



Agroecology's societal benefits depend on solidaristic relationships: some experiences from Brazil

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European agroecology agendas have emphasised many societal benefits (e.g. rural livelihoods, fair prices, socio-economic equity, biodiversity conservation and nutritional quality), whose fulfilment depends on short supply chains. Producers thereby avoid middlemen, retain more of the value that they add, and build closer relationships with consumers. Such short chains are variously called alternative agri-food networks, proximate markets or circuits courts in France (Chiffolleau, 2012; Karner, 2010; Kneafsey, 2013; Lamine & Chiffolleau, 2016).

From a global perspective, 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 (HLPE, 2019: 41; also FAO, 2018; IPES-Food, 2021: 4).

In the European context, 'Agroecology has embraced social and solidarity economy approach in agriculture, but it is still in its infancy and will need political vision and consumers' engagement', according to Agroecology Europe (AEEU, 2020).

Successful experiences elsewhere could inform European strategies.

Question: To build an agroecology-based solidarity economy in Europe, what can be learned from Brazil?

In Latin America, there have been increasing overlaps between two social movements seeking better livelihoods beyond the capitalist economy. The movement for a social and solidarity economy – also known as *economia solidaria*, ESS or EcoSol – has built cooperative relationships within and among enterprises. Each gains collective capacities for self-managing *circuitos curtos*. Latin American networks helped stimulate a global one (RIPESS, 2015). Meanwhile the agroecology movement has built capacities for recycling natural resources and maintaining biodiversity, especially through knowledge-exchange among producers and with agri-extensionists, a process often known as *diálogo de saberes*.

Here EcoSol-agroecology denotes a strategic convergence between those movements. In Brazil this effort was jointly promoted by the *Articulação Nacional de Agroecologia* (ANA) and *Forum Brasileiro de Economia Solidária* (FBES).

They developed collective capacities for the convergence and demanded support measures for them, at both national and local level.



Such proposals were somewhat accommodated by the 2003-2016 governments led by the Partido dos Trabalhadores (PT). After a decade, its 2013 Plano Nacional de Agroecologia e Produção Orgânica (PLANAPO) brought together many relevant policies including solidarity economy. Reciprocally, its **Conselho Nacional de Economia Solidária** (CNES) emphasised a solidaristic basis for technical training in agroecology. Through these national frameworks, social movements more readily expanded collective capacities, support networks and knowledge-exchange processes (Schmitt, 2020).



Valorize circuitos curtos: from the earth to the table

Baixada Santista: collective capacities for circuitos curtos

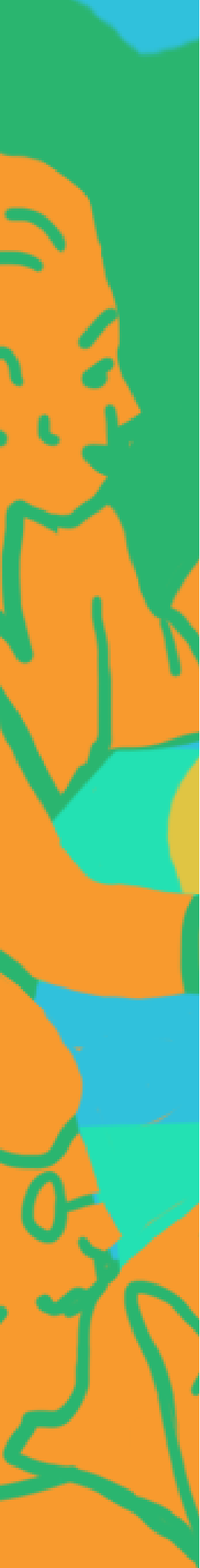
Question: How did EcoSol-agroecology movements build collective capacities for circuitos curtos?

Let us turn to a specific region. The Baixada Santista is a metropolitan area on the southwest coast of São Paulo state. It is named after Santos, a major port city linked with international markets. Eight coastal towns have small-scale artisanal production including agriculture; some have significant peri-urban agriculture.

In the past decade, EcoSol-agroecology networks there have sought to build collective capacities, initially for small-scale agroecological producers to gain and manage collective marketing. These efforts emphasised access to agroecological markets, i.e. constructing *circuitos curtos* such as public procurement and farmers' markets.

During 2011-18 training programmes there were financed nationally and supported locally by municipalities. Supporting this agenda, public policy managers formed a regional network to coordinate and sharpen strategies.

Eventually they established the *Fórum de Economia Solidária da Baixada Santista* (FESBS) within the EcoSol national policy framework. Beyond Federal programmes, FESBS continued the training efforts, often hosted by municipalities during 2016-18. Topics included *Plantas Alimentícias Não Convencionais* (PANCs, non-conventional plants), which valorise agro-biodiversity and its related socio-cultural diversity. They provide means to produce herbal medicines and/or traditional foods. With appropriate care (*carinho*) in lightly processing the fruit, the products remind people of favourite childhood tastes and aromas; processed food have a longer shelf life, gain more income and avoid waste.



All these aspects have helped Feira vendors to build closer relationships with consumers. Training topics also included community-based tourism, likewise based on cooperatives, linking agroecological production with other artisanal activities, e.g. clothing, jewelry, services, etc.

Women's cooperatives and networks have played central roles. Within the FESBS the feminist collective EcoSol Mulher held regular events on ways to strengthen women's autonomy. As a recurrent **slogan**, 'When each one ceases silence, the collective voice is made strong, vibrant and sharp in finding the way'.

Question: How did those efforts make 'solidarity economy' more effective and publicly accessible?

FESBS coordinators have conceptualised solidarity economy as an 'economy of proximity' in multiple senses (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, solidary 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.

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

EcoSol-agroecology networks face the pandemic

Question: In this Brazilian region, how did solidarity networks deal with disruptions of the Covid-19 pandemic?

After the Covid-19 pandemic intensified in March 2020, Brazil's state authorities shut down schools to limit infections. Some local authorities used the funds to deliver food to vulnerable people, responding to civil society pressure. When Brazil's state governments imposed protective measures of hygiene and social distancing, heavier burdens fell on lower-income people and small-scale producers.

The new requirements posed special difficulties for open-air farmers' markets, generally called Feiras do Agricultor or Productor. The new hygiene measures included: disinfecting the food stalls, maintaining a minimum distance between them, and avoiding infection through product handling, packaging, plastic bags or payment methods. Some Feiras made special efforts to adopt hygiene measures, but others could not comply and had to suspend operations.

Local solidarity networks made efforts help the Feiras to comply, to stimulate direct sales by other means, and to facilitate barter of surplus products. They also promoted donations for vulnerable individuals. As the FESBS emphasised, **donations** are not charity: 'In gift relationships, the goal is to establish a social bond.'

The **FESBS** hosted regular online roundtables (rodas de conversas) to discuss new strategies. Speakers included collective marketing initiatives, EcoSol networks, academic researchers and public policy officers supporting such efforts.

Collective marketing initiatives

Question: How are proximate relationships illustrated by initiatives there?

Some general patterns can be illustrated by collective marketing initiatives of small-scale producers in an agroecological transition. Some producers formed or joined an Organização de Controle Social (OCS); this continuously improves agroecological methods and collectively provides organic certification, which can obtain higher prices in public procurement programmes.

Let us look briefly at one initiative each in four towns. Quotations here come from their Facebook pages and our 2021 research interviews.

In the main city, **Santos**, a new solidarity network had been established about a year before the pandemic. Called **o Rede Livres Consumidores Conscientes**, they locally 'link producers and conscientious consumers'. The term Livres (free) has a dual meaning: products free of pesticides, and distribution free of profit-driven middlemen. They have highlighted the resource conservation, solidarity and socially just livelihoods accruing from agroecological production methods: 'We promote popular access to produtos de bem'.

o Rede Livres Consumidores Conscientes



Those aims have been pursued through its Community-Supported Agriculture (CSA) box scheme, thus building a cultural proximity between producers and consumers. During the pandemic, demand rose, but many subscribers could not reach its distribution point. So o Livres arranged smaller pick-up points or home deliveries for agroecological products that otherwise would have no outlet. Home deliveries depended on an **eco-bikers** cooperative, using a novel app which avoided user charges and promoted the alternative vision.

In **Peruibe**, **EcoSol-agroecology networks** have been stimulated by the **União Mulheres Produtoras de EcoSol (UMPES)**, the EcoSol Union of Women Producers. A common purpose has been mutual aid as the basis for dignity, higher income and emotional bonds. UMPES has co-managed the weekly Feira do Agricultor with the municipality and promoted women's participation in professional improvement courses. Some women's cooperatives gained organic certification through an OCS, thus gaining a higher price. These arrangements exemplify a greater organizational proximity among UMPES members.

During the pandemic the Feira do Agricultor could not continue to operate in its previous form, mainly for two reasons: the virus risks deterred its usual customers, and the facilities could not be easily adapted to the hygiene requirements. To minimise human contact, food parcels could be picked-up at a drive-thru facility or at alternative pick-up points or else delivered to people's homes. UMPES also established a weekly virtual **online fair**.

Women producers pooled their products, assembled food baskets at the Feira site, took orders online and afterwards distributed the income according to criteria which they had democratically agreed (Silva et al, 2020). By exchanging their surplus products, moreover, UMPES members could offer greater variety to consumers and increase their income. This novel practice had a solidaristic role: 'We valorise product exchanges, seen as a necessary practice to create more just relationships' (Capozzi et al, 2020).



Itanhaém is the base of the rural producers' association, **Associação dos Produtores Rurais da Microbacia Hidrográfica de Itanhaém (AMIBRA)**.

A common purpose has been mutual aid. The municipality has provided training courses in EcoSol-agroecology for many years, often in partnership with the FESBS. The training strengthened collective self-management skills and strategic vision. Illustrating organizational proximity, FESBS training events helped to increase women's participation and leadership. Among the many Itanhaém seminars, one was entitled, 'Ecosol Mulher: women's emancipation through solidarity economy'.



As regards institutional proximity: along with the municipality, for many years AMIBRA was co-managing the **Feira do Agricultor**, featuring collective stalls. During the 2020 pandemic the municipality helped the Feira do Agricultor to find a larger site, which had fewer stalls in order to maintain the necessary distance between producers and consumers. It set up a collective stall to combine products of several producers. It also set up a drive-thru facility for consumers to feel safer from the virus. Its messages emphasised food quality for health: 'You are what you eat, so you should eat healthy food.'

For more than a decade, the municipality had run a Banco de Alimentos, purchasing products for school meals and vulnerable people, e.g. from AMIBRA members. When Itanhaém suspended the school meals programme during the pandemic, its municipal officer helped AMIBRA to gain food-supply contracts with two other municipalities which were continuing the programme, Mongaguá and Guarujá.

Based in Bertioga, the **Coletivo Banana Verde** originated during the pandemic, when the closure of traditional Feiras led twenty producers to initiate collective marketing. Rather than a cooperative, the Coletivo combines producers and associations with their own separate identities. As regards organizational proximity, 'We are a collective of family farmers and small producers of artisanal foods and drinks, engaged in creating a network of producers and consumers, towards constructing a new economy' (**Facebook page**). A common purpose has been mutual aid: 'Money is a political weapon to support a new economy.' Women members 'have a fundamental rich presence.'



Coletivo Banana Verde: form open to place orders for delivery on Saturdays

Collective marketing is done through pre-paid online orders. Through this arrangement, producers lose less food to waste than they did in Feiras. The Coletivo tries to educate consumers about agri-food alternatives. 'Consumers must understand that they are a fundamental active part of maintaining a space' for agroecological methods. The publicity emphasises agroecological methods for seasonal products: 'The products are delivered weekly in accordance with the availability of ingredients and the rhythms of Nature!' (**Banana Verde Facebook**).



Conclusion: common purposes activating proximities of EcoSol

Question: How do proximate relationships emerge from collective efforts of EcoSol-agroecology networks?

In each case above, proximate purposes activate and link other proximities. If the four cases are amalgamated, then together they illustrate the following forms:

- Proximate purposes: They seek to deepen a reciprocal mutual-aid and democratic self-management. They develop collective knowledge for agroecological production methods, based on agro-biodiverse resources. This provides a basis to gain consumer support and raise producers' incomes. Women's leadership (protagonismo feminine) aim to strengthen their capacities, highlight their economic contribution and overcome gender inequalities (e.g. AMIBRA, UMPES and Coletivo Banana Verde). These common purposes have activated and linked other types of proximity, as follows:
 - Organisational proximity: Training programmes have helped producers to build collective capacities, e.g. to establish an Organização de Controle Social (OCS) for agroecological methods and eventual organic certification (e.g. AMIBRA and UMPES). In adapting to the pandemic, Feiras devised adaptations such as drive-thru facilities. Collective marketing initiatives have been linking online orders with new delivery systems (e.g. Livres' eco-bikers and Coletivo Banana Verde).
 - Cultural proximity: Diverse agri-food traditions have been revived for reconnecting producers with consumers. Seasonal foods are promoted as more environmentally sustainable, with consumer education about cooking methods (e.g. Livres, Coletivo Banana Verde, UMPES). Some products are lightly processed, enhancing longevity and aesthetic appeal, by contrast with the prevalent ultra-processed food (e.g. UMPES). Traditional agricultural knowledge has been integrated with technoscientific knowledge.
 - Institutional proximity: Having requested various support measures from public authorities, some initiatives have gained public procurement sales, facilities for Feiras, drive-thru, transport, food basket assembly, etc. This support has been facilitated by FESBS bringing together EcoSol professionals, integrating their expertise and circulating creative adaptations during the pandemic.

As a political project, this network promotes EcoSol as a socially just alternative to the dominant system. By bringing together all such initiatives, the solidarity network helps them to demand support measures, despite the Federal government greatly reducing them.

Question: What are wider implications for circuitos curtos?

Despite the Covid-19 crisis, Baixada Santista's EcoSol network maintained or even expanded circuitos curtos, raised their public profile as an alternative, and (at least) maintained income for many small-scale agroecological producers. They did so by extending collective capacities for activating and linking various proximities of EcoSol. The network has been strengthening solidaristic bonds among various artisanal activities beyond agri-food products. This scope broadens global agendas for scaling agroecology through a solidarity economy.



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Its short name, AgroEcos, indicates that the initiatives have echoes, thus being reproduced across space and time. For all three case-study areas, see AgroEcos (2020).

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