

## Article

# Territorialising Local Food Systems for an Agroecological Transition in Latin America

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**Abstract:** An agroecological transition can enhance resilience by several means, e.g., managing ecological relationships through agroecosystems, enhancing farmers' knowledge of natural resources, recycling those resources, maintaining biodiversity, and thus, flexibly adapting to environmental stresses. However, the hegemonic agri-food system has been continuing its capitalist transition, thereby undermining agroecological methods and deterritorialising social bonds. Facing this pervasive threat, an agroecological transition needs a greater convergence between agroecological production and a solidarity economy (economía solidaria or EcoSol in Latin America). Their convergence can be called EcoSol-agroecology, based on short food supply chains (called *circuitos cortos* there). These efforts develop territorial markets, generate more stable livelihoods, and thus keep producers on the land. In our study, each research team collaborated with an EcoSol-agroecology network to develop Participatory Action Research methods. The COVID-19 pandemic disrupted their *circuitos cortos*, stimulating creative adaptations or alternatives, alongside demands for policy support measures. These networks have regionally territorialised local initiatives, while also confronting obstacles from the hegemonic system. Although socioecological resilience often means a system's capacity to bounce back, here it has meant bouncing forwards through new opportunities for solidaristic livelihoods and bonds. EcoSol-agroecology networks, agri-extensionists, and researchers have jointly developed such counter-hegemonic strategies, as illustrated by the case studies here.

**Keywords:** rural territorial development; (re)territorialisation; EcoSol-agroecology; hegemonic agri-food system; socioecological resilience; *diálogo de saberes*



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## 1. Introduction: Two Contrary Transitions of the Agri-Food System

Food insecurity and malnutrition have been worsening globally, alongside many environmental harms, thus aggravating inequalities from the hegemonic agri-food system. As promoted by dominant nation states, this system has prioritised the input-intensive production of commodity crops for animal feed and ultra-processed food, especially by extracting financial value through global markets. This system degrades agri-food landscapes, marginalises mutual aid traditions, aggravates land-use conflicts, and undermines food quality, thus perpetuating food and nutritional insecurity. Unstable prices have triggered public protests, extending to the deeper injustices and demands for alternatives [1–4].

The globally hegemonic system has been theorised as a corporate food regime [5–7], also known as an imperial food regime [8]. This regime has extended the long-time capitalist transformation of agriculture, in turn extending a longer-term capital accumulation by dispossession. Since the latter process began with land enclosures, small-scale peasants have been further dispossessed and driven off the land by more subtle but systemic means, e.g., state subsidies cheapening exports, farm and retail concentration driving down farm-gate prices, supermarket chains marginalising farmers' direct sales, etc. [9].

Such critical analysis is necessary for identifying short-term actions that could lead to a sustainability transition. The latter is often reduced to resource efficiency measures for 'modernising' agriculture. On the contrary, a sustainability transition needs diverse

social actors combining their expertise to address systemic conflicts around the agri-modernisation agenda, promote diverse agroecological systems, and overcome lock-ins or blockages [10,11]. Jointly developed by academics with social movements, those critical perspectives have been eventually taken up by non-governmental organizations (NGOs) and some state bodies.

Given the social harms from the ongoing capitalist transition, especially in the Global South, some countries have established compensatory measures. Food subsidies have increased the availability and reduced the price of staple foods and their derivatives, thus potentially maintaining calorific intake. Yet such interventions often stimulate higher prices for healthier, less subsidised foods such as fruits, vegetables, and pulses [12].

Citing the FAO report, the global NGO Oxfam declared: ‘Our food system has for years perpetuated inequality, impoverished small-scale farmers and pushed millions of vulnerable people into hunger while wreaking havoc on the climate.’ Towards a remedy, Western governments should ‘invest in diverse, local sustainable food production that helps countries to become less dependent on food imports, and support smallholder food producers, especially women’ in the Global South [13].

This remedy has universal relevance. As a central means, agroecological methods link many social, economic, and environmental benefits; they enhance food security, alongside nutritional quality and diversity [14]. These resilient systems can better respond to environmental stresses by adapting biodiverse cultivars [15].

Agroecological production depends on and enhances agroecosystems, i.e., replicating and intensifying ecological processes. Agroecosystems gain resilience by several means: enhancing farmers’ knowledge of available natural resources, recycling those resources, maintaining biodiversity within and around production sites, and thus flexibly adapting to environmental stresses or other disruptions [16]. Such farm-level transitions have arisen through changed practices, e.g., agri-industrial farmers shifting towards agroecological methods, agroecological farmers expanding their production, and new entrants adopting such methods. Yet their role is often limited by spatial fragmentation and unfavourable markets.

Therefore, an agroecological transition would need systemic changes in power relations and agri-food supply chains based on solidaristic relationships [17]. Their development warrants value chain innovations which invest in and reward sustainable food producers [18]. According to Gliessman’s model, a transition depends on linking three systemic levels:

- Redesign the agroecosystem around a new set of ecological processes.
- Re-establish a more direct connection between those who grow our food and those who consume it, often known as short supply chains.
- Build a new global food system, based on equity, participation, democracy, and justice, that is not only sustainable but helps restore and protect Earth’s life support systems upon which we all depend [19].

Those levels are interdependent, not merely sequential. Agroecosystem redesign may depend economically on more secure livelihoods from directly connecting producers with consumers. As a crucial means, ‘territorial markets’ sell food that is produced, distributed, and consumed within a specific territory. Beyond a merely spatial proximity, such markets serve local food needs in many ways, e.g., nutritional quality, cultural identity, consumers’ affordability, and livelihoods of local food producers, processors, and vendors. Such markets bypass transnational corporations that dominate supply chains, degrade nutritional quality through ultra-processed food, and extract value added from producers [20].

Towards an agroecological transition, practices should ‘Ensure proximity and confidence between producers and consumers through promotion of fair and short distribution networks and by re-embedding food systems into local economies’, especially through a solidarity economy, argues the FAO’s experts [18]. Such distribution networks are variously called alternative agri-food networks, food relocalisation, proximate markets, short supply chains, *circuits courts* in French, or *circuitos cortos* in Spanish. An agroecology-based

food localisation ‘can achieve synergies and positive externalities by means of cooperation among agents and institutions; this is enhanced by their geographical and organisational proximity’, i.e., shared values and resources [21].

Such forms have gained special strength and prominence in Latin America [1]. Since the 1990s there has been a convergence between social movements promoting agroecology and a solidarity economy [14]. The latter is called *economía solidaria* or EcoSol for short; the convergence can be called EcoSol-agroecology, a crucial basis for an agroecological transition.

Such networks have been most politically charged and popularly organised in Latin America, resulting from joint efforts by rural movements, intellectuals, and agronomists. Together they have promoted a regional integration, even a regionalism from below, by territorialising nearby agroecological initiatives [22]. Their strategies have been informed by a broader Latin American Critical Thought, which critically analyses the Eurocentric neocolonial roles of hegemonic concepts, e.g., modernity, modernisation, technology, territorial development, nature protection, etc. In engagement with social movements, such writers elaborated decolonial counter-hegemonic concepts [23–25].

From those perspectives, an agroecological transition has been conceptualised as a territorial scaling: socially proximate networks expand their activity by sharing knowledge, material resources, and solidaristic supply chains. Such expansion has several drivers, for example, social organisation, teaching–learning processes, effective agroecological practices, mobilising counter-hegemonic discourse, external allies, favourable markets, political opportunities and favourable policies, and crises that drive the search for alternatives [17].

Indeed, the COVID-19 crisis posed new dangers and opportunities for alternatives. Agri-food supply chains were generally disrupted, e.g., the distribution of external inputs for local agriculture, middlemen buying their products, and processed and packaged food available in rural towns. Agroecology networks took the lead in generating or expanding solidaristic supply chains based on reciprocity and mutual aid. Such alternatives found ways to continue during the COVID-19 crisis, despite many obstacles [26]. Agroecological producers adapted or created collective means to extend short supply chains, thus strengthening solidaristic relationships and social cohesion in new forms [27].

However, an agroecological expansion encounters obstacles from the hegemonic agri-food system, its environmental degradation, territorial colonisation, and policy support measures. Indeed, agroecological alternatives undergo conflicts of knowledge and of interest with the hegemonic system. Some pro-agroecology reports acknowledge such conflicts [18], especially between agribusiness promoting market-driven globalisation versus opponents promoting eco-localisation [28]. Yet the forces driving such conflict often appear ambiguous, the conflicts remain invisible [29,30], or the problem is reduced to a ‘conflict-management’ task [28,31].

The systemic conflicts warrant a sharper diagnosis of their drivers and forms, as the basis for strategic responses. This paper asks the following research questions:

- How do EcoSol-agroecology agendas seek to strengthen and link local initiatives?
- How do such agendas encounter systemic obstacles, conflicts, and opportunities? How do they address them?
- How do their responses build flexible capacities for an agroecological transition?

Answering those questions, this paper argues as follows: EcoSol-agroecology networks have emerged from a convergence between social movements for solidarity economy and for agroecological production, as a crucial basis to strengthen alternatives and resistance to the hegemonic agri-food system. They construct local solidarity markets, aka *circuitos cortos*, by activating and linking various societal proximities (see Section 2.2). Such networks territorialise disparate initiatives into a stronger regional network with greater socioecological resilience and collective capacity for creatively adapting to disruptions, as in the COVID-19 pandemic. Such transformative resilience can bounce forwards to a better future (Section 2.3). Moreover, a territorialised network can better defend and promote supportive policy measures by strategically engaging in the necessary political-economic conflicts. Integrating those capacities will be necessary for an agroecological transition.

This will need ‘a shift from a market economy to a solidarity economy, from fossil fuel to renewable energy, from big corporations to cooperatives’, as argued by Altieri and Nicholls [15].

As a basis for those answers, our project had three case studies of EcoSol-agroecology territorial networks [32]. Together these help identify general patterns amidst context-specific variations. The paper has the following sections: theoretical concepts (territory, societal proximities, and resilience), with action research methods for applying them; the three case studies in turn; and a Conclusion answering the above questions. Table 1 selects some key points for a cross-case comparison across general patterns.

**Table 1.** Territorialising agroecological initiatives, resiliently bouncing forwards.

Action Research Partnership: Collective Subject	Bioferia and Subcentral San Agustín with Jaina, El Valle Central del Tarija, Bolivia Indigenous peasant organisations; some members participating in the Bioferia	FCT with OTSS La Bocaína de Serra, Litoral Norte, Brazil Forum linking three traditional communities to strengthen basis for their territorial permanence	FESBS with UNESP La Baixada Santista, Brazil Regional EcoSol network linking artisanal producers to strengthen circuitos cortos and their state support
Territorial Dynamics			
Threats deterritorialising space and social bonds	Neocolonial devaluation of traditional cultures and knowledge; agribusiness; ultra-processed foods.	Neocolonial devaluation of traditional cultures and knowledge; Conservation Areas prohibiting cultivation; civil construction; predatory tourism; real estate speculation; ultra-processed foods.	Predatory tourism, coastal displacements, civil construction; second homes, ultra-processed foods; petrochemical industry.
Territorialising initiatives via organisational and cultural proximities (pre-pandemic): <i>Bem Viver</i> in mottos	Asociación Bioferia manages the weekly municipal feira, linking women vendor–producers from around the Valle Central with each other and with urban consumers. Promotes <i>comida campesina</i> in diverse forms. <i>‘Vivir Bien</i> is self-government.’	<i>‘Preserver é Resistir’</i> (To Conserve is to Resist) campaign. Agroforestry has enhanced their livelihoods and territorial control. Community-Based Tourism (TBC) has promoted cultural exchanges with visitors. Demand legal demarcation of their territories. <i>‘Agroecology cultivating territories of Bem Viver’</i> .	Circuitos cortos have been focus of training and knowledge exchange among EcoSol initiatives, replicating them in more places, especially via women’s leadership. Promotes an ‘economy of proximity’ for providing food and nutritional security as well as livelihoods. <i>‘Economy for Bem Viver’</i> .
COVID-19 pandemic: EcoSol networks resiliently bounce forwards	Weekly feira was replaced temporarily by the Canasta Campesina Alantuya, soliciting orders via WhatsApp for home deliveries. Extended solidaristic relations and public visibility of women vendor–producers. Its new regulations helped incorporate more women vendors and thus minimise conflict.	<i>‘Cuidar é Resistir’</i> <sup>1</sup> (To Care is to Resist) campaign delivered emergency food supplies. Traditional communities performed more exchanges of food, seeds, and artisanal knowledge. Developed info base to expand agroecological production for food and nutritional security. More initiatives gained contracts for institutional sales.	EcoSol initiatives adapted circuitos cortos through mutual-aid relationships, extending them to more consumers and municipalities. Santos CSA scheme was expanded. Collective marketing groups maintained or expanded institutional sales. Webinars provided knowledge exchange among local strategies.
Public policies in dispute: institutional proximity	Peasants’ organisation eventually blocked the neocolonial agenda for a ‘municipal protected area’. Counterposed their own territorial autonomy for traditional Life Systems based on agroecology, with support from local research institutes.	Demanded and gained access to Conservation Areas for agroecological production by traditional communities. Gained financial support for emergency food supplies but opposed competitive tendering at the lowest price.	Networks made demands to maintain supportive state institutions, while also opposing predatory development. Some women producers’ groups gained roles in shaping state support measures.

## 2. Theoretical Concepts and Research Methods

The hegemonic agri-food ‘modernisation’ model has promised to rescue peasants from pre-industrial backwardness and poverty. Presenting a harmonious image, ‘modernisation’ disguises the forces dispossessing and exploiting them [33–35]. Its neocolonial agenda has combined capital-intensive techno-diffusionist expertise, technology packages, globalised

supply chains for standard commodity crops, and resource plunder in the Global South. EcoSol-agroecology alternatives can be illuminated by some theoretical concepts, especially territorial development and resilience; both have ambiguous, diverse meanings.

### *2.1. Territorial Hegemony, Resistance, and Alternatives*

The globalised agri-food system has pervasive conflicts which can be understood as territorial ones: actors using a geographical space transform it through relations of power [36]; these may be antagonistic and complementary. As theorised by Milton Santos, the Territorial State facilitates a perverse neoliberal globalisation, intensifying market competition and thus undermining cooperative relationships.

Today's vertically integrated market pervades everything, including people's consciousness: a market of things, including nature; a market of ideas, including science and information; a political market. Both these aims—market democracy and neoliberalism—are necessary to constrain any life modes based on a contiguous solidaristic neighbourhood [37].

There is the emergence of a new space and urban network through territorial integration. A single hierarchised market is articulated by hegemonic firms which command the territory with state support [38].

Santos contrasted the dominant market verticalisation with a solidaristic horizontalisation, which can provide a collective resistance and alternative.

Horizontal bonds can be enlarged through their own new forms of production and consumption. For example, rural producers unite to defend their interests, permitting them to go beyond purely economic consumption to a political one, which is locally defined and regionally distinct. On a social territorial base, new horizontalities allow us to liberate ourselves from the curse of the perverse globalisation in which we are living and construct another globalisation, capable of restoring humanity to its dignity [37].

Extending Santos' insights, later geographers elaborated on how actors seek to use or produce geographical space in divergent ways. Such uses confer rival territorial roles and meanings, often conflicting ones. They give divergent meanings to territory and thus to 'rural territorial development'.

In particular, a neocolonial predatory agenda has newly produced space to exploit labour and plunder natural resources; it has deterritorialised traditional life modes of peasants and, in many cases, indigenous people. In response, they often try to reterritorialise space through new strategies for rebuilding community and appropriating resources: 'On the one hand, from its logic and principles, capital destroys and recreates the peasantry. On the other hand, the peasantry also recreates itself, breaking with the logic and principles of capital'. Those rival agendas construct territory in conflicting ways: 'This contradictory and paradoxical movement promotes development: the market, the state and society conflict and join to overcome their problems, while creating others and still prolonging others', argues Fernandes [39].

In those ways, collective resistance and alternative agendas reterritorialise space, renewing their social identity in ways linked with class and place consciousness as well as social transformation, argues Saquet [40]. 'Territorialized movements. . . are organized and act in different places at the same time, made possible by their form of organization, which permits the spatialisation of the struggle for land' (Fernandes, 2005: 326) [41]. Such (re)territorialisation processes have been 'deployed by multiple subaltern subjects and spacetimes, such as those among inhabitants of the urban peripheries or so-called native peoples or traditional peoples'. They 'construct their territories based on other epistemic approaches and other sociocultural practices', thus subverting the hegemonic Eurocentric ones, argues Haesbaert [42].

Hence, the concept 'territory' encompasses various conflicts and cultural meanings, which readily become intertwined in context-specific ways, as argued by McCall and colleagues:

The arenas of territorial contestations are the sites of the visible conflicts and competitive behaviour concerning struggles over endowments (resources), services

and attributes, rights and entitlements to nature's resources, space per se, control of people, access to capital and institutional or political power. . .

Territorialisation utilises the representation of geographical landscapes (perceived, identified, created) to be interwoven with the territories to reinforce cultural, social, spiritual forces. Thus. . . the connections between a localised people and their place, their landscape and locality, are not simply about ownership or property. There are intense and deep connections, and operative conceptualisations of space as memory-places and sacred places that are aspects of real physical or symbolic appropriation. . . Beyond the standard idea of cosmovisions as being only indigenous, there are endless representations of place connected with territory in popular modern culture which express relationships between locality and belonging [43].

Those concepts have been elaborated by and for EcoSol-agroecology agendas. They defend, construct, and recreate solidaristic bonds, whereas the hegemonic production system tends to deterritorialise them. As Schmitt argues, solidaristic bonds face threats from the hegemonic production system.

Emerging under asymmetrical conditions of power, various conflicts can generate an uprooting (a deterritorialisation process), such as loss of traditional knowledge and regional agri-food culture, and genetic erosion of seed and animal landraces [44].

In response, participants aim to 're-territorialize food systems for a healthy and diversified diet'. They develop 'a territorial and decentralized approach favouring cooperation between actors, innovative markets for the creation of added value and employment at the local level and the creation of integrated territorial approaches leading to a circular economy and food systems', argues the FAO [29]

In a dominant context where a fragmented territory separates the city and countryside, they can instead complement each other through a solidaristic territorial development for reorganising space [45]. Such insights from geography have illuminated divergent trajectories of agroecological production [46]. This leads us to *circuitos cortos*.

## 2.2. Circuitos Cortos: Territorial Markets Dependent on Societal Proximities

As promoted by EcoSol-agroecology agendas, the term 'territorial markets' has several meanings. Small-scale agroecological producers have built traditional markets through local interpersonal relationships as an entry point for novel forms. From an FAO perspective:

Agroecological approaches promote fair solutions based on local needs, resources and capacities, creating more equitable and sustainable markets. Strengthening short food circuits can increase the incomes of food producers while maintaining a fair price for consumers. These include new innovative markets, alongside more traditional territorial markets, where most smallholders market their products [30].

Longer-distance innovative markets likewise have been understood as territorialising local initiatives. Production units establish solidaristic interconnections within and across different territories, seeking to enrich ecological, social, and cultural diversity. These efforts reach urban publics by offering special flavours, knowledge, aromas, human faces, and enchantments, which together extend rural–urban bonds, argues Schmitt [44].

In this sense, *circuitos cortos* depend on 'a geographical and relational proximity between producers and consumers' (Darolt et al., 2013: 10) [47]. Social proximity builds a territorial identity through consumers' knowledge about the origin, producers, and productive system (Darolt e Rover, 2021: 23) [48]. 'Solidarity economy' provides a principle and often a name for such social bonds.

In Brazil, an agri-extension service has promoted *circuitos cortos* as territorial markets, distinguished by specific producer families and their associations in reaching consumers. These markets are 'rooted in ecosystems and social relations of proximity'. Alongside better livelihoods and nutritional quality, territorial markets also pursue non-economic

solidaristic aims of the various social subjects involved in food production and consumption; they encompass socially vulnerable families, women farmers, and rural youths [49]. *Circuitos cortos* encompass various forms such as farmers' markets, institutional sales (especially for school meals), and Community-Supported Agriculture (CSA) as subscriptions for weekly deliveries, barter, etc.

In the broader sense, a solidarity economy links specific kinds of societal proximity, as elaborated here, according to Rodrigues da Silva and colleagues [45,50]. Proximate or common purposes include, for example, democratic self-management, mutual aid, socioeconomic inclusion, respect for the environment, interpersonal affects, friendship, etc. These purposes can activate and link other proximities [45]. In particular:

- Organisational proximity brings together producers so that they can mutualise their resources within and across such groups. This is necessary to establish relationships of confidence, reciprocity, and solidarity among producers.
- Cultural proximity includes common cultural characteristics, elders' wisdom, religious rituals, festivals, and traditional agricultural knowledge. Participatory methods can help to link the latter with technical knowledge, generating forms which better connect with consumers.
- Geographical proximity can be used to establish social cohesion, solidarity relationships, and equitable relations that provide financial and learning gains for all members of the productive chain.
- Institutional proximity includes interactions with professional staff in public authorities which can provide support measures for EcoSol activities. Multidisciplinary professionals and researchers can integrate their expertise through an EcoSol local network.

Participatory Action Research can help practitioners to identify and extend those societal proximities.

Those processes involve *diálogo de saberes*, a term which originated in knowledge exchange among small-scale peasants and with agri-extensionists or civil society groups. Through a 'dialogue capacity and collective learning', they have improved everyday agroecological practices, rather than relying on external techniques [33,51]. For EcoSol-agroecology convergences, *diálogo de saberes* also seeks to improve or innovate solidaristic *circuitos cortos*.

As a key concept for EcoSol-agroecology, *Vivir Bien* (or *Bem Viver*) has various meanings, e.g., 'a harmonious life respecting Mother Nature' (e.g., FBES, 2012) [52]. It originates from indigenous Andean languages [53]. Here Nature denotes agro-biodiversity, complementing sociocultural diversity [54], as a basis for nature conservation and culturally diverse foods [44].

Feminist movements have played leading roles in developing agrobiodiversity and building trust relationships which underlie *circuitos cortos*. This experience 'suggests that female leadership is essential for autonomous and endogenous construction processes to occur' [55]. The term 'feminist' highlights women's struggles to act as social and political subjects [56].

Such leadership has been prominent for many reasons. Men have more easily accessed credit to finance capital-intensive inputs such as technology packages. Women organise protests against pesticides, which threaten natural resources and human well-being. To supply local markets, many women cultivate plants in their home garden—*huerta casera* in Spanish, or *quintal* in Portuguese. These women come mainly from low-income (with some from the middle class), black, or indigenous groups, according to feminist groups [57,58]. Women have gained a leadership role in production and marketing groups, sometimes enabling a governance role in public spaces, such as municipal governments and prominent associations.

### 2.3. Resilience as Bouncing Forwards

In 2020–2021 the COVID-19 pandemic stimulated various demands and claims for agri-food systems to devise greater resilience but with divergent meanings. Agri-industry

sought more resilient ways to restore and stabilise its global system. Representing global elites, the World Economic Forum promoted various technofixes for strengthening the resilience of the dominant food system [59], often in ways minimising dependence on human labour. Anticipating future crises, it proposed to enhance 'food-system resiliency' through 'data-driven' information platforms, especially by integrating small-scale farmers into distant markets [60].

Towards a different future, critics have advocated food systems that build resilience by linking agroecological producers with local markets. 'Transformational change in agriculture must be accompanied by a shift from a market economy to a solidarity economy, from fossil fuel to renewable energy, from big corporations to cooperatives', argue Altieri and Nicholls [15]. In such ways, 'the active promotion of more diverse and resilient food systems can help to overcome some of the problems of the approaches of the previous 70 years that the COVID-19 pandemic has laid bare', argue Clapp and Moseley [61].

Civil society groups already had been promoting such transformative resilience for a couple of decades, and then highlighted this potential during the COVID-19 pandemic. Hygiene restrictions potentially undermined agroecological alternatives, but many used the opportunity for novel supply chains—e.g., online orders, alternative pick-up points, home deliveries, and public procurement—each involving new people. According to a Brazilian extension service, 'This participation in diverse markets, be they public or otherwise, provides sustainability and resilience to the farmer in case some modalities have problems, difficulties or temporary obstacles, because other sales will bear the loss in that period' [45].

Given the practical divergence between elite versus grassroots agendas, they have generated contrary versions of resilience. Expert narratives often interpret resilience as the capacity to withstand stress or disruption by bouncing back to a previous state. This implies an analogy with an engineering model, which may be necessary for physical structures [62]. Yet the bounce-back model can entrench harmful social systems. Indeed, 'Undesirable states of systems can be very resilient' [63]. When the dominant agri-food supply chains bounced back from the COVID-19 pandemic, this was seen as an undesirable resilience [64], reinforcing unsustainable structures [65].

Moreover, the bounce-back model can serve neoliberal ideology and practices. In recent decades, the state has weakened its societal responsibility, while transferring this to individual, voluntary, and corporate responsibility, which at best fill gaps. Communities are meant to become increasingly adaptable, flexible, and self-reliant in responding to disruptions from market forces or other instabilities, notes Cretney [66].

For solidaristic initiatives, by contrast, resilience has transformative meanings. It can mean collective capacities for systemic improvements. Let us consider the concept 'social-ecological resilience', which describes a system's capacity for self-organisation, learning, and adaptation [67]. It has divergent meanings.

As a relatively open definition, socio-ecological resilience means 'the capacity to adapt or transform in the face of change in social-ecological systems, particularly unexpected change, in ways that continue to support human well-being' [68]. Transformation involves fundamental change, which requires radical, systemic shifts in values, beliefs, and social behaviour [69]. System transformation may happen when the current system becomes untenable or undesirable [70]. From that perspective, resilience should be understood as an adaptive capacity to transform the socio-ecological system; this designs society–nature relationships in complementary ways (cf. Bem Viver/Vivir Bien concept above).

As regards gender inequalities, feminist EcoSol perspectives likewise have emphasised resilience for social transformation. In Brazil's EcoSol initiatives, approximately 60% of female members are black, seeking means to overcome inequalities [55,58]. Women's initiatives have brought several capacities such as emotional intelligence as a basis for resiliently dealing with obstacles and overcoming them, especially during the COVID-19 pandemic [57].



To deal with the pandemic, feminist networks mobilised their pre-pandemic informal, interpersonal solidaristic relationships. They maintained or developed socially proximate supply chains through generalised reciprocity. But their efforts incurred extra work burdens featuring voluntary labour, especially roles caring for others. Their resilience attracted much praise but risked perpetuating gender inequalities. Towards a socially transformative resilience, a *protagonismo feminista* has sought to renegotiate and transform inter-gender power relations [56].

By contrast with bouncing back to the previous state, responses can bounce forwards. In disaster management experiences, a community agency has often facilitated a decision for transformative change; collective initiatives found ways to enhance local livelihoods and alleviate inequalities [71]. Since the COVID-19 pandemic, the ‘bounce forwards’ concept has been taken up more widely as a transformative resilience, especially for localising food systems [72].

Given those divergent meanings, ‘actions taken in the name of resilience have less to do with theoretical socio-ecological resilience and more to do with the values and motivation of those taking action’, argues Cretney [66]. This leads us to methods for engaging with actors’ aims.

#### 2.4. Research Materials and Online Methods

Our research project investigated collective capacities for EcoSol-agroecology, focusing on research questions about *circuitos cortos* (see Section 1). In the three case studies, each research team had a partnership with a solidaristic network which was promoting artisanal production methods (especially agroecology), expanding *circuitos cortos* for their products, and demanding policy support measures for such practices. Their aims faced various territorial obstacles and opportunities, along lines specific to each territory. For details of the teams, see the final report [32]. Organizations’ weblinks have a list just before the References.

Our project planned Participatory Action Research (PAR) by each partnership in the three territories (Sections 3–5). PAR methods structure learning from experience so that a collective subject can become empowered as a more effective agent for social change [73]. To prepare the empirical studies, the research team carried out literature reviews for three topics: EcoSol-agroecology in Latin America; Investigación Acción Participativa (IAP = PAR); and means of recording the research process, especially for PAR/IAP methods. The research plan featured various workshop methods within and across localities.

However, in early 2020, COVID-19 restrictions precluded our original plan. Facing similar constraints to their *circuitos cortos*, EcoSol-agroecology networks devised cooperative adaptations or alternatives. In this way, each collective subject turned difficulties into opportunities. This effort provided rich research material.

To highlight and inform those efforts, the project had several online means: First, using social media, local solidarity networks were publicising their *circuitos cortos*, expanding their activities, connecting more groups, appealing for practical support, etc. Facebook pages provided textual and visual information about new activities. Second, the project (especially its communitarian partners) organised multi-stakeholder knowledge exchange events. One team co-organised several webinars, approximately two per month in the first year; participants included community practitioners from all three territories, especially on adaptive responses to the COVID-19 pandemic. Third, the project carried out some online interviews with key practitioners in the two Brazilian case studies. Fourth, transcripts were put into Nvivo to identify key terms and their inter-relationships; this analysis helped to sharpen the original research questions. Some transversal methods spanned the three cases [74].

Project results emphasise how EcoSol-agroecology networks adapted to the pandemic restrictions in creative, solidaristic ways. In the case study areas, COVID-19 cases had subsided by around mid-2022 but had some spikes due to the Omicron variant. The networks emerged with a larger, stronger support base.

The COVID-19 pandemic was more severe in our three case study areas than in the overall continent. Nevertheless, through creative adaptations, our case study partners increased their public visibility, product distribution, and political influence; this activity also provided rich research material. When the pandemic subsided around mid-2021, those partners continued their gains and resumed their direct sales to consumers. The project arranged an in-person visit across the two Brazilian sites in early 2022, but it was too late to arrange an international meeting.

The three next sections summarise each case in turn, emphasising territorial dynamics. Latin American sources have been translated by the author.

### 3. El Valle Central de Tarija, Bolivia

In the Valle Central, Tarija, the Asociación Bioferia links women agroecological producers from distant indigenous rural communities with each other and with consumers. In Bolivia, such initiatives are called a communitarian economy, within Bolivia's framework as a Plurinational Communitarian State (Estado Plurinacional Comunitario). The Comunidad de Estudios Jaina has carried out action research with the Bioferia, as well as with site-specific indigenous peasant organisations around the Valle Central.

#### 3.1. Before the Pandemic: Self-Managing the Farmers' Market

In Jaina's territorial perspective, the peasant organisation recovers the indigenous peasant struggle as a social subject with its own historical project. Its meaning comes from the colonial formative process of dispossessing the indigenous peoples, the ancestral origin of the Bolivia peasantry. The state imposes an administrative territorial rationality, which conflicts with the peasant concept of territory. The latter claims a space for communal social life, alongside the right to reproduce their pre-existence as indigenous peoples in the geographical space [75]. They root agrobiodiversity in the Andean indigenous cultural traditions of cultivating and consuming products.

The indigenous peasant cultures continue to face processes of cultural destructuring and disparagement, stemming from the colonial formation of Andean countries. Peasant movements oppose the dominant model promoting a capitalist transformation of traditional peasant production. They counterpose communitarian bonds and traditional production systems, which adapt some approaches from public policies [76,77].

As a methodological approach, Jaina has appropriated Participatory Rural Appraisal (Diagnóstico Rural Participativo, DRP), shifting 'from project to process', as elaborated by Chambers and Guijt [78]. DRP is a process of self-reflection on the actors' own problems and the possibilities to solve them [79]. Jaina has focused on a social subject, the peasant of the Central Valley of Tarija, through two organisational structures: one of a territorial community type, the Subcentral of San Agustín, and the other of an associative community type, the Bioferia in Tarija. It was necessary to discuss the project objectives with the collective actors in order to produce a shared work agenda, involving the research team and the peasant organisation in a single process.

For many years, the Asociación Bioferia has managed Tarija's weekly feira. It has been territorially linking agroecological vendor-producers from various rural communities of the Valle Central. For example, in 2018, Jaina facilitated a conversation with peasant women to preserve traditional peasant food, within the framework of a national gastronomic festival sponsored by Tarija municipality. The Bioferia offers traditional peasant food (chirriadas, cane honey, tamales, creole cheese, and bread); it is made with traditional techniques and utensils and cooked with firewood, thus acquiring the characteristic flavour of peasant food.

The producers developed collective capacities to self-manage the agroecological fair, building on their geographical proximity to develop a new type of organisational proximity. The Bioferia informs urban consumers about agroecological practices and their broad benefits, thus promoting cultural proximity.

### 3.2. During the Pandemic: La Canasta Campesina Alantuya

When the pandemic quarantine began in March 2020, the Bioferia women were unable to securely transport their products to the city for many reasons. Eventually, a team of diverse actors built a new system, the *Canasta Campesina Alantuya*, based on four principles: fresh agroecological products directly from the producer to the consumer; biosafe management in food handling, transfer, and distribution; fair price and solidarity trade between the countryside and the city; and local trade for a local economy.

This system emerged step by step from scratch. In the first week, Jaina developed a pilot experiment in coordination with a Municipal Council member. He was concerned about getting food to a group of disabled families whose condition prevented travel. Since the team of researchers did not have a suitable vehicle for transportation, the councillor provided the Municipal Council's truck. He visited the Saladillo community, where the Bioferia colleagues waited with their collected products, but without having assembled the products into family baskets. The councillor supported the women to assemble the baskets for delivery, which turned out to be a crucial technological innovation; this initiated a system for combining diverse products.

From then onwards, this assemblage process was the basis of delivering food from rural producers to urban consumers. Facilitated by Jaina, this experimental practice helped to build the new collective distribution system. This had to collect and share information on products, producers, and consumers, organise them according to nutritional criteria in family baskets, request orders, organise supply routes, and facilitate home deliveries complying with biosafety standards.

In that period, there was a convergence of goals. The mayor sought means to continue supplying food to the city under a reasonable municipal control that applies biosafety measures for public health. The Bioferia compañeras sought to continue marketing their products, on which their family economy depended. Urban residents sought to access fresh food safely, even better if it was also organic. The research team sought to develop an alternative supply model that could be replicated on a larger scale, in continuous dialogue and consultation with those involved.

The Canasta's management initially involved some institutional units of the Mayor's Office, where each person in charge had to make decisions to facilitate action in the field; this depended on the personnel and vehicles available to distribute the food. The basket assembly had to be organised among several producers who usually market food individually. In this process, Jaina coordinated the teams to ensure that the food distribution and payments would be effective. The coordination had to develop biosafety protocols, maintain an administrative protocol, and plan the nutritional benefit in the supply system.

The compañeras themselves had to deal with transport from the communities to the city. They hired a neighbour from the community to transport the baskets to the Alantuya store; from there they were delivered by motorcycle, a method that was maintained thereafter. This was a novel experience for the community organisation. This process developed a greater collective capacity, strengthening the organisational proximity between vendors. To plan the deliveries, a link was created to join a WhatsApp group. Based on solidaristic volunteering, the system was facilitated by Jaina's institutional role to provide a Participatory Action Research (PAR) methodology. This experimental effort allowed Jaina to build the new system.

Direct sales helped to educate urban consumers about the origin of food. It was also possible to monitor the quality of the service and the satisfaction or fulfilment of consumer expectations. The organisers frequently received photographs of the products displayed on consumers' kitchen tables, expressing satisfaction with their quality and the possibility of receiving them in these unexpected circumstances. Amidst all the difficulties that arose during the quarantine, there was no similar food supply system in Tarija.

Participants felt a part of something special; this feeling was shared by the producers, the consumers, and the volunteer team. In this sense, the Canasta had important benefits for those who were directly involved. Together, they maintained the economic security of

producers and the food security of consumers. They felt a sense of social contribution to resolve the crisis through a solidaristic communitarian practice.

### *3.3. Since the Pandemic: Protecting Fair and Territorial Self-Management*

When social mobility was normalised and vendors could return to the fair site in mid-2021, the Canasta distribution was reduced. Of the 500 deliveries per week during the pandemic, only 30 continued their orders. Producers still maintained this arrangement for solidarity reasons.

At the same time, the reopening of the farmers' market caused a new conflict in defending the space for agreed aims. New vendors began to occupy the spaces that some members were slow to reoccupy after the pandemic, so the Bioferia had to deploy new strategies to protect its space. The team realised that the Bioferia lacked a regulatory basis to assign stalls or incorporate new members. It had no legal status, nor a formal document through which the Tarija mayor's office recognised the right to the space occupied by this organisation in the weekly fair. For many years, the Bioferia had been seeking to obtain legal status, an instrument that now became necessary to face this conflict.

As the partner members understood, the prospects to maintain this vendor's space lay not only in the agroecological quality of its products, but also in the social cohesion and capacity to act jointly to assert its organisational achievement. They needed strategies to address internal conflicts, which occurred, for example, when incorporating new members who want to benefit from a food stall without caring for the ethical aspects of organic production. Many consultation processes facilitated a draft regulation on the requirements, conditions, and procedures for vendors who want to join the Bioferia.

The Jaina team facilitated a participatory process to clarify the criteria for members and their products. The team applied techniques to collectively reconstruct the norms that had been informally agreed upon between the member partners for their group functioning. Questionnaires were distributed to long-time members designated by the organisation. Workshops helped to reconstruct the history of the Bioferia and the rules used for its operation, resulting in a draft Statute and Regulations.

Both were presented to the Bioferia Board and were approved for the legal status process. Through various PAR methodologies, the team enabled the Bioferia to accommodate new vendor members within a legal structure, thus strengthening its capacity to manage any future conflicts. Thus, the Bioferia extended its organisational proximity and democratic participation to more women. The initiative emerged from the pandemic with a stronger base, but by 2023 lower agricultural prices posed difficulties in maintaining the same income levels as before.

Meanwhile, a territorial conflict arose in one area which was supplying products for the Canasta Campesina. In early 2020, thirty Andean condors died in the Laderas Norte community, due to poor management of poison to control wild predators in the area. The communities then had an intense discussion about using this opportunity to attract external support to implement their own rural territorial development agenda. However, the regional government proposed a 'Municipal Protected Area' to protect nature from human activities.

The local peasant organisation, the Subcentral San Agustín, opposed the government proposal as a neocolonial threat to its territorial autonomy and self-management. Indeed, the proposal intensified a long-time territorial conflict between state 'conservation' agendas versus indigenous communitarian governance, dating from the mid-20th century land reform. Facilitated by Jaina, the Subcentral has been developing a community strategy for biodiversity management through traditional Life Systems, as foreseen in Bolivian legislation. The Instituto Tecnológico Agropecuario San Andrés has helped the Subcentral to develop the strategy; it has encompassed a Geographic Information System (GIS), participatory techniques, Vivir Bien, and traditional agroecological methods.

By strengthening their organisational proximity with the Institute, these joint efforts successfully blocked the state agenda for a Municipal Protected Area in 2022. They

maintained peasant autonomy based on a decolonial territorial identity. In these ways, indigenous peasant networks have sought to reterritorialise space, variously in cooperation or conflict with state bodies.

#### 4. La Bocaina, Brazil

The Fórum de Comunidades Tradicionais de Angra, Paraty y Ubatuba (FCT<sup>2</sup>) links traditional communities around those three towns in the Bocaina region. The FCT has a partnership with the Observatório de Territórios Sustentáveis e Saudáveis da Bocaina (OTSS<sup>3</sup>). Amidst territorial conflicts, the OTSS has been building collective capacities among traditional communities to elaborate their own development model through ‘territorialized solutions’. For more details, see the case study report [80].

##### 4.1. Before the Pandemic: ‘Preserver é Resistir’ Campaign

In the Bocaina region, the traditional communities have faced many territorial conflicts due to predatory economic activities such as real estate speculation, large enterprises, and capital-intensive tourism. Moreover, the State created Conservation Areas overlapping with their territories, thus damaging the peoples’ cultural modes, even criminalising their traditional agricultural and fishing practices. The traditional communities had to reduce the areas which had been historically used for subsistence farming, barter, and sales.

Facing this adverse context, the communities have been resisting the expropriation and devaluation of their life modes. Meanwhile, they have demanded public policies that can reconcile nature conservation with their territorial permanence and traditional practices. A prominent slogan has been, ‘Agroecology cultivating territories of bem viver’ (Vivir Bien in Spanish).

The Forum of Traditional Communities (FCT) emerged in 2007 from indigenous Guaranis, quilombolas, and caiçaras (descendants of Portuguese settlers) to resist the threats that they faced. In 2009 the FCT co-founded the OTSS, a programme of the Fundação Oswaldo Cruz (Fiocruz), based on shared management and governance. This partnership promotes a ‘territorialized sustainable development’, which allows current generations to meet their economic and social needs without jeopardising future generations and the planet. An ‘inclusive and sustainable development, social justice and the construction of alliances are needed for the realization of this ideal’, argue Gallo and de Nascimento [81].

In 2012, the FCT started the Juçara Project to generate family income by sustainably managing palm tree fruits and their pulp. Marketed via *circuitos cortos*, this has directly reached the final consumer, thus building cultural proximity with them. Since 2014, the *Associação dos Bananicultores de Ubatumirim* (ABU, banana cultivators’ association) has sold products which are collectively certified as organic by an *Organização de Controle Social* (OCS), as authorised by government regulations [82,83]. This gains favourable terms for institutional purchases by the Ubatuba municipality under the PNAE (*Programa Nacional de Alimentación Escolar*, or National School Feeding Programme). ABU has a feminist leadership carrying out collective marketing [84].

In 2014, the FCT launched the ‘Preserver é Resistir’ (To Conserve is to Resist) campaign, promoting socio-environmental justice and asserting the collective rights of traditional communities in their own territories. The campaign has sought to ensure that teachers, griôts, and pajés—as guardians of memory and ancestral knowledge—transmit their legacy to the youth. Traditional communities organise the sustainable management of nature, community ties, collective mutual-aid work, and product exchanges through *circuitos cortos*. Agroecological production plays a fundamental role in several processes. These include social organisation, agroecosystems, agrobiodiversity, collective knowledge construction, work and income, health promotion, and food and nutrition [81].

From the dialogue between traditional and technical knowledge, weaving a network of allies, the OTSS facilitates an alternative development model through agroecological agroforestry and Community-Based Tourism (TBC). This was initiated in 2016 by the *quilombola* community of *Campinho da Independência*, which gained a land title in 1999. It

was among the first in Brazil, after many years of struggle. Its TBC activities have promoted *quilombo* food (river fish with *farofa de banana*, *vaca atolada*, *feijoada*) from agroecological methods, alongside its music and dance heritages. TBC has facilitated cultural exchanges, spreading especially through the Nhandereko Network [85], an indigenous term for ‘our way of being’.

During 2018–2019, the OTSS-FCT partnership organised several rounds of dialogue to hear community demands, which helped to develop projects. A Territorialized Agroecological Plan aimed to establish alliances and plan priorities for territorial actions between the OTSS, community organisations, and peasant families in each community. The strategy divided the territory into microterritories and mesoterritories for territorialised development plans, emphasising locally decided agroecological production [86].

In the conflict over Conservation Areas, the traditional communities eventually won a victory. A 2018 law established criteria and procedures for the sustainable use of native plants in those areas [87]. In the Serra de Bocaina National Park, the OTSS-FCT partnership sought to strengthen and promote productive arrangements for agroecological agroforestry, artisanal fishing, Community-Based Tourism (TBC), and other local initiatives. They have sought to guarantee the generation of work and income, social inclusion, health, and *bem viver*. Meanwhile, the FCT has demanded the legal demarcation of the territories of traditional peoples, especially indigenous ones, as foreseen in the 1988 Constitution; productive activities there strengthen their demand.

#### 4.2. During the Pandemic: The ‘Cuidar é Resistir’ (To Care Is to Resist) Campaign

When the COVID-19 pandemic began, the Bocaina’s traditional communities decided to protect themselves through their own restrictions, stricter than government ones, especially in ceasing Community-Based Tourism (TBC). There was a general reduction in tourism; previous incomes declined. Many people faced food and nutritional insecurity. There were no effective public policies to feed needy families.

With the OTSS, the FCT created the *Campagna Cuidar é Resistir* (To Care is to Resist) campaign, initially to reduce the vulnerability of traditional communities [88]. Solidarity actions distributed basic baskets with healthy food from family farmers and artisanal fishermen. The *Incubadora de Tecnologias Sociais* (Incubator of Social Technologies) provided technical advice for the face-to-face logistical organisation (food delivery, storage, distribution), information gathering, interaction with partners, and accountability of the process. Having already increased agroecological production, the *Quilombo Campinho da Independência* Residents Association (AMOQC) made food contributions to the basic emergency baskets.

Soon, the communities were cultivating more plants for their food security, while also demanding that the state demarcate such areas. There was an increase in traditional farming and fishing activities, including the exchange of seeds, seedlings, and agroecological products between communities. This exchange had logistical support from the FCT-OTSS partnership, gaining greater visibility. Accommodating demands of social movements, in March 2020 a new law facilitated the emergency authorisation of traditional food cultivation in Conservation Areas [89].

In the period when the pandemic began, community support efforts minimised its harmful impact, especially by resuming the actions previously agreed in Territorialized Agroecological Plans. The *Quilombo do Campinho* carried out actions in five axes: commercialisation, management of agroecosystems, food processing, training, and food safety. The *Quilombo da Fazenda* began to implement the Agroecological Plan through collective spaces, starting from the community association, family farmers, and their agroecosystems. To clarify priorities for agroecological production, the communities explored their realities, possibilities, bottlenecks, demands, and dreams.

Family farmers strengthened their organisational proximity and leadership by extending their food distribution. The OTSS-FCT jointly organised emergency deliveries to needy families. Moreover, they mobilised farmers and their allies to politicise policy debates over

public procurement, especially through Special Purchases for Family Agriculture in Paraty and Ubatuba. This was funded by those municipalities through the *Programa Nacional de Alimentação Escolar* (PNAE), going beyond its main remit for school meals.

The procurement system involved interaction with diverse participants in the program, including family farmers, state bodies, school meals, and the education community. The OTSS-FCT partnership conducted research that facilitated a multi-stakeholder dialogue that would strengthen support from the PNAE, children's healthy diets, farmer participation, and greater agroecological production. For better engagement with public procurement policies, the campaign gained advice from the Paraty Organic Producers' Association (APOP) and from the OTSS technical team.

Those emergency food donations initially depended on third-party intermediation between producers and recipients. In Paraty, producers' greater access to the PNAE stimulated discussions towards a plan to supply food baskets directly to consumers. Since 2021, the *Cestas da Agricultura Familiar* (Baskets of Family Agriculture) have a direct interface between producer and consumer. In addition to generating income, this process brought family farmers from rural and traditional communities closer together, gave them greater visibility, and generated self-esteem for families initially supplying food for the baskets.

From those activities, the campaign gained a locally produced information base with site maps, thus helping its second phase in early 2022. The campaign evaluated its advances, limits, and necessary readjustments. It faced a challenge to organise the productive capacity, storage depots, and distribution logistics, mainly for agroecological products and fish. These arrangements were expanded but encountered difficulties, especially in extending beyond the FCT's base areas to extra towns, where traditional communities lacked the necessary organisational capacities.

To source emergency food supplies, municipalities sometimes imposed competitive tendering at the lowest price, thus imposing three difficulties. First, some contracts were won by companies that have no direct link with the territory. Second, the cheaper price meant lower-quality products in the food baskets. Third, agroecological producers and small-scale artisanal fishers were subjected to market logic, with impractical prices for remunerating their work [90]. The campaign criticised those adverse policies and counterposed quality criteria.

In all those ways, the campaign valorised traditional artisanal practices and knowledge. Political commitment and popular education were important elements in building and motivating participation. A solidarity economy perspective helped to fill a legislative vacuum, e.g., as regards agroecological production in Conservation Areas and emergency food for vulnerable families. Traditional communities' actions became essential to supply products, as well as to consolidate production and distribution networks. This effort involved many young people; it gave greater visibility to women's contributions, yet they felt marginal in decision-making processes.

In sum, during the pandemic, the traditional communities became qualitatively more involved in common actions, thus strengthening their organisational proximity. In their greater engagement with public policies, this institutional proximity strengthened cooperation to gain favourable policies while also opposing adverse ones.

Territorial threats have continued since before the pandemic. As one type, industrial trawlers degrade the coastal ecology and deplete fish stocks; their plunder undermines artisanal fishers, deters their investment, and destabilises their permanence in the land [81]. As the FCT organises greater resistance, its activists say, 'We need food for the soul as well the body... We can construct more just pathways through *economia solidaria*.' They raise collective demands for public policies that conserve the environment, protect their quality of life, provide technical assistance, and promote artisanal fishing and healthy food more generally [91].

## 5. La Baixada Santista, Brazil: FESBS

The Fórum de Economia Solidária da Baixada Santista (FESBS<sup>4</sup>) links various artisanal initiatives including agroecological producers, especially for collective marketing, training, and policy support measures. It has sought to territorialise local EcoSol initiatives in order to strengthen its economic power and political influence over public policy. It has action research collaborators in several universities, especially UNESP (São Paulo State University). For more details from the case study, see the final report [92].

### 5.1. Before the Pandemic: Solidarity Networks and Capacity Building

This coastal region has a main port city (Santos) and nine coastal towns. It has undergone a predatory development, e.g., heavy tourism, second homes, and the petrochemical industry; together these displace artisanal livelihoods. Almost the entire food supply comes from outside the region. Allied with agribusiness, supermarkets promote unhealthy ultra-processed foods. Many low-income neighbourhoods are ‘food deserts’, lacking fresh fruit and vegetables. The region hardly has a ‘community’, except for small indigenous Guarani villages.

Artisanal producers provide a small socioeconomic base to build communitarian bonds through solidarity networks. Some towns have peri-urban agriculture, and many people have a quintal (back garden) to grow food plants, as a basis to exchange or sell products. Many participants from urban or peri-urban backgrounds recently initiated agroecological production. Before the pandemic, in some towns, EcoSol initiatives were built for collectively marketing artisanal products including handicrafts and food.

In this context, the Baixada Santista Solidarity Economy Forum (FESBS) has linked public policy managers with solidarity networks and artisanal initiatives, within and across municipalities. This network helped establish and expand collective capabilities through training programs, especially for collective marketing. Before the pandemic, the Coordination of Comprehensive Technical Assistance (*Coordenadoria de Assistência Técnica Integral* or CATI) implemented the *Programa Microbacias II* (Access to Markets during 2011–2018) in cooperation with FESBS. This program sought to increase the competitiveness and improve the quality of life of family farmers, especially indigenous ones.

The training programme emphasised skills for *circuitos cortos* to build consumer support. Fruits were lightly processed into tasty products that have a longer shelf life, earn more revenue, and avoid waste (which befalls 40% of fresh food in Brazil). With proper care, the fruit products remind people of their favourite childhood flavours and aromas. These characteristics have helped vendors to establish closer relationships with consumers at farmers’ markets. The participants also gained skills for collective marketing to the public procurement programme for school meals (PNAE, *Programa Nacional de Alimentación Escolar*).

According to the Forum’s manifesto, EcoSol is a self-managed forum of economic activities: production, distribution, consumption, savings, and financial credit. Amid changes in the world of work, there is a need to ensure that these changes ‘reduce inequalities and improve quality of life’. Wealth must be ‘focused on valuing the human being, characterized by equality’ [93].

### 5.2. During the Pandemic: Solidaristic Adaptations

The pandemic interrupted Brazil’s artisanal *circuitos cortos* as well as conventional markets. Farmers’ markets had to adapt to hygiene requirements or create substitute forms. Socially proximate relations strengthened solidarity networks through innovative solutions. They managed to solicit online food orders and deliver them through individual transport (cars) or through cooperatives that favour direct trade [94]. Solidarity networks facilitated donations, emphasising their role as solidarity rather than charity.

In the Baixada Santista, EcoSol networks shared experiences across initiatives, establishing a broader knowledge dialogue on a regional scale. The FESBS-UNESP partnership promoted a webinar series that became spaces for continuous training of managers, allies,



and leaders of EcoSol initiatives. Topics included many artisanal activities including agroecology. Various initiatives discussed their experiences of collective marketing, cooperative organisation, democratic self-management, strategies, and policy support measures. Webinars facilitated methodologies for Participatory Action Research by involving participants from many EcoSol-agroecology initiatives and raising more specific questions.

In this period, various small EcoSol initiatives were formed or strengthened. The forum was expanding various forms of proximity and reciprocity. Participants were able to strengthen their practices and inspire groups in other places. The forum has linked many initiatives, such as the following.

#### 5.2.1. Santos: La Livres Cooperativa

At national and regional levels, the *Frente Ambientalista* (environmentalist front) promotes responsible, conscientious consumers; they are sometimes called prosumers, supporting broadly beneficial production methods. This is epitomised by *la Livres Cooperativa de Consumidores Conscientes* (conscientious consumers), which organises Community-Supported Agriculture (CSA), supplying weekly baskets for its member subscribers in Santos. The term *livres* (free) has two meanings: products without agrochemicals, and *circuitos cortos* without capitalist middlemen, facilitating fair prices and fair remuneration for labour. In that dual sense, 'We promote popular access to *produtos do bem*', evoking the concept *Bem Viver* (living well).

The subscribers connect production with consumption under the principles of solidarity economy. La Livres supports farmers in rural sites distant from the city. Its subscriber bulletin highlights their agroecological methods, animal welfare measures, seasonal foods, and recipes to cook them [95]. Their publicity highlights mutual aid and solidaristic voluntary work, for example, in assembling the weekly baskets. It offers biofertiliser supplies as an incentive for members to grow their own food.

During the pandemic, la Livres created more flexible, resilient supply chains. It offered members the option to pick up their food basket from the premises or to receive a home delivery via an *ecociclista* cooperative. La Livres had a big rise in subscription requests, exceeding the food supply that could be readily arranged. However, many new subscribers lacked the socioecological commitment of the earlier ones. Seeking mainly 'healthy food', they wanted greater options for ordering more diverse foods. This preference required a more flexible online platform. So a solidaristic IT collective provided a redesign with more options. Offering greater choice helped extend the territorial supply chain. La Livres became a new outlet for some producers who lost access to conventional buyers during the pandemic [96].

#### 5.2.2. Peruipe: UMPES

Long before the pandemic, the Women's EcoSol Producers' Union (*União Mulheres Produtoras de Economia Solidária*, UMPES<sup>5</sup>) was co-organising a farmers' market, supported by the Rede Solidária and the municipality. Its common purposes emphasised reciprocity, mutual aid, and self-management, as well as a means to deal with gender inequalities. 'When a woman requests any kind of help, we offer a hand as a form of solidarity.' Training courses helped some women to establish an *Organização de Controle Social* (OCS) with the aim to certify their agroecological products as organic. Some groups sold them collectively for school meals through the *Programa Nacional de Alimentação Escolar* (PNAE); thus, they constructed institutional proximity.

When the pandemic began, UMPES helped many vulnerable families and stimulated solidaristic practices. Members bartered surplus products in order to offer consumers more variety and to increase their income. This new practice played a solidarity role: 'We value product exchanges, seen as a necessary practice to create fairer relationships' [97]. A *protagonismo feminista* (feminist leadership) was mobilising their previous relationships of trust, based on sentimental bonds. Through these various practices, the UMPES was extending cultural proximity.

The farmers' market was temporarily replaced by an online fair, promoted through social media. The physical market was eventually reorganised as a drive-thru with a collective stall. This had importance especially because few UMPES members had internet access for online orders. As another reason, 'It is necessary to speak with consumers to facilitate an understanding of EcoSol. A physical space is very important' [97]. Such products included artisanal bread with natural fermentation, as well as lightly processed products with spices, evoking memories of childhood foods. By such means, UMPES maintained or constructed cultural proximity with consumers.

In 2020, the school meals programme (PNAE) was suspended. However, as proposed by the solidarity network, in May 2021 the municipality began a campaign to distribute food baskets to vulnerable individuals. These new public purchases included food from UMPES members, who thereby gained greater financial autonomy.

UMPES members participate in social movements that demand public policies promoting women's rights, emancipation, and freedom. Through organisational and institutional proximity, members gained greater economic and political roles. These efforts exemplify a *protagonismo feminista*, overcoming gender inequalities through transformative resilience.

### 5.3. Public Policies in Dispute

Throughout the above period (2016–2022), FESBS made several regional interventions into public policies, often relating to the national context. After Brazil's 2016 shift to Right-wing governments, they reduced or dismantled support measures for agroecology and EcoSol. Likewise, the São Paulo government tried to close down the state agencies that support family farming, especially agroecology; these targets included the Agriculture Houses and the São Paulo State Land Institute Foundation (ITESP). To resist this threat, the FESBS supported protests, as well as webinars attracting various groups.

More generally, public policies have favoured so-called coastal 'development', e.g., civil construction for heavy tourism and second homes. This predatory development threatens natural resources, common goods, and artisanal production, thus worsening inequalities. According to the FESBS Manifesto, the region faces 'an increasingly globalized world guided exclusively by an economic paradigm of "production and consumption", which is based on the unlimited and predatory use of natural resources'. The manifesto advocated various support measures to build 'an economy of proximity' that could overcome inequalities in employment, income, and food security [98].

The Manifesto advocated a solidarity transition. In this perspective, artisanal producers (and service providers) organise themselves to devise solidarity financing, market products, buy inputs collectively, strengthen food security, and share knowledge about those practices. The FESBS sought endorsement by political candidates during the November 2020 municipal election campaign. Two years later its Manifesto highlighted land tenure as a territorial conflict between financial drivers versus a symbolic space of tradition, memory, and cultural practices.

Some municipalities had already adopted EcoSol policies but without implementing them. Local EcoSol networks formulated specific demands and mobilised support for them. Under such pressure, some municipalities established special units or procedures to design support measures with the EcoSol networks. UMPES promoted a charter for EcoSol policies that could overcome women's inequalities. UMPES has provided representatives for EcoSol advisory councils in towns such as Santos and Peruibe. There, the EcoSol Municipal Forum has promoted relevant initiatives. UMPES also has provided several speakers to the regional EcoSol forum. In those various ways, the FESBS sought to strengthen institutional proximity, encompassing both collaboration and conflict with local authorities.

In partnership with other movements, the regional EcoSol movement seeks to 'build another economy in the territory where we live and work'. Meetings must be held online to shorten territorial, regional spaces. It is important to have common objectives so that people unite in solidarity for the generation of work and income. We have to organise

our territories, our states, and nationally to make the Solidarity Economy an attractive alternative for workers [99].

Inspired by publicity about agroecological *circuitos cortos*, some lower-income groups established collective purchasing for cheaper access to agroecological products, thus enhancing their own food and nutritional security [100].

In the Baixada Santista, many agroecological producers benefited from training before the pandemic; then, FESBS continued to spread the skills. Among the producers' initiatives for collective marketing, only a few members had collective self-certification of organic status through an *Organização de Controle Social* (OCS). They were seeking advice on organisational and commercial aspects, so they asked for training in public policies.

Those requests gave rise to a short course on agroecological transition in cooperation with the FESBS and agri-extensionists. The course featured an Agroecological Transition Protocol, which highlighted solidarity relationships through multi-stakeholder alliances, cooperativism, and *circuitos cortos* [101]. In this way, the PAR method strengthened collective capacities for demanding and accessing public policies that favour EcoSol-agroecology.

Through all those efforts, the FESBS has extended a network territorialising various initiatives, supporters, and places in the region; these promote agroecological methods within wider artisanal skills and cultures. Solidarity networks provide means to strengthen collective capacities, promote solidaristic alternatives, and gain favourable public policies. At the same time, the networks help resist the hegemonic system, especially further land encroachments [102].

## 6. Conclusions

Agri-food systems have been undergoing two antagonistic transitions. Their respective agendas have sought to use space in rival ways, thus shaping contrary meanings and agendas for rural territorial development. In Latin America, this systemic conflict has gained great prominence and stimulated much debate. Informed by Latin American Critical Thought, social movements have elaborated a decolonial perspective on territorial development, inverting its colonial and neocolonial origins. Those movements have sought to extend EcoSol-agroecology networks, potentially towards regionalism from below [22]. Moreover, they have recast hegemonic concepts for counter-hegemonic meanings and practices, as outlined in the literature review and illustrated by our three case studies.

As the hegemonic territorial agenda, capitalist modernisation promotes capital-intensive inputs, causes environmental degradation, globalises distant supply chains, and marginalises or expels small-scale producers. This agenda has been deterritorialising space in ways undermining traditional practices, artisanal skills, and communitarian social bonds. Real estate interests have promoted a predatory development, the agri-modernisation techno-diffusionist model has devalued farmers' knowledge, and supermarket chains have promoted ultra-processed food. These practices have extended the original colonial and later neocolonial concepts of territory.

For a different rural territorial development, an agroecological transition valorises farmers' knowledge, provides better livelihoods, and thus helps them remain on the land or even attracts new producers. An agroecological transition depends on a greater convergence between social movements for *economia solidaria* and agroecology, here called EcoSol-agroecology. This convergence has arisen as both a resistance and alternative to the hegemonic agri-food system.

An EcoSol-agroecology convergence has diverse forms, varying with their social actors in specific contexts, as in our case studies (see Table 1). General patterns can be identified through some theoretical concepts (Section 2). EcoSol-agroecology networks promote solidaristic means of distributing the products of artisanal methods, thus incentivising and highlighting them. To bypass competitive market pressures, they develop collective marketing based on reciprocal mutual-aid relationships. These underlie short food supply chains, generally called *circuitos cortos* in various forms. Together these build territorial markets as a relocalisation process.

To protect or extend territorial markets, EcoSol-agroecology networks have mobilised common aims (e.g., democratic self-management, mutual aid, reciprocity, *Bem Viver*, or *Vivir Bien*). These helped to activate and link various societal proximities. By strengthening organisational proximities, EcoSol-agroecology networks mutualised their capacities and spread their solidaristic basis. Through cultural proximities, especially aesthetic meanings of traditional foods, they created bonds with consumer supporters. These efforts took advantage of geographical proximities, while also going beyond them [45].

These networks have a solidaristic, flexible character which facilitated adaptive responses to the COVID-19 pandemic, its hygiene requirements, and supply chain disruptions. EcoSol agroecology networks found opportunities to maintain, extend, or adapt *circuitos cortos*, e.g., by combining or bartering products among producers, deepening knowledge exchanges among them, creating new connections with more urban consumers, gaining public procurement contracts, etc.

Each in their own way, these practices strengthened solidaristic bonds, social identities, and collective claims for territorial control. They extended *diálogo de saberes* (knowledge exchange) from agri-production methods to *circuitos cortos* through multi-stakeholder networks of practitioners, external experts, and supportive public functionaries. Such knowledge exchange served the Participatory Action Research process, whereby practitioners evaluated outcomes of their previous actions in order to strengthen future ones.

All those efforts strengthened their capacities for institutional proximity, i.e., dealing with state bodies. EcoSol-agroecology networks achieved some gains in support measures, especially for agroecological methods and *circuitos cortos*. At the same time, they opposed harmful policies favouring dominant interests. The policy area illustrates the conflictual character of territory, likewise territorial development.

Building a *protagonismo feminista*, women's leadership has strengthened those societal proximities to maintain or extend *circuitos cortos*, especially during the pandemic. Their extra efforts increased their work overload, especially in caring roles, generally still within inequitable gender relations. Nevertheless, many women maintained or increased their financial independence, raised their self-esteem, and sometimes gained a more prominent political role in dealing with local authorities.

Through those various responses to the pandemic, EcoSol-agroecology networks enhanced socioecological resilience. They maintained ecologically sustainable production methods, linked them with a greater consumer base, and demanded policy support measures. Rather than simply bounce back to a previous state, these practices resiliently bounced forwards along novel lines.

In sum, EcoSol-agroecology networks have sought to territorialise local artisanal initiatives across localities on a regional basis and beyond. These activities serve to reterritorialise space for counter-hegemonic roles, resisting the dominant land use and agri-food system. They have sought to renew or construct place-based identities in ways promoting social transformation. In each place, diverse participants and contributions were integrated into a 'composed culture of social networks and belonging', symbolised by *circuitos cortos* [103].

The three case studies here together illustrate pervasive conflicts between agendas: for centralised, verticalised colonising markets versus horizontalised solidaristic ones, as originally theorised in the 1990s by Milton Santos. Likewise, they illustrate overt conflict between the respective public policies facilitating them. This antagonism has been neglected by many pro-agroecology perspectives, which imply a harmonious transitional process (as cited in the Introduction).

Such conflicts manifest an antagonism between the hegemonic agro-modernisation agenda and a counter-hegemonic one. By understanding the conflicts, an EcoSol strategy can better develop an alternative and resistance. This role can generate more effective strategies for an agroecological transition.

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## Notes

- <sup>1</sup> Campagna Cuidar é Resistir, [https://www.facebook.com/hashtag/cuidareresistir?source=feed\\_text&epa=HASHTAG](https://www.facebook.com/hashtag/cuidareresistir?source=feed_text&epa=HASHTAG).
- <sup>2</sup> Fórum de Comunidades Tradicionais (FCT). Available online: <https://www.facebook.com/forumdecomunidadestradicionalisnraparatyubatuba/>.
- <sup>3</sup> Observatório de Territórios Sustentáveis e Saudáveis da Bocaina (OTSS), <https://www.otss.org.br/>.
- <sup>4</sup> Fórum de Economia Solidária da Baixada Santista (FESBS), <https://www.facebook.com/groups/1384849224929289>; [http://www.economiasolidarias.org.br/?pg=procure\\_forum\\_regional](http://www.economiasolidarias.org.br/?pg=procure_forum_regional).
- <sup>5</sup> União Mulheres Produtoras de Economia Solidaria (UMPES), <https://www.facebook.com/umpes.mulheres>.
- <sup>6</sup> AgroEcos project website, <https://projetoagroecos.wixsite.com/meusite>; youtube channel, <https://www.youtube.com/@agroecologiaeconomiasolidaria6702>.

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