Extended abstract


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**Highlights:**

1. Anti-COVID public policies favoured agribusiness to the detriment of family farming.
2. Family farming suffered restrictions and prohibitions that put its viability at risk.
3. Agrarian organizations and social movements responded quickly and in a coordinated way.
4. The measures evidenced the persistence of a growth ideology in public institutions.

**Abstract:** The state of emergency decreed by the Spanish government due to COVID-19 pandemic –first half of 2020– established that basic activities should be maintained; among them, those related to food production and distribution. However, occupations typical of family farming and agroecological production were restricted. From the analysis of two cases (farmers markets in Barcelona and self-consumption orchard in Alcaine, Teruel), the article shows that the regulations were not applied homogeneously in the territory. It depended on the interpretation of the government delegations, the interests and influence of the decentralized institutions in those delegations, and the organizational capacity of civil society. The emergency evidenced that in the central government and other decentralized institutions an urban-centric vision persisted that prioritized the conventional agri-food model.

**Keywords:** Pandemic, Agri-food policies, Self-consumption orchard, Peasant markets, Social movements.
Extended abstract

Introduction and justification

On March 14, 2020, the Government of Spain declared a state of alarm due to the COVID-19 pandemic. In a country in which the regions (called “Autonomous Communities”) have extensive powers, the state of alarm involves the temporary recentralization of the legislative and administrative power. The regions became entities subordinate to the Government Delegations -representatives of the Central Government in each region-.

On the same date, 14 March, the Central Government published a Royal Decree (DR) that established the conditions of lockdown. Mobility and functioning restrictions excluded basic activities such as food production and distribution. But some methods of food production and marketing were left in legal limbo, especially those that affected small family farming. Among other measures, non-permanent markets - where farmers sell their production directly - were closed, and moving to self-consumption orchards was prohibited.

Objectives, methodology and sources

During the first months of 2020, and at the global level, numerous “emergency studies” on the effects of the pandemic on food production and distribution were published. However, few of them analysed the impact of the pandemic on family farming and local markets. These few studies proposed different scenarios. Some claimed that family production was particularly vulnerable to the crisis. Others felt that there were interesting expectations, either because of the difficulties that global markets would experience in the coming years, or because of an increased consumer interest in healthy products.

This article analyses the impact that the application of the RD had on family farming and for self-consumption in Spain. Beyond the conjunctural situation of the
pandemic, we wonder if these emergency policies showed an urban-centric bias. Our analysis leads us to conclude that the Spanish Government made a commitment to ensure food supply through the agro-industrial chain and to the detriment of those of an alternative nature.

The response to these measures was organised through SOS campesinado (SOS farmers) a platform that brought together more than 700 peasant organisations, NGOs and social organisations. The article also analyses this resistance. In some places, it succeeded in getting local and regional institutions to accept a flexible interpretation of the legal regulations of the state of alarm. In others, it did not.

To analyse these government policies, the article focuses on two specific aspects: the closure of non-permanent markets for direct sales to consumers, in the city of Barcelona (Catalonia), and the ban on working in rural orchards for self-consumption in Alcaine, a small village in the province of Teruel (Aragón).

The research method used was the ethnographic. The two cases analysed are known in depth. Given the situation of lockdown, the monitoring of the situation generated by the state of emergency was carried out through telematics means (virtual ethnography).

**Results**

*Non-permanent direct selling markets (Barcelona, region of Catalonia)*

The day before the state of alarm was enact, the Catalan regional government issued a resolution that considered it necessary to guarantee the continuity of the farmers’ markets. However, the centralisation of competences due to the state of emergency annulled this Resolution and subordinated all the measures to the DR. The lack of definition of this legal norm meant that each municipality established its own regulations. Barcelona City Council decided to close down non-permanent farmers’ markets. This was in addition to the loss of other direct sales channels, such as school canteens and restaurants, which were closed due to the state of emergency. As these are fresh foods, this situation led to the loss of production.

Organised through SOScampesinado platform, this productive sector reacted by means of two strategies. One, applying pressure on public institutions to make a non-restrictive reading of the DR. In Barcelona, it did not work at first instance. Social pres-
sure managed most of the municipalities in Catalonia to reopen the farmers’ markets. In Barcelona they started up again on 18 April, more than a month after being closed.

The second strategy implemented by family and agro-ecological farms was to create or promote other direct sales systems, such as via the Internet or to consumer cooperatives. Sales through these marketing channels grew. This made it possible to release part of the production. But this solution had limitations. Door-to-door sales entailed logistics that made marketing more expensive and reduced profit margins. In addition, many farmers who had never worked in this way before or were not part of larger organisational structures, were unable to articulate themselves. In these cases, the farmer had to turn to the conventional commercial chain, at the cost of sacrificing the commercial margin, or seeing his production shrink.

**Self-consumption orchards in the rural world (Alcaine, region of Aragón)**

Alcaine is a village affected by the rural exodus. However, most of the houses that existed at the time of greatest demographic splendour are in good condition. This paradox is explained by the fact that they are used as second homes, and their owners are immigrants and their descendants. Alcaine’s role as a tourist destination revived the orchard. In the 1980s, the orchard began to be recovered by those former emigrants who practiced residential tourism in their place of origin. As they reached retirement age, some extended their stays, and this allowed them to devote more care to the orchard, and to make better use of the agricultural seasons.

Although the pandemic locked only thirty people in the village, regulations prohibited them from accessing their orchards. In a letter published by the newspaper *Diario de Teruel*, the inhabitants denounced the contradiction involved in not being able to do self-consumption work in areas where it is difficult to meet anyone, but having to go to a busy supermarket dozens of kilometres away to buy food.

The ban on access to self-consumption orchards became generalised throughout Spain. The DR established measures to ensure “the functioning of production site services”. But in one part of the country, food production was understood to be an exclusively professional activity. Therefore, only those who were registered in the Agrarian Social Security System, had an employment contract with a farm, or owned land were allowed to move. It should be noted that, in the rural world, it is common for the use of orchards to be established through non-formal agreements.

In other words, the DR imposed containment measures appropriate for urban areas, but inconsistent in rural areas with low population density. On the other hand, it did not consider that unpaid activities with a relevant role in the domestic economy
are practised in the rural world. Finally, it did not contemplate the existence of customary land use mechanisms.

The regional government of Aragon, under pressure from rural citizens, tried to negotiate with the central government to make DR more flexible, but without success. It was only on 2nd of May, almost two months after the start of the emergency, that free movement to the orchards was allowed.

Discussion

During the state of emergency, small-scale agriculture was faced with situations that put its viability at risk. Two cases have been presented. One, that of those farms that exploit relatively few resources, but obtain the commercial margin by selling directly to the consumer in non-permanent markets. In some cases, they were able to establish alternative marketing channels. But in others, part of the production was spoiled or had to be sold by conventional means, giving up the commercial margin. In the case of rural self-consumption producers, many farmers could not travel to their orchards or assumed the risk of a fine. Not only did they lose their spring production. They were also unable to prepare properly for the summer harvest.

Social organisations and peasant organisations defined the government’s regulations as urban-centric. Certainly, in Spain they were established on the basis of the needs and characteristics of the cities, and favoured the agro-industrial model. Supermarkets increased their in-store turnover by 12-15% and their online sales grew by 74%. The situation consolidated - at least temporarily - its predominance in the agri-food chain.

Conclusions and future orientations

The political measures taken during the hardest phases of the lockdown were an attack on rural society seeking independent alternatives. But it does not seem that they were aimed at expressly favouring the agro-industrial model. The case of the farmers’ markets in Barcelona is exemplary. The City Council had been promoting them for years, but they were closed. It was not a political turn. It must be understood as the persistence of an ideology of growth that colonises mentalities and that is acti-
vated in situations of crisis, when there is no time for reflection. A demonstration of the Gramscian concept of cultural hegemony.

It should be noted whether, at the end of the pandemic, the vulnerability of small farms has increased, whether they have been resilient, or whether – as was noted in the analysed period – the sector has been restructured to the detriment of the more independent ones and in favour of those immersed in networks that facilitate marketing and political action.