



Social skills in coping with the pandemic in territorial food markets: case studies in Médio Alto Uruguai and Litoral Norte regions of Rio Grande do Sul

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Abstract

The article analyzes social skills mobilized in facing the Covid-19 pandemic for constructing territorial food markets. In dialogue with the Theory of Strategic Action Fields, we investigated markets digitalization strategies undertaken by skilled actors as well as their political coalitions in two territories of Rio Grande do Sul: Litoral Norte and Médio Alto Uruguai. The research involved direct observation of structuring of digital food marketing systems and 72 interviews carried out with actors involved in the construction of these markets (managers, farmers, consumers, political leaders, consultants). Interviews were carried out between November 2020 and November 2021. They were transcribed and processed using NVivo software for subsequent content analysis. Findings show that, in both territories, the design of strategies was influenced by the distinctive capacity for engaging other actors, notably family farmer and consumer organizations; the specific socioeconomic characteristics of each territory, with emphasis on the distance from consumption centers; and, in particular, by the absence of external public policies to strengthen territorial food markets, in view of a context of dismantling of the state structure in support for family farming during the Bolsonaro administration. The study's findings suggest that the social skills demonstrated by the organizations allowed the construction of relevant resilience mechanisms during the most critical moments of the pandemic, but that, given the institutional, logistical and political barriers they faced, they were unable to produce substantial changes towards the territorialization of food markets.

Keywords: Digital markets. Collective action. Strategic action.

Habilidades sociais no enfrentamento à pandemia nos mercados alimentares territoriais: estudos de caso no Médio Alto Uruguai e Litoral Norte do Rio Grande do Sul

Resumo

O artigo analisa as habilidades sociais mobilizadas no enfrentamento à pandemia da Covid-19 a partir da construção de mercados alimentares territoriais. Em diálogo com a Teoria dos Campos de Ação Estratégica, foram analisadas estratégias de digitalização dos processos de comercialização empreendidas por atores hábeis e suas coalizões políticas em dois territórios do Rio Grande do Sul: Litoral Norte e Médio Alto Uruguai. A pesquisa envolveu observação direta da estruturação de sistemas digitais de venda de alimentos e 72 entrevistas realizadas com atores envolvidos na construção desses sistemas (gestores, agricultores, consumidores, lideranças políticas, consultores). As entrevistas foram conduzidas entre novembro de 2020 e novembro de 2021. Elas foram transcritas e processadas utilizando o software NVivo, para posterior análise de conteúdo. Os resultados demonstram que, em ambos os territórios, a configuração das estratégias foi influenciada pela capacidade diferenciada de engajamento de outros atores, notadamente das organizações de agricultores familiares e de consumidores; pelas características socioeconômicas específicas de cada território, com destaque para a distância dos centros de consumo; e, de maneira especial, pela ausência de políticas públicas voltadas ao fortalecimento de mercados alimentares territoriais face a um contexto de desmantelamento da estrutura estatal de suporte à agricultura familiar durante o governo Bolsonaro. As conclusões do estudo sugerem que as habilidades sociais das organizações analisadas permitiram a construção mecanismos de resiliência relevantes durante os momentos mais críticos da pandemia, mas que, face às barreiras institucionais, logísticas e políticas com os quais se depararam, não tiveram condições de produzir mudanças substanciais no sentido da territorialização dos mercados alimentares.

Palavras-chave: Mercados digitais. Ação coletiva. Ação estratégica.

Habilidades sociales para hacer frente a la pandemia en los mercados territoriales de alimentos: un análisis desde el Médio Alto Uruguai y el Litoral Norte de Rio Grande do Sul

Resumen

El artículo analiza las habilidades sociales movilizadas para enfrentar la pandemia de Covid-19 a través de la construcción de mercados territoriales de alimentos. En diálogo con la Teoría de los Campos de Acción Estratégicos, se destacaron estrategias de digitalización de los procesos de negociación emprendidos por actores capacitados y sus coaliciones políticas en dos territorios de Rio Grande do Sul: Costa Norte y Medio Alto Uruguay. La investigación implicó la observación directa de la estructuración de los sistemas digitales de venta de alimentos y 72 entrevistas realizadas a actores involucrados en la construcción de estos sistemas (gerentes, agricultores, consumidores, líderes políticos, consultores). Las entrevistas se realizaron entre noviembre de 2020 y noviembre de 2021. Fueron transcritas y procesadas mediante el software NVivo, para su posterior análisis de contenido. Los resultados demuestran que, en ambos territorios, la configuración de las estrategias estuvo influenciada por la diferente capacidad de involucramiento de otros actores, en particular las organizaciones de agricultores familiares y de consumidores; por las características socioeconómicas específicas de cada territorio, con énfasis en la lejanía de los centros de consumo; y, en particular, por la ausencia de políticas públicas externas para fortalecer los mercados territoriales de alimentos, enfrentan un contexto de desmantelamiento de la estructura estatal de apoyo a la agricultura familiar durante el gobierno de Bolsonaro. Las conclusiones del estudio sugieren que las habilidades sociales demostradas por las organizaciones permitieron construir mecanismos de resiliencia relevantes durante los momentos más críticos de la pandemia, pero que, dadas las barreras institucionales, logísticas y políticas que enfrentaron, no lograron producir cambios sustanciales hacia la territorialización de los mercados de alimentos.

Palabras clave: Mercados digitales. Acción colectiva. Acción estratégica.

1 Introduction

The new coronavirus (Sars-Cov2) pandemic brought about a series of transformations in food systems globally, whether in food production, processing, distribution, marketing or consumption (Hobbs, 2020; Schneider et al., 2020; Siche, 2020). In this article, we highlight the field of territorial food markets, which comprises a particular type of strategic action field whose differential aspect is the territorialized logic of organizing economic relations. The territory houses a web of multi-scalar social, cultural, political and ecological relationships, which are not restricted to local spaces (Campagne; Pecqueur, 2014). What distinguishes these markets is essentially the circulation of food products that bear quality (value) that is referred to these territorialized relationships.

During the pandemic, several studies indicated the importance of collective organizations in constructing marketing alternatives to enable the overcoming of limitations imposed by the health crisis. Such alternatives included food markets' digitalization (Gazolla; Aquino, 2021; Niederle et al., 2021), distribution of food baskets to rural families and advance of agricultural credit aimed at mitigating the effects of food and financial insecurity (Ciadella et al., 2021). The territorial food systems were the setting for such innovations, which required reconfiguration of many social practices, from production to consumption.

The emergence of these innovations aroused interest in understanding the activities of "skilled social actors" (Fligstein; Mcadam, 2012), as well as identifying the material and symbolic resources to which they resort in building strategies to deal with the pandemic context. This objective dialogues with issues that pervade contemporary debates in the Theory of Strategic Action Fields - SAF (Fligstein; McAdam, 2012), according to which social change (and the construction of markets) far from being an autonomous and spontaneous process, is triggered and driven by actors and coalitions who, given the institutional conditions to which they are subjected, take advantage of windows of opportunities created by different types of crises and act politically to alter their possibilities of having greater or lesser control of the dynamics of the fields, that is, of the markets.

The research was conducted between November 2020 and November 2021 in two regions in the state of Rio Grande do Sul: Médio Alto Uruguai (Middle-upper Uruguay river) and Litoral Norte (North Coast of the state). Both regions are constituted by small municipalities where family farming is a relevant social actor. According to data from the latest Agricultural Census (IBGE, 2019), Médio Alto Uruguay comprises 34 municipalities with an average population of 6,377 inhabitants per municipality. The North Coast, in turn, is made up of 20 municipalities with an average of 15,656 inhabitants. Considering the agricultural establishments, the North Coast comprises 9,184 farms, 81% of which are considered family-owned. In Middle-upper Uruguay this percentage reaches 88% of 21,314 farms in total (IBGE, 2019). These data highlight both the strong presence of family farming and the small size of municipalities in both territories. However, while the North Coast is geographically close to the metropolitan region of Porto Alegre (the capital of the state) and Serra Gaúcha (the mountain region), Middle-upper Uruguay is located far from large consumer centers, what significantly changes the dynamics of food marketing.

The article is organized into four sections, besides this introduction. It starts by discussing the food system crisis following the pandemic and then it presents the theoretical-methodological framework of the research. Next, findings bring to light the coalitions formed in the field of territorial food markets and then, the strategic action put into practice in each of the territories leaning on the identified coalitions. The last section presents the main conclusions of the study.

2 The crisis in food systems due to Covid-19

The effects of the pandemic crisis were felt and faced in different ways and with varying intensities. In a global analysis carried out at the beginning of the pandemic, Bené (2020) pointed out some of the effects on food systems in low- and middle-income countries: in production, it was possible to identify interruption in supply, increase in input prices, reduction in demand for some foods and in availability of workforce; regarding transport (for small and medium-sized companies), restriction on the circulation and difficulty with distributing products besides increased risk of exposure to the virus; in processing, there was excess of supply, resulting from reduction in demand for the final product, and difficulty in maintaining standardization and regularity in supply of processed products; as to commerce, in addition to reduction in demand generally and the increased risk of exposure to the virus, which had a transversal impact on all stages of the production chain, many farmers and local traders who operated with direct sales got stuck during the quarantine, losing their work and income; and regarding impacts in consumption, loss of jobs in services such as restaurants, increased operating costs due to necessary precautions and interruption of food supply were observed.

Similar research was also carried out by the International Fund for Agricultural Development (IFAD, 2021) in the Brazilian semi-arid region, which corroborated some of the previous findings, such as increase in production costs and interruption of some marketing channels, besides pointing to a decrease in consumers and farmers the purchasing power, a weakening of collective actions due to social distancing measures and, finally, appreciation of locally produced natural products, suggesting a change in consumption patterns.

Also in Brazil, particularly in Rio Grande do Sul, Cassol, Vargas and Canever (2020) found that the pandemic's most visible effects were transformations in food marketing dynamics, especially because market channels such as farmers' markets and public procurement were directly affected, particularly in the first months, when a drop of approximately 50% in sales from family farming in the southern region of Rio Grande do Sul was noted. In turn, regarding consumption, the authors identified "[...] an increase in consumption of fresh foods as an effect of the pandemic, linked to two factors: more time at home to prepare (cook) food and greater concern for health." (Cassol; Vargas; Canever, 2020, p. 397).

It is essential to consider that the Covid-19 pandemic added to what was already characterized as a global syndemic (Swinburn et al., 2019), which is not just a comorbidity, but rather a problem that requires more than knowing the biological aspects causing the event, which, although fundamental, is not enough to understand the whole phenomenon (Horton, 2020). This would require the analysis

to include social aspects, since, if biologically everyone is reasonably susceptible to the disease, it cannot be said that everyone has the same conditions to face it.

Other research revealed that richer regions and countries were considerably less affected than less affluent countries (Burnquist et al., 2020). Thus, emerging markets (China, Brazil, India, Mexico, Russia, Indonesia and Turkey) suffered more from economic disruptions, currency devaluations and high unemployment rates (Ajayi; Aliyev; Sarkhanov, 2020). Brazil is an emblematic case, as income crisis affected most of its population, resulting from increase in unemployment and devaluation of the currency, which reached historic marks, especially in the first year of the pandemic.

Without underestimating the pandemic's consequences for all rural families, it is important to highlight that its effects were heterogeneous and that, economically, some sectors benefited from rise in prices. For example, soybeans, one of the main products in the Brazilian trade balance, surpassed its historic mark of 100 Reais per bag of 60 kg on March 30, 2020, reaching R\$207.14 on March 17, 2022¹. Although this case is not unique, it is very illustrative of the heterogeneous effects that a pandemic can have on food markets at the most diverse scales.

Following authors who projected long-term effects, Hobbs (2020) pointed out that some trends could be observed in the markets, such as the growth of delivery services for online food shopping. For the author, this happened, on the one hand, through services exclusively dedicated to online shopping (Amazon, for example) and, on the other hand, through platforms operated by traditional retail chains, in which online shopping has become a viable and well-accepted alternative. In addition, a series of initiatives, generally local, set up by farmers' associations and cooperatives, which sought digital platforms as a market alternative during the pandemic. Such strategies were already present before the restrictions imposed by the pandemic and expanded during the period.

Among initiatives found in Rio Grande do Sul, two cases stand out: the digital platform Alimento de Origem (Origin Food), which allows exposure and sales of food products from family farming in the Middle-upper Uruguay, and the platform of the Cooperativa Mista de Agricultores Familiares de Itati, Terra de Areia e Três Forquilhas – Coomafiitt (a cooperative that gathers family farmers from three municipalities – Itati, Terra de Areia and Tres Forquilhas), in the North Coast region, which started to sell its products online – both initiatives including home delivery. These two experiences are important in the scope of the studied territories for being carried out by farmers' organizations and focused on sustainable production. This process reveals the role of territorial governance and local initiatives, such as those by associations and cooperatives, in building responses to crises, as Cassol, Vargas and Canever (2020) noted.

Even though food production has been less impacted by the pandemic than demand (Soendergaard et al., 2020), the aforementioned transformations, such as rise in prices and emergence of new marketing and distribution strategies, instigate new research into how different food systems have coped with the crisis. Therefore, this research sheds light on experiences focused on sustainability and which involve territorial food markets, for considering that these markets were considerably

¹ Data from the Soybeans Indicator Esalq/BM&FBovespa.

affected by the pandemic and are extremely important for both farmers and consumers. We aim, particularly, to advance knowledge on what transformations occurred in the dynamics of food marketing at a territorial scale and, based on this, to identify how this process was conducted, which implies identifying what social skills (Fligstein; McAdam, 2012) were mobilized to manage resources so that to tackle the Covid-19 crisis.

3 Theoretical and methodological considerations

There are several circumstances in which social skill – defined as the ability to induce other actors to cooperate – can be analyzed. In a research conducted by Magalhães (2007), the focus was on the strategic action employed by cooperatives of milk producers in market competition, within a field dominated by large agro-industrial conglomerates. Ceccin (2019), in turn, takes the same approach to analyze the constitution of a strategic action field in the context of a public policy implementation. In addition to different objects of study, strategic action can also be analyzed considering the actions performed by individual actors to induce cooperation of others in their coalition (Carneiro et al., 2020) or the strategies formulated by an organization to encourage collective action by a given group (Magalhães, 2007; Ceccin, 2019). Our research adopts this latter perspective by focusing the analysis on the role played by some organizations in building responses to the Covid-19 pandemic in the context of territorial food markets.

The main concepts involved in the SAF theory (Fligstein; McAdam, 2012) are the field – the place where strategic action is developed –, the components of this field and, finally, the strategic action itself. Bringing them to the context of food systems, a territory can be understood as a field where disputes and strategic action occur. Each territory-field is composed of other fields, so that the field of territorial food markets constitutes a specific subfield within the food markets' field. However, in order to avoid what Fligstein and McAdam (2012) call “fieldcentric bias”, the analysis must also consider the pressure of events that unfold in other fields, particularly the role of the State, which is a special field due to its recognized institutional strength.

To assist in delimiting a field, the authors establish some premises: there is clarity and consensus among the actors in the field regarding what is being disputed; there is a power dimension involved, that is, there are dominant actors and challenger actors; the rules of the field are respected by its components; and there is an interpretive framework constructed to justify actions and mobilize cooperation within coalitions, which, from a conventional perspective, would be seen as merely the organizational logic, disregarding the position and influence of each actor (Fligstein; Mcadam, 2012). Once a field of action has been defined, it is worth specifying that the actors within it are divided into incumbents and challengers. Incumbents are those who exercise influence and have the rules in their favor, while challengers are the subordinates – what, however, does not prevent these latter from building institutional frameworks that, especially in times of crisis, can cause important changes in the structure of the field.

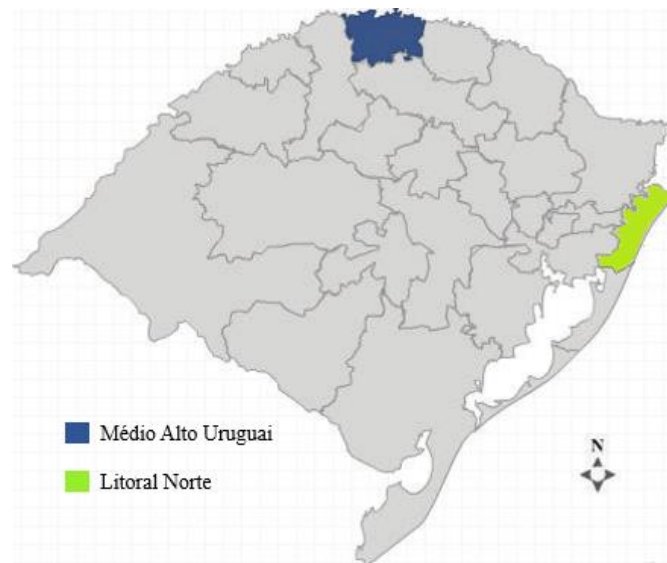
A central concept for understanding change in a field is that of strategic action, which is any action undertaken with the purpose of promoting the

engagement of other actors around a common project. It is in this sense that the term cooperation is used. Even in more stable fields, strategic action is required to maintain stability (Fligstein, 2007). It is important to note that this concept directly diverges from the interpretation that institutions serve to constrain. In this conception, there must be social action both to maintain the power structure of the field and to change it. Strategic action is directly associated with the concept of social skill. An article by Neil Fligstein (2007) is especially dedicated to establishing the interfaces between this concept and the field theory, in which he states that social skill can be defined as the ability to induce others to cooperate.

Finally, another key concept for this research is that of external shock. Fligstein and McAdam (2012) attribute great relevance to external shocks, that is, to the direct influence of related fields. In effect, skilled social actors find more space and capacity for social change after the occurrence of external shocks, which open “windows of opportunity” for institutional changes (Frizo; Niederle, 2019). Such shocks catalyze the beginning of contestations that can bring about institutional rearrangement of the field, depending on resources and social ability of challenging actors to induce collective cooperation around their change projects (Fligstein, 2007). Given the importance, magnitude and limitations imposed during the crisis generated by Covid-19, this research was based on the theoretical premise that this event could configure an external shock with potential to provoke reinstitutionalization of territorial food markets.

Data and information gathered throughout field research underwent a comparative analysis, seeking to understand the behavior of phenomena with similar origins in different environments – the territorial food markets of Médio Alto Uruguai and Littoral Norte, whose location can be seen in the Figure 1. The comparative method seeks to find specific differences based on crucial similarities (Sckocpo; Somers, 1980). In this case, the similarity is the pandemic event generated by Covid-19 and its ability to affect markets, while the specific differences are made up of the institutional characteristics of each field and the social skills of the actors, including the territorial resources that are available to them for strategic action.

Figure 1- Location of Litoral Norte and Médio Alto Uruguai territories in Rio Grande do Sul.



Source: adapted from Oliveira, Gazolla and Schneider (2011).

The first stage of the research consisted of identifying innovative experiences in the field of territorial food markets, what pointed to Admau/Cooperbio and Coomafitt as emblematic cases for study in Middle-upper Uruguay and North Coast territories, respectively. After identifying the two cases and the web of relationships established by these organizations, we focused on determining the main dynamics of food marketing in those territories. To this end, data collection technique was based on both field observation and semi-structured interviews with members of all the organizations involved in this study and also with farmer families. Once the coalitions were identified, it was necessary to understand how skilled social actors performed in these territories. Therefore, more than mapping the actors, we were interested in understanding what resources and skills these social actors mobilized to formulate their strategies. It is worth highlighting that the analyzed strategic action was aimed at responding to the challenges of the pandemic while competing in a field troubled by the crisis.

In total, 72 interviews were carried out, 20 out of which were conducted in Middle-upper Uruguay and the rest in the North Coast. The discrepant number of interviews between the territories is due to the fact that the universe of farmers working towards transition to sustainable food systems – the demarcating element used in this work – is smaller in Middle-upper Uruguay, especially if we consider the number of families linked to the cooperatives under study (15 families, while in the North Coast the number is close to 40). Field data collection took place during two trips to each territory, the first in November 2020 and the second in November 2021. This aspect was fundamental because it allowed us to understand the actions and transformations at different moments of the pandemic.

Potential interviewees were suggested by local agents (cooperative managers, extension agents, public managers) and by interviewed farmers as the interviews took place. After all data and information gathered throughout the field research

were organized, the interviews were transcribed and a content analysis was carried out using the NVivo software, which allowed a deeper analysis of the following categories: i) meanings and narratives produced and appropriated; ii) created strategies; iii) constructed coordination; iv) institutional changes in the field.

4 Actors and their coalitions in the field

Identifying coalitions of actors is important because skilled social actors rely on them to operate either to maintain the current order, when challenged, or to disrupt this same order, when challenging (Fligstein; McAdam, 2012). When approaching the topic of coalitions, Fligstein (2007, p. 63) makes it clear that “some actors are socially more adept at getting cooperation from others, working with more powerful actors and generally knowing how to build political coalitions in life”. Thus, the existence of consistent coalitions is essential for skilled social actors to perform.

Even though the concept of political coalition is not explicitly defined in SAF theory, the literature allows us to say that it expresses an alliance formed by a diverse group of social actors and organizations that share interests and motivations (Fligstein, 1997, 2007; Beckert, 2009; Fligstein; Mcadam, 2012). Common interests, world views, fictional expectations and relationships between actors are central to unifying and delimiting coalitions, whatever the field.

Starting with the coalition formed in the North Coast of Rio Grande do Sul, the history of Coomafitt (the family farmers’ cooperative) dates back to 2006 and results from the organization of a small group of farmers to sell their products, being similar to the history of many cooperatives in Rio Grande do Sul (Silva; Anjos, 2022). In the mid-2000s, the structure that gave rise to Coomafitt was founded to sell locally produced honey, originating its first name, Casa do Mel. As other products were introduced and other marketing channels emerged, the need to officially found Coomafitt arose. Currently, the cooperative occupies a prominent space in the three municipalities in which it proposes to operate, especially when it comes to the sale of bananas and, to a lesser extent, citrus, pineapple, sweet potatoes, potatoes, strawberries, vegetables and other fruits, with an emphasis on organic food aimed at school lunches.

In addition to the organizational aspect of this group of farmers that constitutes the cooperative, the accounts from the field research highlight the cooperative’s work towards advancing organic production at a territorial level, which is essential for expanding the number of families interested in this production system. Even though the motivations are diverse (healthy food, working without contact with pesticides, prices, production costs, expansion of markets, etc.), from the farmers’ perspective, the presence of the cooperative represents a guarantee of continuous product flow at a fair price. In this sense, addressing the history of organic production in the Litoral Norte territory, a rural extension agent of Emater reports that “[...] Coomafitt was an important partner, because when the cooperative said it wanted to buy the products, it distinguished itself from other cooperatives, perhaps because it works with organic products, and it strengthened this process” (interview

25, 2020). This dynamic guaranteed more solidity to the coalition that was being formed².

Territorial food markets configure a type of field in which the main relations of production and marketing of food occur within the territories. In this case, Coomafitt can be considered a territorial actor that competes in the market with other actors. Even though the cooperative may not aspire to be the most important player in the market, at any rate, what is at stake is also a market share since it is important for the cooperative to expand its presence and ability to control the field. Therefore, it resorts to a series of market strategies, such as product diversification in the case of organic production and the large scale and stable supply when it comes to conventional production of bananas, for example. These are different modes of operation that help to understand disputes in the field of food markets, by focusing on a given coalition.

Over time, Coomafitt has constituted a coalition able to compete in such markets by means of establishing specific interpretive frameworks, which define the cooperative as a farmers' representative organization, Emater as a body that provides technical assistance and OPAC Litoral Norte (the regions' participatory organic conformity assessment body) as a certifying body, in addition to other partners. With regard to organic products, the narrative constructed by the cooperative, and supported by the other aforementioned actors, is mainly associated with sustainable production, healthy eating and value-adding through appealing to territorial attributes. Furthermore, these frameworks are institutionalized by territorialized systems of participatory organic certification, notably through the partnership between Coomafitt and OPAC Litoral Norte.

This coalition was built to include farmers and their unions, *tendeiros* (stallholders), Emater, Cooperativa Girasol, municipal government of Itati and OPAC Litoral Norte. It is worth highlighting Emater's role in shaping this coalition, by providing direct support to Coomafitt and OPAC Litoral Norte since the origins of these organizations. More recently, other actors have joined the coalition, such as Cooperativa Girasol, which is a consumer cooperative that operates in Porto Alegre and works with organic or agroecological products only.

The construction of sustainable food systems can be considered the main focus of this coalition's action, especially because the main motivating elements relate to encouraging ecological farming and healthy food, culminating in adding value to family farming products. These elements are present in the accounts of the interlocutors, whether they are farmers, cooperative managers, rural extension agents or other actors; so, they constitute unifying topics that are extensively used by skilled actors in producing engagement and strengthening the coalition. If, on the one hand, these are the motivations that help to give cohesion to this coalition, on the other hand, when it comes to competing for markets, that is, acting externally to the coalition, the narratives constructed by skilled actors are mainly linked mainly quality food. This was the main interpretive framework produced by the cooperative

² It is important to highlight that the construction of sustainable food systems has been debated for a few decades by several organizations in the territory – including through systems of organic certification, such as the Ecovida Agroecology Network – which are also part of the field of territorial food markets in Litoral Norte (Oliveira; Grisa; Niederle, 2020) although in another coalition, since the actors, relationships and region of operation differ from each other.

in the field of territorial food markets. This process occurs even when it comes to markets that do not pay differentiated prices for organic products. In these cases, the narrative around quality food served to enhance the value of organic products in comparison to conventional ones and, consequently, make it more competitive in the field of territorial food markets.

For the distribution of farmers' production, previously to the pandemic there were three main types of market channels: direct sales, sales via intermediaries and sales via collective action. While in the first case farmers connect directly with consumers (farmers markets, home sales and on-farm sales), in the second one the products are sold through intermediaries – or middlemen – who help to constitute an important conventional market in the North Coast region. Finally, sales through collective action are led by Coomafitt itself and consist essentially of sales to public purchasing programs, such as the Food Acquisition Program – PAA and the National School Meal Program – Pnae.

In the field of territorial food markets, not only organic foods circulate, but also foods from conventional farming that fall within the scope of territorialized dynamics. In this field, Coomafitt and other organizations form a coalition interested in encouraging ecological farming, healthy food and fair prices for farmers. From the SAF perspective, this coalition is not in an incumbent position. On the contrary, there are large properties, supermarkets and retail chains that have greater scale and stability of supply than Coomafitt.

In Middle-upper Uruguay, located more than 500 km from the North Coast of RS, the Agência de Desenvolvimento do Médio Alto Uruguai (Admau) is also a skilled actor who designed innovations from the point of view of territorial food markets in the face of the COVID-19 pandemic. These innovations were carried out in partnership with other actors in the territory, such as farmers' cooperatives, teaching and research institutions and Emater. One of the organizations that stands out in this coalition is Cooperbio, a farmers' cooperative that constantly coordinates its work with Admau. It is worth noting that, unlike Coomafitt, Admau, as a development agency, does not work directly with farmers. Its stewardship profile involves establishing institutional relationships with other organizations, such as Cooperbio. Admau has several lines of operation, which have changed over time as territorial demands have also changed (Fligstein, 2007). The three main lines of work involve: organization of production chains and marketing of products from family farming, formalization of rural family agri-processing of farm products, and traceability of fresh products of plant origin. The construction of the online platform, Alimento de Origem, created by Admau and the Federal University of Santa Maria - Campus Frederico Westphalen, emerged from the first line of work.

Previously to the pandemic, its line of work focused on marketing consisted of a “display window” module on Admau's site just to expose products³. Since the pandemic, this module started to be used as an e-commerce structure by partner cooperatives, notably Cooperbio, which operates mainly with organic or transitional products and, thus, is also linked to OPAC Ecovida. Just like in the North Coast, both

³ For some time, Cooperbio worked delivering food baskets to end consumers. which were assembled from the production of its partners. This happened mainly between 2012 and 2015, and this experience, after the outbreak of the pandemic, proved to be important in terms of learning.

organic and conventional products circulate in this field; the part of organic food comes from a few farmers who have organic certification or are in the transition process.

Cooperbio's headquarters are located in the municipality of Seberi, RS, in an area totaling 20 hectares. The cooperative can be considered simultaneously a collective organization, a production unit and also the legal face of a social movement – the Movimento dos Pequenos Agricultores- MPA (movement of smallholder farmers). Currently, the cooperative also carries out technical assistance work, production of bio inputs, maintains a training center and provides support for certification and marketing of food produced by its members, who normally also identify themselves as part of the MPA. It is, therefore, a dynamic that sometimes highlights the face of the movement, sometimes that of the cooperative.

On a territorial scale, the MPA and Cooperbio form one of the few coalitions around themes such as peasantry, sustainable farming and healthy food. In the field of territorial food markets, these organizations constitute a coalition that is also a challenger, so that throughout its trajectory new partnerships and alliances have been built, among which that with Admau stands out. As a development agency that does not work directly with farmers, Admau does not compete in food markets, what explains the centrality of Cooperbio in this research, which is directly integrated into the field of territorial food markets and competes with other local cooperatives and retail chains locations through price, quality, diversity and stability of food supply.

The coalition structured around Cooperbio/Admau aims at competing for these markets, relying especially on interpretive frameworks related to healthy food, sustainable and ecological production originating from local family farming. In the case of Middle-upper Uruguay, field theory also enables locating Cooperbio's participation in a subfield of territorial food markets, that is, the sustainable markets. In this subfield, Cooperbio holds a prominent position, as it congregates the majority of certified farmers in the territory. Data from the National Register of Organic Farmers of the Ministry of Agriculture, Livestock and Supply (BRASIL, 2022c) points to a total of 29 certified farmers in the territory, 10 of which through audited certification. Cooperbio has 15 certified farmers among its members, through both audited and participatory certification due to specific requirements of some marketing channels.

As challenging actors in the field of territorial food markets, Cooperbio and Admau began to congregate actors and organizations interested in strengthening sustainable production, marketing and consumption processes. In the views of their managers, this strengthening implies adding value to farmer members' products, encouraging ecological farming and quality food. These are the main motivators of this coalition – the drivers of strategic action of actors who work to open new markets (such as the creation of farmers markets in municipalities of the region), to guarantee access to public policies (encouraging public purchase of family farming products for school meals) and participating in ATER (technical assistance and rural extension) requests for bids, with a view to promoting sustainable food systems.

The construction of this coalition is the main outcome of Admau's work in providing services to the territory (offering, for example, an online module for displaying family farming products and support in traceability services) and of

Cooperbio that, in addition to organizational work and food marketing for this group of farmers, also provides technical support to production, which can be seen as an innovation from the point of view of a cooperative’s functions. In this territory, Emater has a more episodic presence – that is why we did not include it as part of the coalition.

Regarding the types of markets in which this coalition competes, it can be said that, unlike what was observed in the North Coast, farming products are mainly distributed through direct sales (farmers markets, home deliveries and on-farm sales) and through sales via collective action, in which Cooperbio take on the marketing of its partners’ products. It is noteworthy, however, that in this case public purchases were not part of the cooperative’s privileged marketing channels, among which only farmers markets and sales at Cooperbio’s own shop stand out. Furthermore, intermediary agents in conventional marketing channels do not constitute an important category in this coalition.

In short, this section allowed us to highlight two coalitions that compete for territorial food markets, one in each territory. The relationship with sustainable food systems is found precisely in the way Coomafitt and Admau/Cooperbio compete for these markets, that is, through frameworks based on sustainable farming and quality food. The analysis characterizes territorial food markets as a field, precisely because the premises pointed out by Fligstein and McAdm (2012) were identified, namely: there is clarity regarding disputes over markets (in the sense of creating new demands and of expanding participation in already existing market demand); there is a dimension of power involved (coalitions that work with organic and ecological products do not have the same ability to influence the field as those focused on selling conventional foods); the rules of the game are respected (there are no reports of institutional disruptions or significant friction); and there are interpretive frameworks produced to compete in different markets, so that these frameworks are a reflection of the way skilled actors induce cooperation of other actors. In the case of the coalitions under analysis, narratives involving sustainable farming and healthy food stand out. A summary of these elements is presented in Table 1.

Table 1 - Characteristics of COOMAFITT and COOPERBIO/ADMAU coalitions

Categories of analysis	North Coast	Middle-Upper Uruguay
Skilled Actors	COOMAFIT	ADMAU/COOPERBIO
Motivations	Sustainable farming; Healthy food	Sustainable farming; Peasantry; Healthy food
Rules	Participatory Certification or Ecological Farming	Member of the MPA; Participatory Certification or Ecological farming
Interpretive frameworks	Healthy food	Healthy food
Resources mobilized	Cooperative; Certification; Public Procurement	Social movement; Cooperative; Certification, Farmers markets, ATER
Main markets accessed	Direct sales; Sales via intermediaries; Sales via collective action	Direct sales; Sales via collective action

Source: own elaboration

In the two studied fields, the coalitions found are not conservative forces in their fields. On the contrary, they take strategic action to reconfigure the field

depending on the situation, being rather characterized as challenging forces within a reasonably stable field that was not disturbed before the pandemic. Based on this full panorama, the next section will present an analysis of strategic action undertaken by skilled actors following the external shock caused in the field of territorial food markets by Covid-19 pandemic.

5 Social skill emerges from an external shock

Seeking to analyze how skilled actors managed available resources for giving responses to problems posed by the pandemic for the field of territorial food markets, the research focused on three dimensions: i) meanings and narratives produced and appropriated; ii) strategies formulated; iii) arrangements to put the strategies into practice.

In the North Coast, the strategic action led by Coomafitt operated so as to drive other actors' efforts towards actions that best served the interests and motivations of the coalition itself. Markets digitalization became the main bet for distributing the produce of cooperative's members.

Despite being a cooperative that gathers together farmers from just three municipalities in the North Coast, Coomafitt has a robust physical structure for storage, logistics and administration and a large permanent staff, as compared with other cooperatives in the same segment, such as Cooperbio, what implies significant monthly and annual fixed costs, including the payroll of approximately ten employees and repayment of loans taken out to buy vehicles. Such a configuration is important because it creates a critical need to build alternatives to interrupted marketing channels. Many of the farmers who participated in markets headed by the collective action delivered only to Coomafitt. Likewise, more than 80% of Coomafitt's sales were destined for institutional markets.

Another fundamental element that helps explain the adoption of digital tools is that the external shock represented by Covid-19 has curtailed the universe of possibilities available to skilled actors for distributing food, limiting it to a set of options much smaller than before the pandemic. In other words, although the shock represents a window of opportunity for action by challenging actors and coalitions (Fligstein; Mcadam, 2012; Frizo; Niederle, 2019), the options have become reduced. Facing the need to create marketing alternatives and considering, on the one hand, the restricted universe of possibilities and, on the other hand, the ability of the administrative staff to operate digital tools with ease, digital markets have become one of the few viable options.

The strategy formulated by the cooperative's managers highlighted the benefits of home delivery of food baskets, what per se constitutes a major change in the commercial logic of the cooperative, which began to operate for the first time in direct retail. The strategy was based on weekly lists distributed via WhatsApp with all the products available that week. This required prior contact with all members who had products available. After gathering this information, the lists were sent to consumers who, in turn, could place the order either through a Google Docs spreadsheet or via WhatsApp. At first, the strategy was simple, but operationally it involved significant work in organizing information. The cooperative named this sales channel Coma Fitt Delivery.

As the cooperative's managers pointed out, the first action to build the strategy occurred through contact with Adufrgs, the teachers' association of the Federal University of Rio Grande do Sul, with whom the weekly delivery of approximately 100 baskets was coordinated. Furthermore, the association has also collaborated by purchasing baskets and donating to needy families, as did the RS Food and Nutritional Security Council – Consea-RS (Duarte et al., 2021).

Regarding the marketing, since its beginning the strategy adopted by Coomafitt was based on wide publicity of the new marketing format through both the cooperative's social networks and those of its employees and managers. Another strategy taken was direct contact with persons responsible for public procurement in municipal departments, schools, daycare centers, hospitals and with all those with whom the cooperative had contact. At the beginning of 2021, when the cooperative started to operate with its own e-commerce, the promotion efforts were intensified, though having little appeal outside the group that had already become customers, possibly because at that moment restrictions had begun to ease and the return to physical markets was already a reality. Meanwhile, the processes became operationally simpler, as Google Docs was replaced by a website managed according to the specific needs of the logistics system.

At that time, the partnership with Cooperativa GiraSol was also consolidating to the point of sharing the website in some projects and collaborating in the construction of Coomafitt's marketing tool. Emater also helped to strengthen this partnership, especially through its Department of Cooperativism. GiraSol's previous experience of direct contact with consumers also helped to boost digitalization of Coomafitt's markets. In this sense, the strategies undertaken by the cooperative consisted in channeling its efforts to strengthen digital markets, without knowing quite well whether this channel would be sustainable in the post-pandemic context.

Besides strategies and partnerships, the construction of a digital food marketing channel involved the use of a narrative around healthy eating, food originated from family farming and appeal for people to stay at home, avoiding crowds, contamination and spread of the virus. The research data shows that with the pandemic a greater concern about the quality of the food being consumed surfaced, what is in line with a number of recent research (Attwood; Hajat, 2020; Renzo et al., 2020; Soendergaard et al., 2020; Oliveira et al., 2021). This meant a relevant competitive advantage. This is about strengthening a narrative that some consumer groups hold dear.

The discussion around food and nutritional security did not arise with the pandemic, but the cooperative's actors took advantage of this consumer concern to explore a new marketing channel, considering the contextual needs. This explains, for example, the wide acceptance of a new way of buying and selling food, even if limited to a certain group of consumers. These are people who are acquainted with the issue and find in Coomafitt Delivery a possibility to resolve one of the concerns created by the pandemic: access to healthy food.

These strategies, narratives and partnerships were fundamental for building interpretive frameworks around the consumption of healthy foods, such as organic products. Such frameworks also include narratives about consumption of local foods and shopping from home, which were important elements during the pandemic and made sense to consumers in a pandemic moment. These last two aspects were

relevant to the cooperative for being directly related to both the reduction in circulation and the consumption of fresh food that did not travel long distances between production and consumption. These are relevant elements that resonated with consumers.

The construction of narratives and meanings is in line with the discussion carried out by Fligstein (2007) about the need for skilled social actors to tell stories that are sufficiently convincing to induce cooperation of other actors in their coalition. In this sense, the cooperative's ability to operate its own e-commerce, the networks of which it was part and, mainly, the limited set of possibilities available to the coalition as a whole led the organizations to work together to create shared digital channels. The coalition included, in addition to the cooperatives and certifier entity, also Emater, which usually provided support to the organizations, and the farmers themselves. Furthermore, this strategic action also involved use of resources from other actors – for example, the logistical capacity that is shared between the various cooperatives associated with RedeCoop⁴.

Beyond being feasible, the idea proposed by the cooperative also needed its members to trust it, otherwise they could join other digital market projects led by private companies. Research data suggest that, in addition to recognition of the importance and benefits of cooperativism, two factors helped getting it. Firstly, the universe of possibilities (Frizo; Niederle, 2021) has become restricted for farmers, especially for those whose only marketing channel was that intermediated by collective action (by Coomafitt, in this case). The second factor is the trust placed in the managers of the cooperative, which is mainly led by children of farmers. There is, therefore, a close and reciprocal relationship between Coomafitt's managing team and the farmers, who play a relevant role in decision making. In the same sense, Godoy (2007) identified that one of the strategic actions of small dairy farmer cooperatives in Paraná was based on symbolic incentives, in addition to economic ones.

Just as the mere existence of territorial resources without strategic action does not produce social change, also the ability to manage resources for building plausible paths and benefits for your coalition makes no sense in itself. Resources must be available to be managed. This is a relevant consideration when focusing on a meso-level analysis. While strategic action is considered a virtue of some social actors, we should not overlook that these actors are part of a coalition with more or less limited physical and symbolic resources. In the case of Coomafitt, delivery was an alternative that fulfilled a crucial function in enabling financial inflows when the main source of revenues ceased to exist, albeit momentarily. However, this was possible because the cooperative has, among other assets: own logistics infrastructure that allows it to operate with ease throughout the north coast and in the metropolitan region of Porto Alegre; processing infrastructure that allows storing and maturing a significant amount of products; a staff capable of meeting all demands at the time. All these resources have been idle since the beginning of the pandemic.

⁴ Network of Family Farming and Solidarity Economy Cooperatives (REDECOOP), which coordinates and is composed of 43 cooperatives, covering more than 18 thousand members in 29 municipalities in Rio Grande do Sul.

The fact that, over time and since the withdrawal of social distancing measures to fight the pandemic, delivery stopped being a reasonable option among Coomafitt's marketing channels does not discredit the strategy. On the contrary, this is a possibility pointed out by Fligstein (2007) when he said that skilled social actors understand that the course of negotiations is not linear and the result may not be what was initially planned. Therefore, they often engage in more than one strategy at the same time. That is, delivery was important for a while, it guaranteed the engagement of both farmers and the cooperative team, and social skills mattered for this to be an effectively operational channel.

Even though expectations were frustrated as digital markets became inoperative after the return of institutional markets, this was not the cooperative's only marketing strategy. Skillful social actors “[...] keep their goals somewhat open and are prepared to accept what the system gives them.” (Fligstein, 2007, p. 67). Let us remember that the return to “normality”, besides driving consumers back to physical market channels, also implied a return of institutional markets, which began to demand more of those resources that were previously idle.

In the case of Cooperbio/Admau coalition, it is interesting to understand how the cooperative used its material, symbolic and human resources to solve the marketing problem of its members, especially because one of the strategies was precisely the incorporation of the Alimento de Origem platform into the food markets. To this end, the conditions and social skills that turned digital markets into a line of action of the cooperative are different from those observed in Coomafitt.

Cooperbio was not created with the aim of solving problems related to marketing of farmers produce. Its origins are connected to the creation of the Smallholder Farmers Movement (MPA) in Middle-upper Uruguay and it has been mainly engaged in discussion around topics such as ecological farming and peasantry. This is a completely different context than that in the North Coast, given that Coomafitt was created and continues to operate precisely to support farmers in marketing their produce, what demands different skills from the point of view of the managers of each cooperative.

From the moment the pandemic became a reality in Brazil, Cooperbio stopped selling at local farmers markets for a few weeks, but this did not change the cooperative's operating dynamics, as its fixed costs were relatively low in view of a small staff, and it received support from the MPA. Although having already some experience in home delivery of food baskets, the cooperative was not part of the digital universe, in the sense of working, for example, with marketing and publicity on social networks, what also differs from Coomafitt's skills in the North Coast.

On the other hand, farmer members of Cooperbio and MPA used to sell most of their produce individually, by means of direct sales arrangements, or, in a few situations, through public calls for bids, also individually and without the cooperative as intermediate. Just like in the North Coast coalition, these farmers were left without income in the first weeks of the pandemic, given that they also held farmers' markets, but stopped doing so due to the intrinsic risks of travel and contact with the public.

The interruption was not due to legal restrictions, but rather to the necessary precautions during the pandemic. It is important to revisit this process to highlight that the universe of possibilities (Frizo; Niederle, 2019) following the external shock was restricted for the farmers in this coalition. We must add to this analysis the fact

that most of these farmers have another source of income, such as retirement or external salaried work, what gives ecological farming only a complementary role. This reality alleviates the problems arising from the pandemic and gives another magnitude to the possibilities presented following the shock.

In this sense, Cooperbio continued to participate in farmers' markets in the Middle-upper Uruguay region, especially the Seberi farmers' market, with its own products and those of its members. Selling their members' products did not require much from the cooperative in terms of transforming the operational dynamics, as it already held these markets with its own products. This is, therefore, an intensification of a very important practice in the first months. Besides keeping the farmers' markets, another strategy led by the cooperative was exactly the use of digital markets, put into practice by means of sales via WhatsApp and Alimento de Origem website. The use of WhatsApp was an almost natural path adopted by the cooperative, given that the instant messaging application was already widely used for communication between the cooperative and farmers and the cooperative and consumers.

Thus, following the first restrictions imposed by the pandemic, WhatsApp became Cooperbio's main marketing channel. The strategy adopted by the cooperative was to keep contact with consumers, publicizing available products, collecting orders and organizing baskets deliveries. From a comparative perspective, the mode of operation was similar to that adopted by Coomafitt's actors, but with the peculiarity that, in the case of Cooperbio, consumers were already customers of the cooperative.

The strategy of digital marketing via WhatsApp did not involve coordination with external agents and organizations. However, the narrative used to keep contact with consumers encouraging their loyalty draws attention. After all, even though the public already attended Cooperbio's farmers' markets, they were also customers of supermarkets and groceries, which also started to offer delivery, whether via WhatsApp or websites and apps. Thus, the attraction of ecological and organic products and of products from small farmers – once linked to the MPA – made a difference in the construction of interpretive frameworks to maintain the sales.

The research findings point to digital markets as an important strategy for some farming families linked to the cooperative. This, however, cannot be extrapolated to the whole group of farmers in the coalition. There are some that, for various reasons, were left out of this universe of digital marketing. Among some circumstances, issues such as seasonality, distance from urban centers and logistical difficulties stand out.

It is also important to highlight that food basket delivery had been developed by Cooperbio previously, what contributed to implement online sales following the pandemic outbreak. On the one hand, the expertise acquired earlier helped make less difficult the reconstruction of this market channel. It is worth noting that the universe of farmers who gather into Cooperbio is considerably smaller than that of Coomafitt's farmers. Even though approximately 40 families produce organic foods and part of these depended on Coomafitt to sell, there is an even larger part of members that produce conventional foods and also depended on Coomafitt to sell these products. In the case of Cooperbio, the products of member farmers sold by

the cooperative come from just 15 families, what facilitates the operational process as a whole.

On the other hand, the resources available to skilled actors were more restricted, especially regarding human resources, since, after 2016, Cooperbio and MPA teams have been significantly reduced, resulting an idle installed capacity that was not very useful for the scenario triggered by the pandemic. Part of the cooperative's infrastructure consist of physical structures intended for the production of bio-inputs and food processing.

A few weeks after the pandemic outbreak, Admau put into operation the online marketing module of the Alimento de Origem platform, for which the construction of narratives around local production and healthy food in the digital environment was fundamental, also indicating that Admau actors bore more consistent digital skills than those of Cooperbio's actors. Apparently, aspects related to food and nutritional security have become more robust following the pandemic (Oliveira et al., 2021; Soendergaard et al., 2020) and, therefore, this discussion was also included in MPA's agenda (Carvalho et al., 2022). Such institutionalities are directly related to the local operations of Cooperbio, which starts to incorporate this narrative in the field of territorial food markets.

The Alimento de Origem platform emerges from territorial demands and from Admau's understanding of its functions. For example, part of the agency's staff was a group of actors acquainted with information technology and integrated platforms and took over the construction of the platform. That is, actors had programming, what does not necessarily mean knowing digital marketing, given that initially the platform did not targeted end consumers, but rather organizations. Such distinct skills proved to be decisive in the construction of the digital tools of the studied fields – their websites are products of these skills, sometimes favoring integration of services based on more complex models (Admau), sometimes focusing on aspects such as intuitive and attractive layouts solely for online marketing aiming at a specific group (Coomafitt). In other words, the actors' heterogeneous skills in each coalition were central to distinguish the online marketing strategies of Coomafitt and Cooperbio/Admau.

With the return of physical market channels, only WhatsApp continued to be used to receive orders (though few), despite the platform still being available. Three important issues deserve to be highlighted in this context. Firstly, although market digitalization was one of the few options left to farmers in this territory, the universe of possibilities (Frizo; Niederle, 2019) in this coalition also included external income from pensions or salaried work, as demonstrated. In other words, pressure to seek marketing alternatives was lowered by both the secondary nature of ecological farming in this coalition and the lesser need for sales revenue on the part of the cooperative, since, unlike Coomafitt, this is not the main function of Cooperbio, which furthermore is backed by MPA.

Secondly, the existence of resources available to social actors for strategic action is essential for these latter to be effective. Cooperbio and Admau do not have marketing structures available, such as cold storage warehouse's, for example. It became clear that the skilled social actors only relied on the resources of the coalition itself. Once again, as in the case of Coomafitt, state support to these new experiences

that could constitute interesting strategies for building other market configurations was absent.

Thirdly, in the view of Admau and Cooperbio managers this type of market channel lacks enough demand. There is a certain consensus on the existence of a consumer market in Middle Upper Uruguay, even if less robust than that of the North Coast, but the appraisal of these actors is that these consumers are very accustomed to shopping in physical markets, whether at farmers' markets, at groceries, or even in supermarkets. In this sense, the disruption caused by the pandemic was enough to move the field to the point of bringing about new strategies for food marketing, but not to the point of producing significant changes in the subfield of territorial food markets.

Since Cooperbio takes on the responsibility of coordinating food sales, the tool proposed by Admau becomes relevant insofar as it responds to a current problem with a solution created within the scope of its own coalition. The close relationships between the cooperative, the social movement and the agency contributed decisively to integrate the platform into the field of territorial food markets, constituting a strategy for competing in these markets. In this case, the dispute was also guided by frameworks that highlighted the quality of the food and the appreciation of local production.

6 Final considerations

In this work, we sought to identify the way skilled actors performed in building alternatives for the actors in their coalition in response to the challenges posed by the pandemic. If, on the one hand, this reflection starts from the assumption that social actors in the territories have agency capacity to drive social change, unlike more structuralist views, on the other hand, strategic action should not be overestimated. The joint analysis of the studied cases indicates that social skills need resources to express their potential. Coomafitt was benefitted by the fact that the cooperative was fully operational, worked with a focus on building food markets and had a technical team and infrastructure capable of meeting new demands. Cooperbio, in turn, although having a less robust structure, counted on previous experience with delivery and on Admau's support, what allowed them to build important responses at a time when many farmers had to interrupt direct sales.

The external shock restricted the options available to farmers and organizations, making digitalization one of the few alternatives available. This research's findings point to different answers, even when the focus is only on digital markets, what immediately corroborates the thesis that digital markets are heterogeneous. In both cases, the responses are aimed at digitalizing markets, but with different constructions. At least three tools could be identified: WhatsApp (all experiences), website (Coomafitt) and platform (Cooperbio/Admau). The skill required to put each of these tools into operation acquires new proportions as the tool becomes more complex. WhatsApp is a widely accessible application, whose necessary handling consists of publicity work, construction of a narrative that dialogues with consumer demands and formulation of appropriate strategies. The website, in turn, in addition to the narrative and strategies, demands greater coordination, especially when it is developed by the organization itself. Finally, the

platform increases this difficulty even further, precisely because it works with integrated systems and offers a series of services in addition to digital markets.

The heterogeneity of the created tools is a product of the actors' different skills in each coalition. While Coomafitt had a young team that was very involved in the digital universe, as it already worked with digital marketing strategies on social networks, for example, Admau and Cooperbio had in their coalition actors whose skills were more focused on areas of programming and information technology, which allowed the development of a more complex tool from the point of view of systems integration and data control. The field research pointed to a great acceptance of WhatsApp, whose ease of operation suggests that, sometimes, simpler and more accessible strategies work well, as was the case with territorial food markets during the pandemic. This facility, however, has a non-monetary cost, namely the impossibility of managing data and information, such as purchase history, consumer profile, updating available stock, etc., something that is increasingly valued in the digital world.

The role played by social skills in coalitions should not be disregarded; it becomes clear in the strategies, partnerships and narratives observed in the most restrictive moments of the pandemic, which guaranteed markets for farming production. However, in these cases – in which there were an idle structure and skilled actors – the State failed to encourage these new markets by supporting the continuity of these new marketing strategies in accordance with the new context that was presented. Furthermore, the state not only failed to support alternatives, but also the very crisis generated in territorial food markets stemmed precisely from the interruption of public procurement programs led by State departments at its various levels.

In other words, in addition to social ability (which becomes more important following an external shock) and available resources, the transformation of a field is strongly catalyzed by the presence of the State, given its ability to powerfully encourage certain processes. In the case of Cooperbio, the effect of the interruption of institutional markets was not more significant because food sales are not among the main purposes of the cooperative. Given the importance of the MPA in its operational dynamics, its work as a cooperative is mainly focused on the field of production.

These results show how difficult is changing the institutional dynamics of a field. This does not deny the importance of social skills, especially considering that responses were constructed, but it demonstrates the power of conservative forces in maintaining the dynamics of the field. Finally, it is necessary to highlight the relevance of the Strategic Action Fields approach in analyzes that seek to understand the different disputes inherent in any field.

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