

Commercial intermediaries, healthy shops and ICTs in the strengthening of agro-ecological fruit and vegetable marketing networks in the southeast of Buenos Aires (Argentina)

Agro-ecological Fruit and Vegetable Marketing Networks: Experiences and Challenges in Southeast Buenos Aires (Argentina)

Agro-ecological Fruit and Vegetable Marketing Networks: An Approach to the Study of Commercial Intermediaries, Healthy Stores and ICTs in Southeast Buenos Aires (Argentina)

The global agri-food system is characterized by the integration, concentration and massification of food processing, distribution and consumption, which are both standardized and differentiated, and this has been made possible by the proliferation of quality standards and protocols (Henson and Humphrey, 2010). This production model, which is dominant at the global level, has notable crisis characteristics, so its sustainability is at risk (Wilkinson, 2019). Problems include soil and water degradation and air pollution (Aparicio et al, 2018; Pengue, 2006), health problems related to inadequate nutrition, both through excess and deficiency of nutrients (Aguirre, 2017), other problems are specifically associated with food security (Saulais, Valceschini, 2017), exposure of workers and society (Avila-Vazquez et al., 2018) and the survival of rural communities, the creation of decent jobs, income and gender equality (Gorban et al., 2011).

Faced with these problems, short-circuits of food production, exchange and consumption emerge and develop, in which the characteristics of food, its processing and origin, as well as the relationships between producer - producer, producer - consumer and consumer - consumer are reconfigured, playing a key role (Goodman, Goodman, 2009; Marsden et al., 2000).

These processes coexist with the strengthening of agroecology and its transition processes, which among their principles propose from the reduction of the use of chemical inputs to the total replacement by local bio-inputs, a change in the values and modes of action of farmers and consumers, in their social, productive and natural resource relations (FAO, 2019). In this sense, the transition does not occur only in the productive establishment, but fundamentally at the community level, thus integrating the concept of local agro-ecologically based food systems (LBAS).

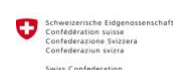
In the south-east of Buenos Aires, these alternative networks are beginning to form around agro-ecological fruit and vegetables and producer fairs that are evolving with the incorporation of intermediaries in marketing for the sale of bags through social networks and web pages and the role of healthy shops that form nodes for the valorisation of healthy food and the relationship with consumers.

The objective of this proposal is to analyse the short marketing-consumption circuits of agro-ecological fruit and vegetables in the city of Mar del Plata (Buenos Aires, Argentina), reflecting on their possibilities for sustainability and expansion.

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To this end, this research falls within the framework of the study of food systems, a concept that makes it possible to grasp the way in which "people organize themselves in space and time to obtain and consume their food" (Malassis, 1979).

The methodological strategy is based on the development of interviews and surveys, the application of qualitative and quantitative data analysis techniques and, in particular, the methodology of social network analysis.

The results show the emergence of a significant number of relatively recent agro-ecological fruit and vegetable producers, with different degrees of development and various marketing channels that form a local network, with the identification of central actors and nuclei for the exchange of knowledge and experience between producers and consumers.

Although these networks of production and consumption of agroecological products are incipient, they allow us to reflect on their strengths, the representations and innovations developed and their possibilities for sustainability and expansion over time. Among the explanatory factors are identified : (i) Relationships of trust through "face-to-face" links, established by commercial proximity, which refers to the smallest number of intermediaries, organizational proximity, which encompasses a common base of shared knowledge, norms, values and principles around healthy food and agro-ecological products, and social proximity, where the relationship between producers and consumers goes beyond the commercial transaction by adding the exchange of information, (ii) the existence of consumers who are aware, i.e. concerned and/or sensitised to the various aspects of food, such as health care, respect for the preservation of the environment working conditions during processing, among others, (iii) the specific quality that plays a key role in building the value and importance of the food produced and distributed in alternative networks, (iv) the definition of a fair price makes it possible on the one hand to capture a greater percentage of the value of the product and on the other hand the possibility of accessing a product of a particular quality, (v) the structure of local economic and social networks (taking into account size, connectivity) and the role of certain actors such as healthy shops and commercial intermediaries who, together with ICTs, contribute to the development of experiences. These networks are less vulnerable to interruptions or discontinuities because they do not radically affect communication throughout the system, as the multiple redundant relationships between nodes allow for alternative routes.

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