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Covid-19 Pandemic: Changing Conditions for Local Food System Actors to Operate Towards Agroecology

MARKUS FRANK¹, MARIANO M. AMOROSO², BRIGITTE KAUFMANN³

¹*German Institute for Tropical and Subtropical Agriculture (DITSL), Germany*

²*National University of Rio Negro, Institute for Natural Resources, Agroecology and Rural Development, Argentina*

³*German Institute for Tropical and Subtropical Agriculture (DITSL), Germany*

Abstract

Measures implemented to control the COVID-19 pandemic are challenging global food systems, and weaknesses of prevalent food regimes are evidenced. Responses by local food system actors, such as alternative local marketing and farm-level diversification strategies, indicate that impacts of the pandemic provide new windows of opportunity for transforming local food systems, guided by the principles of agroecology. Agroecological transition studies stress the possible trigger effects of sudden change situations and necessary new conditions for shifts in production, marketing and consumption practices. Studying the diverse changing conditions that frame the individual room to manoeuvre of food actors for changing their actions and strategies is promising to understand what pushes actors to change from the usual. We encompass these emerging questions in our ongoing case study research on exploring transition pathways in mixed smallholder production systems in Northern Patagonia, Argentina. In a first step, in June 2020 we conducted a survey (n=30) to assess how local farmers and processors perceived the changing situation in the early stage of the pandemic (March – June 2020) and what strategies they proposed and implemented to adapt their production and marketing to the changing conditions. In line with other recent studies, our results indicate strong disturbances and impacts perceived by the actors. Immediate responses reveal adaptation strategies in agroecological niches that may strengthen local transition processes, such as developing civic food networks. Based on these results, in a second step, we are currently conducting in-depth interviews and group discussions with local marketing initiatives that were encouraged by the pandemic, to study i) which production and marketing conditions have changed in the course of the pandemic; ii) which principles and properties of the agroecological target system became more relevant for actors to operate; and iii) which capitals and capacities were employed by the actors to implement strategies. By presenting (preliminary) results, our contribution seeks to engage in the discussion about potentials of the current global crisis to facilitate shifting paradigms in localised food systems towards sustainability.

Keywords: Adaptation strategies, agroecology, civic food networks, pandemic, transition