



Distributive food systems to build just and liveable futures

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Accepted: 25 April 2020 / Published online: 13 May 2020
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The global pandemic has repositioned our priorities to value the essentials of life, including food but also community and public services. The connections between people, places and the environment have become a key factor to understand how our lifestyles are sustained but also challenged: from the global impact of a virus locally transmitted from animals to humans to the importance of mutual-aid to access food. These interdependences expose the futility of individualistic approaches to address planetary health challenges. The COVID-19 pandemic is thus a dramatic call to ensure universal rights and collective responsibilities. This collective turn is clearly exemplified in the unprecedented public policies implemented across the globe, from freezing mortgage repayments to taking over private hospitals,¹ which defy the limits of what was portrayed as ‘possible’ in policy-making. However, this collective approach is partly hinging on essentialising equality discourses around “we are all affected, we are all the same” that largely fail to recognise the diversity of situations within society and across places (Young 1990; Fraser 2008), and therefore limit the possibilities of delivering just and long-lasting solutions such as assuring good food for all without further depleting the planet.

In the Spanish case, initial extraordinary measures linked to the state of alarm displayed a narrow understanding of how food gets to our plates. In common with other countries, supermarkets were largely framed as the nation feeders—the

same ones that were signalled a month before as largely responsible for putting farmers’ out of business and amidst this crisis accused of inflating food prices.² Many farmers’ and food markets were pushed to close-down, access to growing spaces denied and food-sector workers (particularly migrants) faced dire conditions. This monolithic understanding of our food system reinforces the dominance of the agri-industrial food system which is underpinned by unsustainable and unjust socio-ecological relations at the heart of our planetary health crises, from COVID-19 to climate change (Rohr et al. 2019; IPCC 2019; IPES-Food 2020).

However, these dominant policy imaginaries are constantly challenged. Since the pandemic started, citizens have actively created territorialized and community food economies that champion diversity and redistribution of value to deliver wide societal and material benefits. By mobilising social, physical and digital infrastructures, communities have set up systems of mutual aid, helped vulnerable neighbours and supported local farmers who have dramatically increased their capacity.³ Social movements and allies have also shed light on the potential of agroecology to repair and rebuild a truly sustainable food system, and in Spain they successfully lobbied to re-open markets and allow access to growing spaces.⁴ Globally, civil society organisations and

¹ For example, the Spanish government froze mortgage and house rent payments and took control of private hospitals in order to provide healthcare for all in the state of emergency following the COVID-19 outbreak <https://www.lavanguardia.com/economia/20200331/48214217373/gobierno-ayudas-alquiler-vocid-19-quitadas.html>.

This article is part of the Topical Collection: Agriculture, Food & Covid-19

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² Supermarkets were pointed as responsible for low prices at the farmgate in January 2020 and paying farmers prices below production costs <https://www.elperiodico.com/es/economia/20200203/gobierno-compromete-asociaciones-agrarias-evitar-venta-perdidas-7834424>. Also they have been signalled as drivers of price hikes of vegetables in the pandemic by increasing their demand by 3 or 4 and storing these foodstuffs. Consequently, small veg shops offer more expensive produce while supermarkets sell their cheaper vegetables bought weeks before. <https://www.elsaltodiario.com/coronavirus/especular-con-lo-basico-tiempos-alarma>.

³ For more information and updated linkages on these initiatives see <https://www.ciudadesagroecologicas.eu/pequena-produccion-mercados-campesinos-y-coronavirus/>.

⁴ More than 600 organisations across the country signed a petition to ask the Spanish government to support small scale and agroecological production, and related commercialization channels <https://www.soberaniaalimentaria.info/otros-documentos/luchas/728-movilizacion-sin-precedentes-a-favor-de-la-alimentacion-de-proximidad>.

local governments have activated multiple mechanisms to share knowledge and support others. For example, city food networks are providing inspiring examples to coordinate a fragmented set of suppliers to healthily feed spiking numbers of urban food insecure people.⁵ These interconnected webs of people, materials, technologies and knowledges are assembling in flexible and open ways amidst this crisis, and can reconfigure their relations to address diverse needs and adapt to distinct scales and territories (Moragues-Faus and Sonnino 2019).

Nevertheless, after decades of actively championing agro-industrial food systems, these distributive infrastructures lack the capacity to replace the globalised food chains that reproduce our unsustainable food system. For example, in this crisis we have seen cities resorting to artificially cheap and centralised operations for a quick fix, such as in the case of Madrid using fast-food companies to provide free school meals.⁶ Similarly, the expansion of platforms such as Amazon or Glovo⁷ are consolidating new forms of globalised control and constantly narrow the scope to build diverse, just and regenerative economies. Resilience and regeneration are not a given, they need to be purposefully nurtured. We therefore need to invest and facilitate the creation of distributive food systems based on local needs and capacities that assure a fair redistribution of value, knowledge and power across actors and territories to deliver sustainable food for all (Moragues-Faus et al. 2020). The time is now to feed the world but also to build the foundations of the type of world that we want to nourish, and through food recreate the distributive social and ecological relations that will deliver liveable and just futures for all.

⁵ Key examples of these networks compiling good practices include national networks such as the Red de Ciudades por la Agroecología in Spain <https://www.ciudadesagroecologicas.eu/los-municipios-busca-n-soluciones-para-el-abastecimiento-de-alimentos-sostenibles-y-salud-ables-durante-el-estado-de-alarma/>, or the UK Sustainable Food Cities Network https://www.sustainablefoodplaces.org/news/apr20_local_food_systems_responses_to_covid_19/; at the international C40 is actively compiling good practice from mega cities https://www.c40knowledgehub.org/s/cities-and-coronavirus-covid-19?language=en_US and also FAO is compiling good practice more globally and actively sharing updated through the Food for cities mailing list <https://www.fao.org/food-systems/news-events/news-detail/en/c/1270727/>.

⁶ The menu offered to vulnerable children by fast-food companies includes hamburgers, pizzas and sandwiches https://www.eldiario.es/madrid/Telepizza-Rodilla-comedor-hamburguesas-sandwiches_0_1006850339.html.

⁷ There is a wide criticism towards these platforms in relation to quality of jobs they offer. In midst this crisis, a Spanish union has filed a lawsuit against them due to the unfair and unsafe working conditions of their riders. <https://www.lavanguardia.com/local/la-rioja/20200401/48261889359/ugt-denuncia-a-glovo-deliveroo-uber-eats-y-amazon-por-no-facilitar-medidas-de-prevencion-a-sus-repartidores.html>. Also Glovo has decided to cut by half the basic fee perceived by riders in the middle of the pandemic <https://www.elsaltodiario.com/glovo/glovo-pedalear-mas-ganar-lo-mismo>.

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