

# **EcoSol-agroecology as resistance and alternative development: Insights from Latin American experiences**

## **Summary**

The term 'EcoSol-agroecology' denotes a convergence between social movements for agroecological production and solidarity economy (*economía solidaria* in Latin America). Its networks construct short supply chains (*circuitos cortos*) bringing producers closer to consumers. By these means, participants seek to recover agri-food heritages, gain self-esteem for producers, raise their incomes, provide low-cost good-quality food and build solidaristic relationships. Together these practices enhance food and nutritional security. In all those ways, EcoSol-agroecology provides both a resistance and alternative to the dominant agri-food system.

The AgroEcos Project investigated three main questions: How do EcoSol-agroecology networks develop collective capacities for solidaristic *circuitos cortos*? How can Participatory Action-Research (PAR) help to identify and strengthen those capacities? How did these processes change during the Covid-19 pandemic?

Those questions were investigated in three territories (two in Brazil and one Bolivia). Each territory has a specific form of hegemonic predatory development, which provokes a territorial resistance including agroecological *circuitos cortos*. In the AgroEcos project, each research team had a partnership with a communitarian network for carrying out Participatory Action Research (PAR).

During the Covid-19 pandemic, the networks adapted their *circuitos cortos* to comply with anti-virus hygiene requirements and to overcome various difficulties. Their previous collective capacities were extended to devise creative adaptations, mobilising human and material resources. Each partnership elaborated an iterative (recursive) practice linking action with research. In this way, each one could turn difficulties into opportunities for *circuitos cortos* in new forms.

The various strategies can be understood through an analytical framework of societal proximities. Each network or initiative clarified common aims, for example, mutual aid, reciprocity, democratic self-management, socio-economic equity and food security. Their common aims have activated other proximities (organizational, institutional, cultural and geographical) as solidarity relationships. The cosmovision of *Vivir Bien/Bem Viver* inspires an alternative future development.

EcoSol-agroecology networks make joint demands for favourable public policies and against those which threaten EcoSol-agroecology. In particular, they need public policies that can help strengthen collective capacities to construct various societal proximities. This improvement depends on cooperation with agencies and networks which already have experiences of relevant capacities. Likewise it needs to mobilise resources for a broader capacity-building.

Collective capacities help to strengthen EcoSol-agroecology networks on a territorial basis, linking nearby initiatives. This basis provides a bottom-up organizational proximity, especially for making public policies accountable to the solidarity networks. In this way, a regional network can build a regionalism from below. By those means, EcoSol-agroecology networks create echoes, being replicated and extended across space and time. Hence our project's nickname AgroEcos. Collective capacities strengthen EcoSol-agroecology for resisting the dominant predatory development and creating a counter-hegemonic alternative development.

# EcoSol-agroecology as resistance and alternative development: Insights from South American experiences

Final Report of the AgroEcos project,  
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Les Levidow, Open University, [les.levidow@open.ac.uk](mailto:les.levidow@open.ac.uk),  
Davis Sansolo and Monica Schiavinatto, UNESP, [davis.sansolo@unesp.br](mailto:davis.sansolo@unesp.br), [monica.schi@gmail.com](mailto:monica.schi@gmail.com)



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## Introduction: EcoSol-agroecology links many benefits

Food insecurity and malnutrition are set to worsen globally, alongside many environmental harms, thus aggravating inequalities from the dominant agri-food system. As one driver, state policies generally prioritise the input-intensive production of commodity crops for animal feed and/or processed products, especially through exports. In some countries, subsidies have increased the availability and reduced the price of staple foods and their derivatives, thus potentially maintaining calorific intake. Such interventions deter and make relatively more expensive the consumption of more healthy but less subsidized foods such as fruits, vegetables and pulses (FAO, 2022: 56). This overall regime degrades agri-food landscapes, aggravates land-use conflicts and undermines nutritional quality, thus perpetuating food and nutritional insecurity.

Why? According to Oxfam, '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 (Oxfam, 2022).

This remedy has relevance to local food production everywhere. As a central means, agroecological methods link many social, economic and environmental benefits; they enhance food security, alongside nutritional quality and diversity (Oxfam, 2014). An agroecology agenda 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, according to the FAO's High-Level Panel of Experts (2019: 41).

Along those lines, European agroecology agendas have combined many societal benefits (e.g. rural livelihoods, fair prices, socio-economic equity, biodiversity conservation and nutritional quality), whose fulfilment depends on a solidarity economy. Producers thereby avoid middlemen, retain more of the value that they add, and build closer relationships with consumers. 'Peasant agroecology empowers local and circular markets building resilience and autonomy from global corporate markets', notes the European Coordination of La Via Campesina (ECVC, 2022). The social and solidarity economy (SSE) offers a practical way forward. 'At the very least, you get practice in how to do things differently; more optimistically, you build an alternative, fairer and more interconnected economy', says a Europe-wide coalition promoting agroecology (ARC2020, 2019).

Such arrangements are variously called alternative agri-food networks, proximate markets, short supply chains, *circuits courts* in French or *circuitos cortos* in Spanish. European agroecology agendas have embraced a social and solidarity economy (SSE) approach, 'but it is still in its infancy and will need political vision and consumers' engagement', notes Agroecology Europe (AEEU, 2020: 4). Since the 1990s agroecology has been linked with the solidarity economy (*economía solidaria*) in Latin America (Oxfam, 2014). European efforts can learn from strategies there.

There the AgroEcos project investigated and facilitated EcoSol-agroecology networks. This hybrid term denotes a convergence between two social movements – for a solidarity economy and for agroecological production. Their networks construct short supply chains (aka solidaristic *circuitos cortos*), bringing producers closer to consumers.

The AgroEcos project originally aimed to investigate two main questions: How do EcoSol-agroecology networks develop collective capacities for *circuitos cortos*? How can Participatory Action Research help to identify and strengthen those capacities? To understand responses to the Covid-19 pandemic, we also asked: How did those processes change?

Those questions were investigated in three territories. Each one has a context of a hegemonic predatory development, which has provoked a territorial resistance including agroecological *circuitos cortos*. Solidarity networks link agroecology with artisanal production in various forms. In each territory the

solidarity networks make demands for favourable public policies and against those which threaten EcoSol-agroecology.

In each territory the AgroEcos had a research team collaborating with a communitarian partner as the collective subject of Participatory Action Research (PAR). Here are the three partnerships, with a short description and reference to the case-study report.

- La Baixada Santista, Brazil: La Universidad Estadual Paulista (UNESP), São Paulo, has a partnership with the Fórum de Economia\* Solidaria da Baixada Santista (FESBS).  
This network links various artisanal initiatives, organizes means to build their capacities and demands favourable public policies. The network stimulates new agri-producers, who have mainly an urban or peri-urban background. Their initiatives recover traditions of mutual aid. See the report (Sansolo e Schiavinatto, 2022).
- La Bocaina, Brazil: The Observatório de Territórios Sustentáveis e Saudáveis da Bocaina (OTSS) has a partnership with the Fórum de Comunidades Tradicionais (FCT).  
Three groups of traditional communities have maintained their communitarian relationships for centuries. Since the 1970s, however, new neocolonial threats have stimulated resistance through new social connections. Since 2014 the Campaign 'Preservar é Resistir' (To Conserve is to Resist) has promoted 'agroecology cultivating territories of bem viver'. See the report (Gallo et al., 2022).
- El Valle Central: La Comunidad de Estudio Jaina, Tarija, Bolívia, has a partnership with la Asociación Bioferia y la comunidad Subcentral St Agustin.  
Indigenous peasant communities confront threats to their communitarian relationships and traditional Systems of Life. Some women farmers organize a weekly urban fair in Tarija to maintain and promote their food heritages, as well as to gain self-esteem and income. See the report (Vacaflores y Lizárraga, 2022).

This report compares the three territories through analytical concepts, thus demonstrating their broader relevance. It explains the continent-wide context, answers the analytical questions, and explains practical implications for public policy. To know more about the project's methods of Participatory Action Research, see the English-language article (Sansolo et al., 2021). More detail is available in the report on each territory in its own language (as above).

## **1 Latin American context of EcoSol-agroecology: a counter-hegemonic convergence**

In Latin America the hegemonic agri-food development strengthens agribusiness, whose model follows the logic of the Green Revolution. It promotes dependence on technological packages, especially external inputs, which need financial credit, thus intensifying pressures to increase production. This hegemonic development undermines social bonds, worsens inequalities and degrades natural resources. It plays a predatory, sometimes neocolonial, role.

The hegemonic development imposes multiple harms that have provoked resistance, alternatives with a communitarian character and territorial demands (Fernandes, 2008; Leite & Delgado, 2011). Here 'territory' is understood as a used territory that transforms a space (Santos e Silveira, 2000). Its use establishes relations of power, which encompasses coexisting antagonistic and complementary agendas. To resist the hegemonic model, an important alternative has emerged from the growing convergence of two social movements: agroecology and Solidarity Economy (EcoSol), as well as feminist movements.

### 1.1 Convergence of social movements

For several decades, social movements have promoted agroecology, which names and improves traditional agricultural practices (Altieri, 2017). These provide many benefits: they use natural resources and promote biodiversity conservation, avoiding the use of chemical inputs, carbon emissions and environmental degradation. These methods produce healthy food that can alleviate food insecurity. These networks seek to conserve, recover and expand socio-biodiversity, emerging from exchanges between agroecological knowledge, culture, nutrition, etc. (ANA, 2012; SOF, 2015).

These movements seek to maintain complementary relationships between agrobiodiversity and ethno-sociodiversity, as the basis of food heritages and traditional foods. Due to traditional food characteristics, promoters establish closer relationships with consumers at farmers' markets (Schmitt, 2020: 118). However, they rarely sell 'agroecological' products, a term which is little known by consumers. The products are called, for example, peasant foods, poison-free products, 'produtos de bem' (in Brazil), or organic products when they gain certification. For a transformative agroecology, some movements in Brazil promote 'true food' ('comida de verdade', ANA, 2021, analyzed by da Silva, 2020).



Agroecology names, encompasses and extends various traditional practices from centuries before the term existed. The name 'agroecology' brings a scientific perspective to a systematic understanding of agroecosystems and ecological processes. This knowledge provides a basis for knowledge exchanges between producers, agronomists, extensionists, etc. (Toná and Guhur, 2009; Martínez-Torres and Rosset, 2016). The concept is related to the concept 'ecology of knowledge': Science enters as part of a broader ecology of knowledge, where scientific knowledge can dialogue with peasants' knowledge, popular knowledge, the knowledge of indigenous people, the knowledge of marginal urban populations, etc. (de Sousa Santos, 2006). Knowledge dialogues extend to circuitos cortos as forms of solidarity. The initiatives have various forms such as an Association, Cooperative or informal network

As a transformative agenda, agroecology brings together three aspects: scientific research, new agricultural practices, and social movements (Wezel et al., 2009). A triple process of innovation -- cognitive, technological and sociopolitical -- is encompassed in the same transformation. Social movements have achieved technological improvements through knowledge-dialogue and participatory research (Toledo, 2012).

At the same time, many social movements have been promoting solidarity economy (EcoSol) activities in Latin America for several decades. In capitalist firms, 'information and inquiries flow from the bottom up', while orders come from the top down, according to Paul Singer (2002: 17). In contrast, EcoSol need bottom-up self-governance.

EcoSol seeks to develop enterprises based on mutual aid within and between economic initiatives. As common purposes, these networks seek democratic self-management and socioeconomic equity, especially for low-income people and women. As a motivation for EcoSol,

It is born from a critical attitude towards a development model that produces wealth by generating poverty, subordinating and exploiting work and nature. Guided by non-commercial values, such as solidarity and democracy, the solidarity economy incorporates the cultural, ethnic and ecological dimensions of sustainable development... (Ávila-Romero, 2018: 81).

EcoSol promotes solidaristic circuitos cortos with the aim of avoiding capitalist middlemen, bringing producers closer to consumers, increasing income and spreading a solidarity culture. They are based on a cooperative sense of reciprocity, which facilitates sustainable strategies that promote the well-being of both producers and consumers (FAO Colombia, 2021: 24). Solidarity networks link agroecology with artisanal production in various ways and make demands on public policies. Beyond an alternative development, EcoSol could play a counter-hegemonic role.

In Latin America the concept of EcoSol had an origin in industrial sectors during the 1990s. Sometimes an owner abandoned or 'bankrupted' his factory and the workers took it back on a self-managed basis. The concept initially highlighted initiatives that already had a business form with legal personality. Later the EcoSol concept named artisanal and informal initiatives, including agroecological producers. They needed to adapt the original framework to those contexts and producers. They sought to organize themselves to commercialize products collectively, as more viable forms of circuitos cortos, e.g. through farmers' markets, Community-Supported Agriculture (CSA), institutional purchases, Community Based Tourism (TBC), etc.

Many initiatives differ from the entrepreneurial framework, so the EcoSol concept has been adapted for other forms. Circuitos cortos encompass forms beyond monetary exchanges, for example barter and donations. The initiatives have various organizational forms such as Association, Cooperative or flexible network in the informal economy. The international network (RIPESS, 2015) has a network for Latin America and the Caribbean ([RIPESS LAC](#)).

Instead of EcoSol, traditional practices of indigenous farmers are called a community economy, based on mutual aid. Here is an origin of the Buen Vivir concept, which helps to visualize three great contributions: 'A non-extractivist relationship with Nature. Other ontologies, epistemologies, knowledges and cultural practices. Other more horizontal and democratic social relations' (Ávila-Romero, 2018: 87). In the face of predatory and neocolonial development, Buen Vivir (Bem Viver in Portuguese) can inspire decolonial knowledge and roles.

But such advances can continue various inequalities, especially for women, without efforts to overcome them. Women's jobs considered productive, those visible in the market circuit, 'are just the tip of a huge block that hides domestic and care work, mostly carried out by women' (Zuluaga et al., 2018).

Agroecology could describe traditional practices, mainly by women and thus unpaid in the patriarchal system. From a feminist perspective:

From the perspective of the sexual division of labor, care – and even productive care on many occasions – carried out by women has been socially invisible because it is concentrated in the unpaid domestic sphere. Within the set of productive activities, whose relevance is made invisible from the logics that emphasize economic-monetary values, there is family farming, strongly led by women. Usually the productive agricultural work they carry out is not recognized. This lack of recognition occurs at the family, community, and most frameworks (CLACSO, 2021: 204).

To overcome these inequalities, many women play a central role in EcoSol-agroecology initiatives, seeking to gain higher income, recognition and self-esteem. Women generally have a large participation in the solidarity economy, especially in informal sectors such as agroecological production in Latin America (CIRIEC, 2022). 'The solidarity economy focuses on the empowerment of women and other marginalized groups, as well as the fight for social inclusion and against poverty', according to an international EcoSol network (RIPESS, 2015).

In EcoSol-agroecology women have played a central role. According to a feminist report on agroecology, this experience 'suggests that female leadership (*protagonismo femenino*) is essential for autonomous and endogenous construction processes to occur' (Zuluaga et al., 2018: 11). After that report, the authors reflected on the terminology. According to them, 'women' or 'feminine' is an adjective generally stereotyped for physical or behavioral characteristics. In contrast, 'feminist' focuses on the processes of women as social and political subjects. Accordingly, this report uses the term 'feminist protagonism'.

In EcoSol-agroecology, women's leadership has been prominent for many reasons. Men have more easily accessed credit to finance technological packages. Women frequently organize protests against pesticides, which threaten natural resources and human well-being. In the same way, they participate in initiatives for agroecological alternatives, frequently using their home garden – huerta casera in Spanish, or quintal in Portuguese. These women come mainly from low-income groups (along with some from the middle class), indigenous origin or minority ethnic groups. In Brazil's EcoSol initiatives, approximately 60% of female members are black (SOF, 2020; Zuluaga et al, 2018).

They organize themselves for mutual aid and collective marketing. This participation increases their self-esteem and income. Women have a leadership role in production and marketing groups, as well as a governance role in public spaces such as town halls, associations, etc.



In Latin America these convergent movements, here called EcoSol-agroecology, go beyond an alternative. Solidarity networks oppose the hegemonic development, confronting its inequalities. Thus, the networks have a counter-hegemonic potential (Petersen and Monteiro, 2021). There the joint forces of Latin American rural, intellectual, and scientific movements have uniquely forged regional integration, even a regionalism from below. This agenda recognizes territory as a space for the reproduction of life, as well as a place to create and resignify socio-cultural relationships. EcoSol-agroecology illustrates a variant of Latin American Critical Thought with a decolonial perspective. Agroecology has been promoted as a new model to territorialize space, as a regionalism from below (Rosset et al., 2021).

### 1.2 Public policies

Agroecology networks make demands for favorable public policies (CGIAR, 2021; Sabourin, 2017). Sometimes they oppose harmful public policies favouring agribusiness and more generally a predatory development. Both categories cover many types beyond agri-food policies, for example, access to land, natural resources and financial credit.

To promote agroecological circuitos cortos, it is necessary to 'improve the capacity of local authorities to design local policies that support agroecological markets through a more direct connection between producers and consumers' (FAO-INRA, 2018: 61). Solidarity networks demand various support measures, including those pertaining to EcoSol in general: collective training throughout the entire chain from production to market; market infrastructure for direct sales to consumers; product storage; capabilities in social technologies, thus minimizing the need for financial investments; low interest rate loans; coordination of artisanal producers. Also measures specific to agroecology: secure access to land; light processing to add value to products; training in traditional foods and Non-Conventional Food Plants (PANCs); transportation and infrastructure for marketing, especially farmer's markets; collective access to institutional purchases; and a collective process for organic self-certification, as explained next.

Many farmers organize themselves through a Participation Guarantee System (SPG; EcoAgricultor, 2016; IFOAM, 2007, 2014, 2020). This continuous process improves sustainable practices of production and direct commercialization in conjunction with the local community. In addition, it encourages mutual aid among the participants. In Brazil, solidarity networks proposed such a system with a legal basis for organic products; the government adopted this proposal under the name Organization of Social Control (OCS; MAPA, 2007, 2020).

Thus agroecological producers avoid third-party certification (auditoria), which imposes bureaucratic burdens and a high cost. With such certification, agribusiness has built a market niche selling expensive organic products to rich consumers, especially in foreign markets. In Latin America, many governments promote these organic niche markets to increase national income. By contrast, an OCS system favours small-scale agroecological producers and helps their sales through circuitos cortos, which provide lower-cost alternatives to expensive organic products (as well as alternatives to ultra-processed products).

For the context of the two countries in this project: Since November 2021 Bolivia again has a government favorable to EcoSol-agroecology, sometimes called the communitarian economy, but lacks effective measures to support agroecological improvement. During the Brazilian government led by the PT (2003-16), agroecological networks built territorial linkages as a basis for public policies that promote territorial planning, technical assistance and rural extension, certification and payment of environmental services, as well as on a territorial scale (Schmidt et al., 2017: 97). However, since 2016 the Federal government has

dismantled public policies favorable to family farming, especially agroecology (Niederle et al., 2021; Sabourin, 2020, 2021). Governments end up promoting much more individual capitalist actions than collective or collaborative ones.

Given the argument for 'bottom-up' self-management of enterprises (Singer, 2002), this need also applies to public policy, according to Brazilian officials who support EcoSol (Red de Gestores, 2021). In this way, public policies can be made accountable to solidarity networks, initially at the municipal and regional level. Our project indicates means to build such policies.

### 1.3 Pandemic difficulties as opportunities

Of course, the Covid-19 pandemic interrupted capitalist normality as well as EcoSol activities. To continue them, the networks quickly mobilized their short-term creative adaptive capacity. Throughout 2020, social distancing required EcoSol networks to devise various strategies so that people could somehow adapt to the newly imposed conditions. The circuitos cortos faced new difficulties, for example, to transport products, and comply with the hygiene and health safety requirements.

Social isolation and fear of virus contamination required new marketing strategies and access to food, especially agroecological food. Producers took steps to adapt or innovate circuitos cortos. Some initiatives extended solidarity links that had been established for many years. The circuitos cortos extended characteristics of solidarity economy beyond transactions of material interest. They are based on a cooperative sense of reciprocity, which facilitates sustainable strategies that allow the well-being of both producers and consumers (FAO Colombia, 2021: 24). In some women's initiatives, faces, emotions, and personal bonds were remembered by sending photos, videos, and audios (SOF, 2021: 34). In many cases, this effort succeeded in adapting and continuing the short circuits, thus limiting income loss and making women's contributions more visible.

In this way, the collective subject turned difficulties into opportunities. New participants helped farmers by taking on various roles, for example, organizing food donations to vulnerable people, managing orders, organizing baskets, distributing them, etc. Some initiatives spread their innovations so that solidarity networks could replicate their experiences.

Yet the pandemic was worsening previous inequalities of class, race, and gender. In particular, women lost income and had a greater care burden (SOF, 2020, 2021). For women in circuitos cortos, their greater economic activity worsened their double burden, which continued without a pause. Women needed to work more because their housework increased during the pandemic; likewise their responsibilities to care for the environment, common goods and social reproduction. These roles are still generally unevenly distributed between genders (SOF, 2021).

## **2 Solidaristic circuitos cortos adapt during the pandemic: our perspectives**

In January 2020, our project started virtual meetings between the teams to plan the project activities. Meanwhile we were discussing counter-hegemonic perspectives, mainly through literature reviews (as in the previous section). Each team wrote a review: on EcoSol-agroecology, feminist leadership (and inequalities), record-keeping about project activities, and Participatory Action Research (PAR).

The latter review covered perspectives on resistance to neocolonial hegemony. For example, Orlando Fals Borda proposed that it is necessary to 'proceed from the bottom up of social structures, and/or from the peripheries to the centers of the systems involved' (Fals Borda, 2009: 329). Likewise, PAR needs a sentipensante character, combining cognition with feeling: To 'face the setbacks of life and be able to overcome them, whoever locks himself in adversity to later return to existence with the same energy as before, is also the sentipensante man who combines reason and love, the body and the heart, to get rid of all the (bad) formations that dismember that harmony and to be able to tell the truth...' (Moncayo, 2009: 8-9; here 'man' means persons). With this objective, we were planning face-to-face methodologies in each territory.



However, the news of the pandemic arrived in March 2020. We decided together to continue working virtually through digital platforms such as Skype or Zoom, then Google Meet and Whatsapp. Each community partner continued their discussions on how to respond to the pandemic. It used digital communication-also to coordinate decisions. But many growers lacked access to Wi-Fi or a computer; they became more dependent on mobile phones, thus limiting access. It was necessary to seek other measures for democratic self-governance. To get closer to consumers, some initiatives used virtual means which are suitable for mobile phones, for example, by adapting social media and applications (especially Facebook and Whatsapp).

In parallel, the project organized webinars to exchange strategies, expand social inclusion and increase support for circuitos cortos. In this way, the project maintained a dialogic process between researchers and solidarity networks, to accommodate their demands through some analytical concepts and questions. See Annex I: Analytical Questions.

To continue their circuitos cortos, the networks quickly mobilized their creative adaptive capacity. In this way, each collective subject turned difficulties into opportunities. New participants helped farmers by taking on various roles, for example, organizing food donations to vulnerable people, managing orders, organizing baskets, distributing them, etc. Some initiatives spread their innovations so that solidarity networks could replicate their experiences

From our three case studies, here are some examples

- La Baixada Santista: When the farmer's markets had to comply with the new hygiene requirements, the agroecological initiatives quickly adapted social media (Facebook and Whatsapp) to organize themselves and to solicit food orders online.
- La Bocaina: For emergency food deliveries (including exchanges and donations), the effort needed to start quickly, experimenting by trial-and-error. Meanwhile the consortium systematized much information: it expanded exchanges (of food, seeds and knowledge) among the traditional communities. This effort identified more areas available for agroecological production.
- El Valle Central: When the Tarija farmers' market had to close, Jaina looked for resources to organize home deliveries of food from the Bioferia Association in the city, step by step from scratch. This experimental practical experience allowed the consortium to build a new system of Canastas Campesinas (peasant baskets).

PAR often involves a sequence of ordered steps, for example: 'Plan, Action, Observe and Reflect'. Such a sequence could structure an investigation and planning process, which helps to design and implement actions to transform reality, thus evaluating and adjusting this process based on the observed results. But PAR is not about a linear sequential logic, but rather about 'a recursive practice' between action and research (Matus, 2013: 7).

In each case here, the collective subject devised short-term recursive (or iterative) practice. It quickly needed to test measures to mobilize human and material resources, without adequate time to design the new arrangement through research. To disseminate and understand these adaptations, the researchers facilitated a knowledge-dialogue between farmers, their associations, extension agents, technicians, conscious consumers, etc. This process exchanged perspectives and knowledge, thus generating new knowledge to experiment, apply, adapt, etc. These dialogues provided a foundation for the PAR approach, which thereby extended collective capabilities for circuitos cortos.

To learn from these experiences, the project discussed many analytical concepts with counter-hegemonic perspectives. We eventually adapted one partner's analytic framework from before the pandemic. According to the FESBS, a solidarity economy depends on societal proximities of many kinds. Proximate or common purposes can activate other proximities (Rodrigues da Silva, et al., 2018: 214-16). In particular:

- Proximate purposes: democratic self-management, mutual aid, socioeconomic inclusion, respect for the environment, etc.

- 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. This support can be facilitated by such professionals integrating their expertise through a EcoSol local forum.

Participatory action research can help to extend such proximities (ibid: 214). Their synergies can make a solidarity economy viable.

In this way, EcoSol practices generally rely on collective capacities to establish and link those societal proximities. Solidarity networks build a sense of community beyond cultural and territorial roots. The *homo situs* concept indicates a 'recomposed man', who identifies with a symbolic place. Various contributions could be integrated into a 'composed culture of social networks and belonging' (Zaoual, 2010: 31, 34). These efforts also strengthen solidarity networks to face various threats, which include internal and external social conflicts. Through their own collective capacities, solidarity networks are better able to fight for favorable public policies

Proximate (or common) purposes can activate and link the various proximities. Moreover, this effort develops collective capacities for such proximities (Rodrigues da Silva et al., 2020).

### 3 La Baixada Santista, Brazil

In the Baixada Santista, UNESP has a partner: the Fórum de Economia Solidária da Baixada Santista ([FESBS](#)). It links various artisanal initiatives, especially EcoSol-agroecology networks. See the [Facebook](#) page and the project's film (Sansolo, 2022).

#### 3.1 Before the pandemic: solidarity networks and their training

This coastal region has a main port city (Santos) and nine coastal towns. People face predatory development, in particular heavy tourism, coastal displacement and the petrochemical industry. Almost the entire food supply comes from outside the region. Allied with agribusiness, supermarkets promote unhealthy ultra-processed foods. Many popular neighborhoods are 'food deserts', lacking fresh fruit and vegetables. The region hardly has a 'community', except for small Guarani groups.

Artisanal producers provide a socioeconomic base to build a communitarian bonds through solidarity networks. Some towns have peri-urban agriculture, and many people have a quintal (home garden) to grow plants, as a base to exchange or sell products. Many participants from urban or peri-urban backgrounds recently entered agriculture. Before the pandemic, in some cities in the region, EcoSol initiatives were built for collectively marketing artisanal products, either organized by agroecological producers or by conscious consumers.

In this context, the Baixada Santista Solidarity Economy Forum (FESBS) has linked public policy managers with solidarity networks and initiatives in each municipality. This network helped establish and expand collective capabilities through training programs, especially for collective marketing. Before the pandemic, the former Coordination of Comprehensive Technical Assistance (Coordenadoria de Assistência Técnica Integral or CATI) had been developing the Programa Microbacias II (Access to Markets, 2011-18) with the support of FESBS. This program sought to increase the competitiveness and improve the quality of life of family farmers, especially indigenous ones.

Using a constructivist methodology, the strategy maximized participation, respecting socio-cultural identities, drawing up ethno-development plans for villages and a business plan for family farmers. In three towns, indigenous villages established self-managed agroecological development projects. These communities have been preparing to manage their productive initiatives, such as agroforestry systems, sustainable fish farming production, and Community-Based Tourism.

The training programme emphasised skills for circuitos cortos. Fruits can be lightly processed into tasty products that have a longer shelf life, earn more revenue and avoid waste, which occurs in about 40% of fresh food in Brazil. With proper care in lightly processing the fruit, the products remind people of favourite childhood flavors and aromas. Through these characteristics, vendors establish closer relationships with consumers at farmers' markets. The participants also gained skills for collective marketing with the public procurement programme for school meals (PNAE, the Programa Nacional de Alimentación Escolar).

The Forum has defined EcoSol as 'the set of economic activities -- production, distribution, consumption, savings and credit -- organized in a self-managed way'. 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' (FESBS, 2020a).

### 3.2 During the pandemic: solidaristic adaptations

The pandemic interrupted the articulation of circuitos cortos in production and consumption, as in other economic circuits. Farmers' markets had to adapt to hygiene requirements or replace them with other forms. Solidarity relations of proximity strengthened solidarity networks through innovative solutions. They managed to solicit food orders and deliver them through individual transport (cars) or through cooperatives that favour direct trade (Rodrigues da Silva et al., 2020). The networks facilitated donations, emphasizing their role as solidarity rather than charity.

EcoSol networks shared their experiences with other initiatives through webinars, establishing a broader knowledge-dialogue on a regional scale. The FESBS promoted a series of seminars that became spaces for continuous training of managers, allies and leaders of EcoSol initiatives. Topics included many artisanal activities including agroecology. In these activities, the various initiatives discussed their experiences: collective marketing, cooperative organization, democratic self-management, support from municipalities and strategies. For PAR methodologies, the research partnership organized frequent webinars involving participants from EcoSol-agroecology initiatives, clarified more specific questions and conducted interviews with some initiatives.

In this period during the pandemic, various small solidarity networks in the Baixada Santista were formed and strengthened. The Forum has become a core of socio-cultural construction based on various forms of proximity and reciprocity. In this way, the participants were able to strengthen their practices and inspire groups in other places. The Forum links many initiatives, such as the following.

Santos: la Livres Coop



Livres Cooperativa, Santos. Foto: *La Folha Santista*.

In Santos, [la Livres](#) Cooperativa Consumidores Conscientes exemplifies Community-Supported Agriculture (CSA by conscientious consumers). Its name *Livres* ('free') has two meanings: products without agrochemicals, and circuitos cortos without capitalist middlemen. 'We promote or popular access to produtos do bem'. This evokes the cosmovision of Bem Viver or Buen Vivir in Spanish.

La Livres organizes weekly baskets for its member-subscribers. The subscriptions connect production and consumption under the principles of solidarity economy. La Livres supports farmers in rural locations far from the city and disseminates news about their agroecological methods to consumers. It promotes seasonal foods and recipes to cook them, as a means to counter the dominant global food chains in supermarket chains. In all these ways, it builds a cultural proximity between producers and consumers.

During the pandemic, la Livres offered the option of picking up the food basket directly from the venue or receiving a basket at home -- especially by ecobikers, a solidarity-based cooperative. The Livres Coop then received many more orders, soon exceeding the food supplies. It highlights mutual aid and voluntary work, for example, to help assemble the weekly baskets.

#### Colectivo Banana Verde

With its base in Bertioga, the [Coletivo Banana Verde](#) (green banana) originated during the pandemic, when the closure of traditional markets led twenty producers to start collective marketing. Instead of a cooperative, the Collective combines producers and associations with their own separate identities. As regards organizational proximity, 'We are a group of family farmers and small artisan food and beverage producers, committed to creating a network of producers and consumers, for the construction of a new economy' (see [Facebook page](#)).



[Coletivo Banana Verde](#): 'The form is open to place orders for delivery on Saturdays'

The Coordinator said: "A common purpose has been mutual help: The organic producer is used to working in a group. We are hitting the market head-on. Money is a political tool to support the collective in a new economy". They have done collective marketing through pre-paid online orders. With this arrangement, growers lose less food to waste than at farmers' markets. The Collective seeks to educate consumers about agri-food alternatives. "Consumers must understand that they are a fundamental active part in maintaining a space" for agroecological methods. The publicity highlights agroecological methods for seasonal products: "Products are updated weekly according to the availability of ingredients and the rhythms of Nature!" (página [Facebook](#), 23.06.2020).

#### Peruíbe: Solidarity Network and UMPES

Before the pandemic the [Rede Solidária de Peruíbe](#) was organized as a means to unite people who produce artisanal products (including agroecological food), fisherfolk and service providers. This network has sought to commercialize locally and promote reciprocity among its members. Its activities strengthen an organizational proximity among producers. During the pandemic an online fair and Facebook page were created to promote all available artisanal products, especially food. The network spread the [slogan](#) 'Constructing a new reality', signifying alternatives to dominant global markets and thus strengthening a cultural proximity with consumers.



The Women's EcoSol Producers' Union (União Mulheres Produtoras de EcoSol, [UMPES](#)) was created in 1987. It has co-organized a farmers' market, supported by the Rede Solidária and the municipality. Its common purposes emphasised reciprocity, mutual aid and self-management, as well as 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 a Organização de Controle Social (OCS) for collectively certifying their products as organic (MAPA, 2007, 2020). Some groups sold organic products collectively for school meals through the Programa Nacional de Alimentação Escolar (PNAE); thus they constructed an institutional proximity.

When the pandemic began, UMPES helped many vulnerable families and facilitated exchanges. Members bartered surplus products in order to offer consumers more variety and increase their income. This new practice played a role of solidarity: "We value product exchanges, seen as a necessary practice to create fairer relationships." A protagonismo feminista was mobilizing their previous relationships of trust, based on sentimental bonds (UMPES, 2021). By these various measures, the UMPES was rebuilding a cultural proximity.

The farmers' market was temporarily replaced by an online fair through social media. The physical market was reorganized as a drive-thru with a collective stall. This had importance especially because few UMPES members have 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.' Such products include 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 a 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.



UMPES poster highlights women's multiple burdens

Drive-thru market stall. Foto: Juanita Trigo Nasser

UMPES members participate in social movements that demand public policies promoting the human rights of women, their emancipation and freedom. 'We use these policies to organize fairs where they can sell

their products and have financial autonomy,' said the Coordinator (UMPES, 2021). Thus, some members gain a greater economic and citizenship role through an organizational and institutional proximity. These efforts exemplify a feminist leadership.

### 3.3 Public policies in dispute

Since 2016, the federal and state governments continued to reduce or dismantle support measures for agroecology and EcoSol. Likewise, in the State of São Paulo, the government tried to close the state bodies that support family farming, especially agroecology; these targets included the Agriculture Houses and the São Paulo State Land Institute Foundation (ITESP). The FESBS supported protests, as well as webinars that attracted different groups, to resist this state destruction.

More generally, public policies favour so-called coastal 'development', e.g. heavy tourism and second homes. This predatory development threatens natural resources, common goods and craft 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 (FESBS, 2020b: 5; Vasques, 2020b). The Manifesto proposed a solidarity transition. In this perspective, artisanal producers (and service providers) organize themselves to practice solidarity financing, market products, buy inputs collectively, strengthen food security and share knowledge.

For its Manifesto, the FESBS sought endorsement from politicians, initially candidates during the November 2020 municipal election campaign. Under such popular demands, some municipalities established special units or procedures to design support measures with the EcoSol networks. Some municipalities had already adopted EcoSol policies, but had not implemented them. Local initiatives were tasked with formulating specific demands and mobilizing support for these policies. In those ways, the FESBS strengthened an institutional proximity.

In the Baixada Santista many agroecological producers had already benefited from training before the pandemic; FESBS continued to spread the skills. Among the producers' initiatives for collective marketing, however, only a few members already had collective self-certification of organic status through an OCS (MAPA, 2007, 2020). They were seeking advice on organizational and commercial aspects, so they asked for training in public policies.

Those requests gave rise to a short course on agroecological transition (UNESP, 2021). This included an Agroecological Transition Protocol, which highlighted solidarity relationships through multi-stakeholder alliances, cooperativism and circuitos cortos (CATI, 2021). In this way, the PAR method strengthened training for accessing public policies that favour EcoSol-agroecology in cooperation with the FESBS.

Through all those measures, the FESBS has extended and strengthened a territorial network. It has encompassed more artisanal initiatives, supporters and places in the region. It provides a basis for making public policies accountable to EcoSol practitioners, strengthens their collective capacities, and promotes a solidaristic development alternative. In these ways, an organizational proximity can strengthen institutional proximity to gain and use favorable public policies, as well as to limit the harmful ones. (See the report by Sansolo and Schiavinatto, 2022).

## **4 La Bocaina, Brasil**

The Observatório de Territórios Sustentáveis e Saudáveis da Bocaina ([OTSS](#)) is a programme of the Fundação Oswaldo Cruz (Fiocruz) in partnership with the Fórum de Comunidades Tradicionais de Angra, Paraty y Ubatuba ([FCT](#)). The latter encompasses groups of caiçaras (descendants of Portuguese settlers from centuries ago), quilombola peoples (descendants of escaped slaves who formed their own communities) and indigenous (mainly Guarani). A prominent slogan is 'Agroecology cultivating territories

of bem viver' (Vivir Bien). See the [Facebook page](#) and [videos](#) in the series [Cuidar é Resistir](#) (to care is to resist).

#### 4.1 Before the pandemic: la Campagna 'Preserver é Resistir' (To Conserve is to Resist)

In the Bocaina, traditional communities face countless territorial conflicts due to real estate speculation, large enterprises and predatory tourism. The State created Conservation Areas overlapping with their territories, thus damaging the peoples' cultural system, even criminalizing their traditional agricultural, extractivist and fishing practices. They were obliged to drastically reduce the areas historically used for subsistence farming, barter and commercialization. Faced with this adverse context, these peoples have been resisting the expropriation and devaluation of their ways of life, while demanding public policies that can reconcile nature conservation with their permanence and traditional practices. During the 1990s and 2000s, collective efforts rescued traditional knowledge and gave visibility to peasants who continued their traditional practices, despite pressure from those in charge of the Conservation Areas. For example, the 'mutirões agroecológicos' (agroecological mutual aid) initiative built seedling nurseries and 30 pilots of agroforestry systems in Paraty.

The Forum of Traditional Communities (FCT) emerged in 2007 from unity among the quilombola, indigenous and caiçara peoples to face the threats experienced by their communities. It was based partly on the National Policy for Sustainable Development of Traditional Peoples. These communities came together to face the conflicts that they were experiencing and to defend their rights, especially their traditional practices and permanence in their territories.

In 2009 the FCT established an alliance with Fiocruz based on shared management and governance, as a basis for the OTSS. 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' (Gallo e de Nascimento, 2019: 9-11).

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). In 2012 the FCT started the Juçara Project to generate family income through the sustainable management of palm tree fruits. They marketed the pulp via a circuitos cortos system to reach consumers directly, thus building a cultural proximity. Since 2014 the Associação dos Bananicultores de Ubatumirim (ABU, banana cultivators' association) has sold products which are collectively certified as OCS-organic to the PNAE of Ubatuba municipality. ABU has a women's leadership in the collective marketing role; they meet weekly in itinerant work teams in agricultural fields (ANA, 2021).

In 2014 the FCT launched the campaign 'Preserver é Resistir' (To Conserve is to Resist), seeking to highlight socio-environmental justice and to assert the collective rights of traditional communities in their territories. The campaign has sought to ensure that teachers, storytellers and shamans (grîôts and pajés) – as guardians of memory and ancestral knowledge – transmit their legacy to the youth. Traditional communities keep many practices alive, especially the sustainable management of nature, community ties, collective work, mutirões (joint voluntary work) and product exchanges through circuitos cortos. Increasingly they are positioned as the most appropriate way to organize the production system within the principles of a solidarity economy.



Agroecological agroforestry symbolizes common practices of the three communities.

Community-Based Tourism (TBC) has facilitated a cultural exchange, spreading especially through the Red Nhandereko (2017), an indigenous term for ‘our way of being’. In the Quilombo do Campinho da Independência, the TBC promotes quilombo food (river fish with plantain-based farofa, short-rib stew, feijoada or bean stew). In the Bocaina’s traditional communities, agroecology plays a fundamental role in several processes to promote sustainable and healthy territories. These processes include: social organization, management of agroecosystems, collective construction of knowledge, generation of work and income, as well as health promotion, food and nutritional security in communities.

Given the conflict over Conservation Areas, the communities won a victory: a law that established criteria and procedures for the sustainable use of native plants in these areas (Estado de São Paulo, 2018). In the Sierra 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 sought to guarantee the generation of work and income, social inclusion, health and bem viver (living well). Meanwhile, the FCT demands the legal demarcation of the territories of traditional peoples, especially indigenous ones, as foreseen in the 1988 Constitution; productive activities there strengthen this demand.

During 2018-2019 the OTSS-FCT partnership organized 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 organizations and peasant families in each community. The strategy divided the territory into microterritories and mesoterritories for territorialized development plans, emphasising locally decided agroecological production (Gallo, et al. 2020).

Such a Plan was initially implemented by the Quilombo do Campinho da Independência through the Quilombo Campinho da Independência Residents Association (AMOQC). They sought to advance access to markets for agroecological products and to improve agroecological food production. As a result of the Covid 19 pandemic, this production made contributions to the basic emergency baskets (de Paula Silva, 2020; see next section).

#### 4.2 During the pandemic: la Campaña ‘Cuidar é Resistir’ (To Care is to Resist)

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 were decreased. Many people faced food and nutritional insecurity. There were no effective public policies to feed needy families.

Therefore the FCT created la Campaña ‘Cuidar é Resistir’ (To Care is to Resist), initially to reduce the vulnerability of traditional communities (FCT, 2020). Solidarity actions sought to distribute 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 actions of logistical



organization (food delivery, storage, distribution), information gathering, interaction with partners and accountability of the process.



Soon the communities were cultivating more plants for their food security and also seeking to 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 the logistical support of the FCT and thus gained more visibility. Due to the demands of local social movements, in March 2020 the Estado de São Paulo (2020) published a resolution that facilitated the emergency authorization for traditional gardens by traditional peoples and communities.

In the period when the pandemic began, community support processes reduced its harmful impact, especially by resuming the actions agreed in the Territorialized Agroecological Plans. The [Quilombo do Campinho Quilombo da Fazenda](#) carried out the development of the Agroecological Plan for 2019-2021. They reaffirmed the strategic actions planned in the five priority axes agreed in the Plan: commercialization, management of agroecosystems, processing, training and food safety, and the development of actions for each of the five axes. The [Quilombo da Fazenda](#) began the construction of the Agroecological Plan with collective spaces, starting from the community association, the family farmers and their agroecosystems. These activities explore the realities, possibilities, bottlenecks, demands, dreams and perspectives to clarify priorities to promote agroecology.

The organizational proximity and leadership of family farmers were strengthened by commercializing their products through institutional markets. The FCT mobilized farmers and their allies to politicize policy debates over public procurement. For emergency deliveries to needy families, the OTSS-FCT partnership organized donations, initially as Special Purchases for Family Agriculture in Paraty and Ubatuba, financed by the PNAE in the two municipalities. The purchases involved interaction with different protagonists that participated in the Program, including family farmers, state bodies, school meals and the education community. The research facilitated dialogue between the OTSS, the PNAE and their protagonists in order to strengthen the programme, healthy eating for children, the participation of farming families and the promotion of agroecology. Its visible results include: the promotion of changes proposed by families in relation to the diversity of products, volume of purchases and the adequacy of the public procurement call in relation to the school calendar.

Those emergency food deliveries initially depended on intermediation between producers and recipients. In contrast, in Paraty the PNAE stimulated discussions that promoted a plan to supply food baskets directly to consumers. Since 2021 the Cestas da Agricultura Familiar (Baskets of Family Agriculture) have a direct interaction between producer and consumer. In addition to generating income, this process brought family farmers from rural and traditional communities closer together, gave greater visibility to them in Paraty, and generated empowerment and self-esteem for 20 families initially involved in the baskets. This initiative also provided locally produced an information base and maps to the Campanha, thus helping its second phase in 2022.

The Campanha had a preliminary evaluation space to envisage some advances, limits and readjustments. The productive capacity and logistics of distribution, mainly of agroecological products and fish, was a challenge; it was necessary to readjust and expand the productive support and storage structures to supply the traditional communities. In addition, under its Federal Regulations, the PNAE imposed contracts via competitive bidding at the lowest price, bringing some difficulties. First, some contracts were won by companies that have no direct link with the territory; second, the cheaper price significantly lowered the quality of the agri-industrial products in the baskets, as well as subjected agroecological production and

small-scale artisanal fishing to a market logic with impractical prices to remunerate the work of small producers (see the film by OTSS, 2022). Institutional proximity thus encompasses cooperation and conflict.

In the Campaign 'To Care is to Resist', the activities valued traditional practices and knowledge, involved young people and gave greater visibility to women's roles. They performed various tasks in addition to involving the entire community in reproductive care work. Although women are the majority of mobilizers, they remain a minority in decision-making spaces; their quantitative contribution has not translated into greater equality.

Political commitment and popular education were important elements in building and motivating the Campanha. The solidarity economy has been presented as a tool to organize agroecological production as a means to fill a legislative vacuum. Surprisingly, this role was able to favour traditional communities. Their actions became essential to supply products for the Campanha, as well as for its consequences, seeking to consolidate production and marketing networks. Regarding Participatory Action Research (PAR), the communities were qualitatively more involved in the field actions during the pandemic emergency, thus strengthening an organizational proximity.

## **5 Bioferia, Tarija, Bolivia**

In the Valle Central, Tarija, Bolivia, la Comunidad de Estudios Jaina collaborates with la Asociación Bioferia, which links agroecological producers from rural communities distant from the city with each other and with consumers. In contrast to EcoSol in Brazil, in Bolivia such initiatives are called communitarian organization and economy. It is promoted by indigenous peasant women within the framework of Bolivia as a Plurinational Communitarian State (Estado Plurinacional Comunitario).

### 5.1 Before the pandemic: self-management of the farmers' market

The debate on agrobiodiversity is linked to indigenous cultural traditions of cultivating and consuming products originating in the Andean and Amazon regions. The peasant indigenous cultures continue to face processes of cultural degradation and disparagement, stemming from the colonial formation of Andean countries. Peasant movements oppose the dominant model that promotes a capitalist transformation of traditional peasant production. They counterpose communitarian characteristics and traditional production systems which adapt the approaches, strategies and technological measures promoted by public policy (Vacaflores, 2005).

In this conflictual context, solidaristic circuitos cortos provide means to resist neocolonial domination. To facilitate these efforts, Jaina articulates Participatory Action Research (PAR) with ongoing processes that the peasant women were already developing. This process focuses on a social subject, the peasant of the Central Valley of Tarija, through two organizational structures with different characteristics: one of a territorial community type, the Subcentral of San Agustín; and the other of the associative community type, the Bioferia in Tarija. The objectives of the research projects to which Jaina agreed in the field of "rural development" had to be reconciled with the objectives of the peasant organization, which was amidst the effervescence of the Bolivian Plurinational constituent process.

Participatory Rural Appraisal (Diagnóstico Rural Participativo, DRP) was appropriated and designated as a methodological approach, shifting "from project to process" (Chambers and Guijit, 1995). An explicit effort was necessary to discuss the project objectives with the collective social subject in order to produce a shared work agenda, involving the research institution and the peasant organization in a single process. In this way, the DRP is a process of self-reflection on their own problems and the possibilities to solve them (Verdejo, 2003). For PAR with the Subcentral San Agustín, see the report of this study (Vacaflores and Lizárraga, 2022).

For many years, the Bioferia has linked the vendors-producers with their agroecological practices from various rural communities of the Central Valley. For example, in 2018 Jaina facilitated a conversation with peasant women dedicated to preserving traditional peasant food, especially within the framework of a national gastronomic festival sponsored by the municipality of Tarija. The producers developed collective

capacities to self-manage the agroecological fair in Tarija, building a new type of organizational proximity among them through the Association.

In addition to agroecological products, the Bioferia offers traditional peasant food (chirriadas, cane honey, tamales, creole cheese, bread). It is made in the community itself with traditional techniques and utensils, cooked with firewood, so that it acquires the characteristic flavor of peasant food. Likewise, in the Bioferia, urban consumers are informed about agroecological practices and their broad benefits, thus promoting a cultural proximity.

Regarding the Municipal Mayor's Office of Tarija, the team has a sporadic coordination relationship with its Directorate of Productive Development, Tourism and Cultures. This department recovers the peasant gastronomic heritage, as well as managing occasional support to complement the productive projects carried out by the team. In this sense, an institutional proximity provides various forms of support.

## 5.2 During the pandemic: La Canasta Campesina Alantuya

When the pandemic quarantine began in March 2020, the peasant women were unable to safely 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.



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Communal collection system to supply the food baskets.

At that time, there was a convergence of goals. The Mayor was looking for a mechanism to continue supplying food to the city, under a reasonable municipal control that applies biosafety measures for public health; the concern of the Bioferia compañeras was to continue marketing their production, since their family economy depended on it; the concern of the urban residents was to access fresh food safely, even better if it was also organic; and the research team's concern was to develop an alternative supply model that could be replicated on a larger scale, in permanent dialogue and consultation with those involved.

This experimental practical experience allowed Jaina to build a new system (Canastas Campesinas). It was necessary to collect and provide information on products, producers and consumers, organize them according to nutritional criteria in family baskets, request orders, organize supply routes and facilitate home deliveries complying with biosafety standards.

The Canasta's management initially involved some institutional units of the Mayor's Office, in which each person in charge had to make decisions to facilitate action in the field, from the availability of personnel in charge of driving, distributing food and the use of vehicles. The basket assembly had to be organized among several producers who usually market food individually. In this process, Jaina was responsible for coordinating the teams to make the circulation of food effective and make the payments to the producers effective. Jaina was required to develop biosafety protocols, maintain an administrative protocol and plan the nutritional benefit in the supply system.

The support of the Mayor's Office with the truck lasted about four weeks, after which 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 distributed using a delivery motorcycle, a model that was maintained thereafter.

This was a novel experience for the community organization. This process developed a greater collective capacity, strengthening an organizational proximity between vendors. To plan the deliveries, a link was created to join a WhatsApp group, called the Alantuya Peasant Basket. This sourcing system was based on solidaristic volunteering and was facilitated by Jaina's institutional responsibility to provide a PAR methodology.

Direct sales helped make urban consumers aware of the origin of food, something that did not happen before the pandemic, especially through the use of photography. It was also possible to monitor the quality of the service and the satisfaction or fulfillment of consumer expectations. The organizers frequently received photographs of the products displayed on the kitchen table, 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 other food supply system of this nature in Tarija.

Participants perceived a feeling of being part of something special; this feeling was shared by the producers, the consumers and the volunteer team. In this sense, the Rural Basket had important benefits for those who were directly involved with it, due to the practical effect on the economic and food security of producers and consumers, due to the sense of social contribution to resolve the crisis from their individual position, and collectively, for rearticulating a solidaristic communitarian sense of society.

In the city a group of volunteers cooked a daily open-air *olla común* (soup-kitchen pot) as a social solidarity activity. This symbolized food as common goods, as well as the resistance to the dictatorship of President Añez until November 2020 (El Deber, 2021). As a contribution, the Canasta Alantuya sent the same food baskets that were sent to help needy families.

Beyond organizing the baskets, the team also helped the Bioferia to participate in a Departmental Fair of Medicinal Plants, organized by [la Federación de Comunidades Campesinas de Tarija](#) (see the film). In this process, women helped systematize traditional knowledge about the use of these plants, particularly to face the Covid-19 pandemic. Medicinal plants helped strengthen a cultural proximity.

### 5.3 Since the pandemic: protecting the fair and territorial self-management

When social mobility was normalized and it was possible to return to the fair site in mid-2021, the Rural Basket was reduced. Of the 500 deliveries per week during the pandemic, only 30 continued their orders. Producers still maintain this arrangement for reasons of solidarity.



The return of the Bioferia to its previous weekly space in 2021.

At the same time, the reopening of the fair caused a new conflict in defense of the space. New vendors began to occupy the spaces that some members were slow to reoccupy after the pandemic, so the Bioferia had to deploy strategies to protect its space. The team realized that the Bioferia lacked regulations to guide the assignment of stalls or the incorporation of new members. It had no legal status, nor a formal

document through which the Tarija mayor's office recognized the right to the space occupied by this organization in the weekly fair. For years the Bioferia had been seeking to obtain legal status, an instrument that became necessary to face this conflict.

Among the partner-members it was clear that the possibility of maintaining this sales space lies not only in the agroecological quality of its products, but also in the cohesion and ability to act together to assert its organizational achievement. They needed strategies to address internal conflicts, which occurs, for example, when incorporating new members who want to benefit from a food stall without taking care of the ethical aspect of organic production. Many consultation processes allowed the development of a proposed regulation as regards the requirements, conditions and procedures for vendors who want to join the Bioferia Association.

The team facilitated a participatory process to clarify the criteria for members and their products. The team applied some techniques of collective reconstruction of the norms informally agreed between the member-partners for their collective functioning. In addition, workshops were held with a group of producers to reconstruct the history of the Bioferia and the rules used for its operation, successfully systematizing a draft Statute with preliminary Regulations. This regulation was delivered to the board, discussing with them especially the part with the requirements and procedures to obtain legal status. Questionnaires were circulated to long-time members designated by the organization to carry out this task.

These components formed the central body of the Regulation, which is the complementary document to the Statute. Both were presented to the Board, which considered them at a Bioferia meeting; they were approved for use in 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 emerging conflicts. Thus the Bioferia extended its organizational proximity to more women.

In early 2020 there were deaths of thirty Andean condors in the Laderas Norte community, due to poor management of poison to control wild predators in the area. This situation provoked an intense discussion among the communities about the possibility to use this opportunity to attract external support to implement development projects in the territory. The regional government proposed a 'municipal protected area' to protect nature from human activities.

The peasant organization, the Subcentral San Agustín, opposed the governmental proposal as a threat to its autonomy and self-management of the territory. The Subcentral is developing a territorial community strategy to manage biodiversity as traditional Life Systems. The [Instituto Tecnológico Agropecuario San Andrés](#) helps the Subcentral to develop the strategy, using a Geographic Information System and participatory techniques. This advances methods of Participatory Rural Appraisal (Diagnóstico Rural Participativo, DRP).

## 6 Conclusion

As explained in the Introduction, the AgroEcos project has sought to investigate three main questions: How do EcoSol-agroecology networks develop collective capacities for solidaristic *circuitos cortos*? How can participatory action research help to identify and strengthen those capacities? How did these processes change during the pandemic?

Those questions were investigated in three territories. Each has a context of predatory hegemonic development. In each territory, a partnership linked a research team with a communitarian partner as a collective subject promoting *circuitos cortos* as both a resistance and alternative development, including a feminist leadership. The research teams needed to understand territorial conflicts as the context of difficulties and opportunities.

The various strategies to build and adapt *circuitos cortos* can be understood through the analytical framework of societal proximities. Each network or initiative clarified common purposes (objectives), e.g. mutual aid, reciprocity, democratic self-management and socioeconomic equity; likewise food and



nutritional security. Common purposes can activate other proximities (organizational, institutional, cultural and geographical) as supportive relationships..

Since before the pandemic, solidarity networks were bringing together artisan producers and building societal proximities with each other in specific ways. In particular:

- Baixada Santista: Solidarity networks recovered and promoted agri-food heritage from various sources. With coordination by the FESBS, the networks were promoting agroecological circuitos cortos as a basis to increase the income of producers and strengthen food security.
- La Serra de Bocaina: The FCT was bringing together groups from the three communities around agroecological agroforestry, especially in nearby Conservation Areas, as a base to establish circuitos cortos, to earn income, to defend their territorial permanence, and to decrease their dependence on external food.
- El Valle Central: La Asociación Bioferia was promoting traditional knowledge of peasant foods. At the Tarija farmers' market the Bioferia brought together peasant vendors from various places in the Central Valley and connected them with urban consumers. The Subcentral St Agustin community was developing and defending a community self-management of their rural territory.

Meanwhile, each partner was building collective capacities to realize various societal proximities. These capacities have various sources, for example, by promoting cultural heritages, recovering mutual aid traditions, organizing training courses, and facilitating knowledge dialogues, which encompass circuitos cortos as well as agroecological production. Each partner has promoted the cosmovision of Vivir Bien, Buen Vivir or Bem Viver, which inspires both resistance and alternatives to the dominant predatory development.

During the pandemic, circuitos cortos had to be quickly adapted to meet hygiene requirements and overcome various difficulties. Previous collective capacities were extended to create creative adaptations across various societal proximities. The solidarity networks needed to mobilize human and material resources for strategic adaptations. Each consortium developed a short-term recursive practice between action and research, either by trial-and-error or trial-and-success. In this way each one was able to turn difficulties into opportunities.

With the analytical framework of societal proximities, it is possible to understand and compare the strategies of the communitarian partners in each territory. See the comparative matrix (Table 1, Societal proximities). Moreover, diverse participants and contributions could be integrated into a 'composed culture of social networks and belonging', whose symbolic places highlight circuitos cortos (Zaoual, 2010). In our project, Participatory Action Research (PAR) facilitated a process of exchanging such experiences, within and between the three territories, thus stimulating inspirations among the participants. Despite relying on online measures, the process had a sentipensante character (Fals Borda, 2009; Moncayo, 2009).

In our project, each consortium organized or supported demands for public policies favorable to EcoSol-agroecology, initially at the municipal and regional level. Collective capacities helped strengthen these demands on a territorial basis, thus linking nearby initiatives and participants. This territorial basis provides a bottom-up means to make policies accountable to solidarity networks. The networks also oppose public policies that facilitate any predatory development. In this way, a regional network builds an organizational proximity and thus potentially regionalism from below (cf. Rosset et al, 2021).

EcoSol-agroecology needs public policies that could strengthen such collective capacities to build various social proximities. This improvement depends on collaboration with agencies and networks that already have experiences of various capacities. It also needs to mobilize resources for more widespread training.

By these measures EcoSol-agroecology networks can echo, replicate and spread through space and time, as in the nickname AgroEcos. Collective capacities strengthen EcoSol-agroecology networks to resist predatory development and create counter-hegemonic alternatives of socio-economic development.

**Table 1: Societal proximities as a basis for solidaristic circuitos cortos**

Note: Each type of proximity encompasses several activities, though the table includes just a few.

Partnership	UNESP with FESBS	OTSS with FCT	Jaina with la Bioferia and Subcentral St Agustin
<b>Territory</b>	La Baixada Santista, Brazil	La Bocaina, Litoral Norte, Brazil	El Valle Central del Tarija, Bolivia
<b>threats</b>	Predatory tourism, coastal displacements, second homes, ultra-processed foods; Petrochemical industry.	Real estate speculation; neo-colonial devaluation of traditional cultures & knowledge; Conservation Areas prohibiting cultivation; civil construction; land grabs; predatory tourism; ultra-processed foods.	Neocolonial devaluation of traditional cultures & knowledge; agribusiness; ultra-processed foods. deconstructing and cultural disparagement, derived from the colonial formation of Andean countries.
<b>PROXIMITIES (type)</b>			
<b>Aims</b>	An 'economy of proximity' that could overcome inequalities in employment, income and food insecurity. Increase agroecological (and artisanal) circuitos cortos, enhancing food and nutritional security. Promote reciprocity, mutual aid (mutirão) and democratic self-management. <a href="#">'Economy for Bem Viver'</a>	Socio-environmental justice, agroecological agroforestry, 'Preserver é Resistir', ecology of knowledge, mutual aid (mutirão). 'Agroecology cultivating territories of bem viver', enhancing food and nutritional security. Develop sustainable and healthy territories. Promote the shared management of territories, clarify community priorities and seek access to public services. Traditional communities claim the juridical demarcation of their territories.	Community organization of indigenous peasant women, as the basis of a plural economy, within the framework of Vivir Bien and the new Plurinational Community State. "Living Well (Vivir Bien) is self-government." Self-management and mutual aid (ayni, minga, minka). Promote peasant agri-food heritages.
<b>Organizational</b>	Self-managed collective marketing, for example, by Fairs, institutional purchases, Community-Supported Agriculture (CSA), etc. Women seek greater self-esteem, income and participation in public policies, especially through feminist initiatives (eg UMPES). The networks recover and disseminate agri-food heritage from various sources. Raw and processed food for sale. The latter avoid spoilage, prolong shelf life and combine 'knowledge and flavours', some through spices. Consumers are reminded of their childhood favorite foods.	Self-management within and among traditional communities. Closer relationship between traditional communities and family farmers. For emergency deliveries, the partnership coordinated the Family Farming Special Purchases in Paraty and Ubatuba. They depended on an intermediary with the recipients. In contrast, the Baskets of Family Agriculture had a direct interaction between producer and consumer. This initiative also provided production maps to the Campanha, thus helping its second phase in 2022.	Collective marketing at the self-managed municipal fair. During the pandemic, the partnership established the Canasta Campesina to solicit orders and organize home deliveries through whatsapp groups.  After the pandemic, when women returned to the fair, the Bioferia adopted requirements to accommodate new vendors within a legal structure, avoiding or managing conflicts.
<b>Cultural</b>	Self-managed collective marketing, for example, via farmers' markets, institutional purchases, Community-Supported Agriculture (CSA), etc. Women seek greater self-esteem, income and participation in public policies. The networks recover and disseminate agri-food heritages. Producers sell fresh and lightly processed food.	Cultural exchange through Community-Based Tourism (TBC), especially through the Nhandereko Network. Promotes quilombo food (river fish with plantain farofa, short-rib stew, feijoada or bean stew). During the pandemic, more exchanges of food, crops and knowledge.	Bioferia promotes the traditional knowledge of peasant foods as well as medicinal herbs. Highlights traditional production systems as the basis of cultural proximity between the countryside and the city.
<b>Geographical</b>	In each town, the networks bring	The strategy divided the territory	The Bioferia brings together

	together consumers with peri-urban and sometimes rural producers, despite the distance.	into micro and meso-territories for territorialized development plans, emphasizing agroecological production specific to each one.	vendors from various parts of the Central Valley with each other and with urban consumers.
Institutional:  Public policies as a cooperative & conflictual space.	<p>Solidarity network demands favorable public policies, for example, co-management of the farmers' market, transport there, access to institutional purchases and technical assistance for EcoSol-agroecology.</p> <p>In São Paulo state, the government tried to close the state entities that supported family farming. These include Casas da Agricultura and the São Paulo State Land Institute Foundation (ITESP). There were protests in some cities</p>	<p>The Prefectures generally support a neocolonial development, although some officials support solidaristic alternatives. To access public policies, conflicts arise, sometimes resulting in the confluence of decisions.</p> <p>OTSS-FCT mobilized farming families and their allies to politicize debates on institutional purchases (PNAE). Some family farmers gained access in Paraty. But the PNAE imposed contracts via competitive bidding at the lowest price, which lowered the quality of the products in the baskets, as well as subjected agroecological production to a market logic.</p>	<p>Tarija Mayor's Office: Jaina has a sporadic coordination relationship with its directorate of Productive Development, Tourism and Cultures; recovers the peasant gastronomic heritage, and manages productive support to complement the productive projects carried out by Jaina.</p> <p>The Subcentral St Agustin community is developing a territorial community strategy to manage biodiversity as traditional Life Systems, collaborating with the San Andrés Agricultural Technological Institute. This strategy opposes the government proposal to establish a 'protected area' there.</p>



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More specific reports in Spanish or Portuguese are available here

<https://projetoagroecos.wixsite.com/meusite/c%C3%B3pia-publica%C3%A7%C3%B5es>

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The final conference on 15.03.2022 had three invited commentaries: by Professor Claudia Job Schmitt, UFRRJ; Miriam Nobre, Sempreviva Organização Feminista (SOF); and Paulo Petersen, Agricultura Familiar e Agroecologia (AS-PTA). Their commentaries benefited this report.

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