming in the territory of the Southern Region of RS.

Health and family farming in times of pandemic

The results obtained with the research show that health concerns have been growing over the months among the family farmers surveyed. In the first interventions carried out in April, the Covid-19 pandemic was seen as almost unimpressive, far from the rural and inland areas of the territory.

However, in recent months (June-July-August), these concerns have grown and the pandemic has become a constant health concern. This change coincides with the spread of the virus in the country and the increase in cases in the region of Pelotas, the largest city in the territory surveyed. In the words of one of the farmers interviewed,

(...) the coronavirus, at first, there was the disease more in the big cities. And now it starts to generate greater concerns because it takes the municipalities in which we have our settlement areas. As much as we are in a slightly more privileged territory, but you need to move and go to the city and run the risk of you being contaminated also by this issue of coronavirus. (Farmer, member of the MST. Interview held on 08/06/20).

It is also recorded that the family farmers surveyed, mostly, are of advanced age, being part of the risk group of the disease. This factor has increased the attention of families, influencing some dynamics, such as the decrease in the presence of elderly farmers in fairs.

In addition, the problems generated by the drought that hit the region during the months of November 2019 to May 2020, implied a decrease in the production of some crops and effects on ensuring the food and nutritional security of the family farmers surveyed.

In general, information on the care to be adopted as a result of the pandemic is being transmitted to farmers through local rural outreach agencies, traditional media (radio, TV and newspapers) and social networks.

Finally, some initiatives and actions have been developed by the actors of the territory to mitigate the health effects generated by the pandemic. We highlight the creation of health protocols in municipal fairs (availability of alcohol in gel; distance between stalls; use of masks; hygiene of products; etc.) and the construction of solidarity networks for donation of food from family agriculture and hygiene and cleaning products to vulnerable populations in the region. These networks have been articulated by the Forum on Sovereignty and Food Security and Fight against Hunger of Pelotas, together with the Movement of Landless Rural Workers (MST) Quilombo of Cotton and regional cooperatives, the Tranca Rua Collective and the Regional Palliative Care Center of the Federal University of Pelotas (CuidATIVA/UFPel).

The effects of the pandemic on food production in the region

Although not the focus of this study, drought was the main responsible for affecting the production of family farming, at least until early June when the rains returned to fall regularly in the region. In April and May there were reports of lack of water, whether for animal or human consumption, in several rural locations. This directly impacted the production of major regional crops. Data from EMATER/RS estimate that bean and corn production had a loss of 60% and 69,1%, respectively. Soybean and tobacco crops and milk production showed a decrease in productivity of around 50,7%, 29% and 10%, respectively.

Likewise, the lack of rainfall impacted on the loss of seed production of local varieties, which are widely used among the traditional populations of the territory, such as black (quilombolas) and indigenous peoples. Such effects will be strongly felt in future harvests.

¹³ Resolution 02/2020 of the Ministry of Education (MEC) that authorized the allocation of food purchased through the PNAE to the families of the students is noteworthy. Provisional Measure No. 957 that released R\$ 500 million to the Food Acquisition Program (PAA) for family farming purchases. The offer of credit in the order of R\$ 65 million for cooperatives to invest and the extension of the financing period of the National Program for Strengthening Family Farming (PRONAF) and the National Program for Support to The Middle Rural Producer (PRONAMP).

In relation to Covid-19, the main impact caused in the production dimension refers to the difficulties in maintaining technical assistance and rural extension services, which until June had to be carried out remotely. As a result, family farmers report problems planning the next harvests, since many could not keep in touch with extensionists due to the lack of internet access.

Interview with agronomist of regional EMATER reveals the changes in relation to working methods in rural extension,

Emater-RS is (...) in the form of telework, basically via WhatsApp, due to the need to maintain social isolation. Cards, folders and electronic leaflets with guidelines were elaborated: what is Covid-19, how it propagates, how we are infected, ways to protect ourselves and hygiene, procedures at fairs, etc (...). (Agronomist, EMATER extensionist. Interview held on 04/15/20).

It is verified that family farmers more dependent on foreign markets, such as grain (corn, soybean) and animal production producers (beef cattle and milk, tobacco) felt more the impacts of Covid-19 and, especially, drought. The fact that they are focused on non-territorial, more volatile markets also contributes to this.

This evidence appears in the speech of a representative of the rural union of the municipality of Canguçu, who argues that:

The shorter commercial chains were favored (e.g. onion and beans). And chains that depend on the acquisition of industry, such as disadvantaged tobacco. (...). Tobacco is being marketed more slowly, only by some companies. On the other hand, food products, such as beans, the sale [is] restricted to neighbors, without marketing out due to COVID-19. (STR representative and farmer. Interview held on 14/04/20).

Finally, there is an expectation of future effects on access to the input and rural credit. The former may have its prices high due to the high dollar, while rural credit should be limited in the face of the fall of the national economy projected for the coming months.

To address these effects, some local actions have been developed. We highlight the opening of dams and artesian wells, carried out by several municipalities in the region, to ensure access to water to animals and the rural population. Also, the partnership between the State Bank of RS (Banrisul) and the Center for Support and Promotion of Agroecology (CAPA-Pelotas), which distributed seed kits to quilombola farmers and those linked to various cooperatives in the region.

Social networks, digital platforms and new food marketing dynamics

The transformations in food marketing dynamics are the most visible point of the effects generated by the pandemic. Immediately after the arrival of the new coronavirus in the country, markets and local supply fairs were suspended or had their operation reduced, directly impacting on the commercialization of family farming products. Added to this is the ban on restaurants, canteens, bakeries and other food establishments that traditionally buy their products from local agriculture. Another difficulty following the onset of the pandemic was the suspension of the class calendar at all levels of education, interrupting the implementation of the PNAE and the PAA, two important markets accessed by family farmers.

These bursts in traditional marketing mechanisms resulted in an estimated 50% drop in family sales in the territory. Some producers reported significant economic losses, as they invested in new products and packaging for delivery to the PNAE that were canceled, since classes practically did not start. Purchases made by the University Restaurant of UFPel, via PAA, were also impaired by the pandemic, generating effects on farmers' incomes.

Over time, even with the resumption of local markets, especially farmers markets, but also the return of the operation of restaurants, bakeries and bars, the number of consumers remains below normal. In fact, this is a feature found throughout the country. Health concerns and fears of being contaminated by the new coronavirus have diminished face-to-face food purchases in local markets.

Similarly, despite the publication of MEC Resolution 02/2020 exceptionally authorizing the distribution of foodstuffs purchased via PNAE to the families of students, many States and Municipalities have chosen to create "lunch assist" by allocating cash to schoolchildren, or buying

large wholesale foods¹⁴. This is the case of the Government of Rio Grande do Sul, which allocated about R\$ 23 million of the program for the purchase of low nutritional quality food from a wholesale plant. Thus, the purchases of family farming continue to stop or derisory, contributing to the loss of revenue among the sector.

A positive example in the region is the action of UFPEL, which together with EMATER/RS, kept the purchase of food from family farming even with the university restaurants closed. Food kits purchased from family farming were created and distributed to low-income scholarship students.

Another interesting point is that the limitations in the traditional food trade have had a positive effect: the growth of the supply of products via digital platforms and information technology (especially Facebook and WhatsApp) with direct deliveries in consumers' homes. Several cooperatives and producers in the region report that they have initiated or improved virtual food supply mechanisms. There are also reports of organic producers struggling to meet the demand for their products after they start offering deliveries of baskets at home.

This is the case of farmers linked to the Regional Association of Agro ecological Producers of the Southern Region (Arpa-Sul). According to one of the farmers interviewed, even though the fairs are not closed in the city of Pelotas,

The association is also marketing via home delivery. Orders placed directly by WhatsApp and distributed to the groups of members. Deliveries made on Saturday at the same time at the Dom Joaquim fair. This way of commercialization has been relevant in volume and commercialized value, leading to the debate on making it permanent in a later period. (...) [despite] a small fall in shopping at the fair (...) [there was] an increase in home deliveries. (Agro ecological farmer, member of Arpa-Sul. Interview held on 14/05/20).

Examples of local actions and initiatives are the creation of the Family Agriculture Virtual Fair¹⁵ and Emater/RS and which acts as a platform to connect producers to consumers. Each consumer enters their address and the platform provides the data of farmers in the region who make home deliveries. South Ecological Cooperative, which has organic producers, has created an order system via WhatsApp, establishing a partnership with 220 Bike Deliveries to deliver its products directly to customers. The family agroindustry Aura Verde Alimentos, together with the Cooperative of Agricultural Producers of Monte Bonito (Coopamb) the Agricultural Cooperative of Arroio do Padre (COOPAP) and the South Ecological Cooperative, created the Fair at Home¹⁶, that works by offering a "signature box" of baskets of family farming products. The consumer can choose to adhere to a weekly delivery plan, a single order or even increase their basket with other products.

Changes in consumption after the onset of the pandemic

In relation to eating habits, some transformations generated in the analyzed period are also visible, nodded by virtue of social distancing and restrictions imposed by the new coronavirus.

These transformations differ according to the income inferred by families. Middle-class consumers interviewed report an increase in the consumption of fresh products due to the pandemic, linked to two factors: longer time at home that allows the preparation (cooking) of food and greater concern for health. Similarly, there is a decrease in the frequency of purchases at local fairs in favor of the acquisition of food in small neighborhood markets (fruit and grocery stores) and an increase in the consumption of non-perishable products purchased in supermarkets. It is in this stratum that there is greater adherence to virtual purchases, both in family farming and other services.

One consumer interviewed, when asked about the changes in their consumption habits due to the pandemic, highlighted that

Yes [I've changed my habits]. Because we end up eating at home, we eat better... and knowing what you're eating. In terms of variety there was a loss... but on balance, we're eating healthier. (Consumer, public servant. Interview held on 04/29/20).

¹⁴ Lunch assist and food baskets: see how city halls and states are offsetting lack of food in schools. G1, 2020. Available in: <http://g1.globo.com/educacao/noticia/2020/04/13/auxilio-merenda-e-cestas-basicas-veja-como-prefeituras-e-estados-estao-compensando-ausencia-de-alimentacao-nas-escolas.ghtml>. Accessed: 13/04/20.

¹⁵ <https://bit.ly/2XtLndL>

¹⁶ <http://www.minhafeiraemcasa.com>

Similarly, another consumer interviewed reports that she adopted "home purchases, and I schedule myself not to go to the market so often. I go less often and buy in more quantity than I did before the pandemic" (Consumer, Dentist. Interview held on 04/29/20).

In the other words, among households with lower purchasing power, the data show an increase in the consumption of ultra-processed and non-perishable products, acquired mainly in large wholesale markets. These choices stem from the decrease in income in this stratum of the population, which has sought in large supermarkets the offer of promotions and low prices. Likewise, there are reports of a decrease in the frequency of farmers markets by this group. Finally, some of the interviewees state difficulties in maintaining the consumption of adequate amounts of food, especially beans and rice, but also fruits, vegetables, vegetables and meats.

As a consumer interviewed,

It decreases (access to food) by which the price has gone up. We're not finding any more products, like rice, beans, lentils... It looks like it's slowing down. I thought it went up a lot [the prices]. So I'm only going to buy once every week/15 days. I buy a lot. It's increased a lot, especially here on the way back... in the mini grocery store here of the back is all expensive. (Consumer, diarist. Interview held on 05/05/20).

Such findings are found in other studies on the subject. There is an overall increase in the consumption of fruits and vegetables in the pandemic. However, such growth is driven by the more affluent and educated classes. Among the poorest and least educated, there was an increase in the consumption of ultra-processed products (OPINION BOX, 2020; USP, 2020).

In relation to food prices, both strata claim to see an increase in the values of fresh products, even if they do not see risks of shortages caused by the pandemic. It is worth noting that among consumers who said they keep going to farmers markets there are no reports of increased food prices. Finally, the majority of consumers interviewed report a significant decrease in meals outside the home, suspending going to restaurants and bakeries, for example. Therefore, it is verified how the consumption of families has been transformed as a result of the effects generated by the pandemic.

The data presented above demonstrate the capacity of actors and organizations to face the crises generated by the Covid-19 pandemic at the territorial level. Despite the difficulties imposed on health, production, marketing and consumption of food, it is possible to verify that the actors linked to family farming in the southern region of RS, are articulated in ensuring the maintenance of food supply, access to markets and safeguarding food and nutritional security of the local population.

However, there are important inequalities among family farmers in coping with the pandemic. It is noticed that those who already accessed public policies and local markets and worked cooperatively have fared better than those with low collective organization and consequent difficulty in accessing local policies and markets.

Such inequalities could be mitigated if the federal government had guaranteed an emergency basic income to rural families. Passed in the house and senate, Bill of Law 735/20 was vetoed by the president of the republic, making it impossible for family farmers to access these resources¹⁷.

Finally, in the process of successfully achieving long-term territorial and collective actions in the region and effectively achieving rural development processes, new and better public policies need to be built. With expansion of state action based on family farming and local supply systems, these new food policies can contribute to a more diverse, redistributive and territorial economy (MORAGUES-FAUS et al., 2020).

The pandemic, the role of the State and the future: the need for new and better public food policies for the territories

The argument defended in this article is that the effects generated by the Covid-19 pandemic may open the opportunity to retake the territories as the main dimension for rural development processes. For this to happen, a new agenda integrating territories into the more general debate on sustainability (SDGs) and local food systems needs to be put into practice. In this way, new and

¹⁷ In an approximate calculation carried out by the Observatory project, we estimate at about R\$ 27 million the volume of monthly resources that stopped circulating in the territory with the negative access of farmers to emergency aid of R\$ 600,00.

better public food policies are necessary, either to reduce the effects of Covid-19, or to make local economies more resilient and with better capacity to respond to future crises.

First, investments in public food purchases, through institutional markets, need to be resumed and expanded (FAO, 2020; CEPAL, 2020). In addition, the creation of new food policies that stimulate the demand for family farming products in the territories can play a dual role in development: ensuring income for farmers and food security for vulnerable populations through access to food (GRISA; NIEDERLE, 2020).

Secondly, public food governance mechanisms need to be improved (FAO, 2020). Here municipalities can play a key role by creating and strengthening local food security councils as democratic spaces for discussing food policies. This is central to the positive actions built as responses to the pandemic to develop beyond emergency and charity and consolidate new food agendas (FAO, 2020).

In the case of the territory of the southern region of RS, the rescue of the protagonism of the Family Farming Forum that since 1996 has acted on the themes related to the sustainable development of the region from a territorial perspective would be of great relevance. In particular, keeping the Forum active in the survey of problems and demands, proposition of actions and referrals of the sector in times of pandemic can contribute to a more coordinated response of actions in the territory.

A third point is to go beyond sectorial policies for the rural, usually expressed through the supply of credit. Financial access must be tied to access to land, stimulating the creation of local markets (short chains) and the adoption of sustainable production systems (FAO, 2020).

Fourth, the government could act to encourage the formation of local associations and cooperatives of family farmers. As we verified in our research, farmers already inserted in cooperatives are able to better face the effects of the pandemic, as they have used collective management and governance relationships to articulate new production and marketing dynamics.

Finally, governments could help develop public and collaborative digital food delivery platforms. This would ensure the maintenance of new virtual purchasing dynamics, while limiting the power of large delivery networks that generally operate through precarious and predatory working relationships (GRISA; NIEDERLE, 2020).

The actions proposed above can contribute to the resumption of the role of the State in food policies, focusing on the territorial dimension of development from a new agenda. In the long term, these initiatives would consolidate more diverse and redistributive processes that have in family farming and food their main marking elements (MORAGUES-FAUS et al., 2020).

Final considerations

Preliminary data from the research show that there is a leading role of local actors and organizations in coping with the Covid-19 pandemic. This highlight opens the opportunity to retake the territories as central to the debate on policies on sustainable development. In particular, it is verified how the actors and organizations of the territory of the Southern Region of RS linked to family agriculture, are building a set of practices and processes that have contributed to the cohesion of the social fabric, in maintaining the economic dynamism of the territory and, mainly, in ensuring access to food and food and nutritional security of its inhabitants. These elements are fundamental in managing and overcoming the crises we are experiencing.

Thus, in order for these practices and processes to last in the long term and are effectively institutionalized in the territory – going beyond their current care character – they need to be more effectively connected to the debate on sustainable development and local food systems. The municipal sphere, through the construction of a new food agenda, becomes essential in this sense.

There are still two points on which it is necessary to move forward. The first refers to the resumption of a greater presence of the State, now practically absent, of development propositions, especially at the federal level. Given the serious effects generated by the pandemic, an integrated, clear and articulated management is necessary for the improvement of the processes of production, marketing and consumption of food, allow.

The second point refers to the theme of governance. There is a historical inability to articulate public policies among federal entities in the country, which were clearly exposed in the current context. This lack of governance in the field of public policies ends up generating inefficiencies such as waste of resources, difficulties in accessing existing policies and, mainly, inability to propose new agendas and policies. The picture completes the lack of democratic spaces

for deliberation, the difficulties of articulation between state actors and civil society and, in the case of family agriculture, the disruption of rural extension bodies.

One way to overcome these limitations lies in stimulating the construction of territorial food policies that are connected to the local processes and demands of the actors. As demonstrated throughout the article, territorial social tissues, despite all difficulties, have the capacity for collective organization at critical moments such as those we are living in. What is lacking is the public recognition of this capacity and the stimulus to its development.

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