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Laying the foundations of a more conscious society? How vendors, consumers and organizers socially construct farmers' markets in Bogotá, Colombia

¿Sentando las bases para una sociedad más consciente? Cómo vendedores, consumidores y organizadores construyen socialmente los mercados campesinos en Bogotá, Colombia

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Abstract

This study examines how vendors, consumers, and organizers socially construct agroecological farmers' markets (FM) in Bogotá. Using a multi-method approach entailing structured and unstructured interviews, descriptive statistics, and ethnographic content analysis, the study shows how the actors situate FM in relation to debates on sustainability, rural development, and alternative agri-food systems in Colombia. The results demonstrate that vendors, consumers, and organizers often hold largely similar perspectives on FM and their relations with the dominant food system. Specifically, they conceive of FM as an alternative to the dominant food system and experience them as spaces in which utilitarian relations are put aside in favour of alternative values and practices, which include care for other human and non-human beings and limited economic competition. Furthermore, FM simultaneously function as protective spaces for peasant knowledge and culture and connectors between rurality and urbanity. Finally, this study shows that FM cannot be fully understood within the sectoral scope of sustainable agriculture, or rural development; rather, they represent an attempt to lay the foundations of a more conscious society that vendors, consumers, and organizers want to help come into being.

Keywords

Sustainability; Peasantry; Alternative agri-food systems; Alternative food networks; Latin America.

Resumen

Este estudio examina cómo los vendedores, consumidores y organizadores construyen socialmente los mercados agroecológicos campesinos ('farmers' markets', FM) en Bogotá. Utilizando un planteamiento de métodos múltiples que implica entrevistas estructuradas y no estructuradas, estadísticas descriptivas y análisis de contenido etnográfico, el estudio muestra cómo los actores ubican a los FM en relación con los debates sobre sostenibilidad, desarrollo rural y sistemas agroalimentarios alternativos en Colombia. Los resultados demuestran que los vendedores, consumidores y organizadores a menudo tienen perspectivas muy similares sobre los FM y sus relaciones con el sistema agroalimentario dominante. Específicamente, conciben a los FM como una alternativa al sistema agroalimentario dominante y los experimentan como espacios en los que las relaciones utilitarias se dejan de lado en favor de valores y prácticas alternativas, que incluyen el cuidado de otros seres humanos y no humanos y una competencia económica limitada. Además, los FM funcionan simultáneamente como espacios de protección para el conocimiento y la cultura campesina, y conectores entre ruralidad y urbanidad. Finalmente, este estudio muestra que los FM no pueden entenderse completamente dentro del alcance sectorial de la agricultura sostenible, o el desarrollo rural; más bien, representan un intento de sentar las bases de una sociedad más consciente que los vendedores, consumidores y organizadores quieren que se forme.

Palabras clave

Sostenibilidad; Campesinado; Sistemas agroalimentarios alternativos; Redes agroalimentarias alternativas; América Latina.

Introduction

This study focuses on farmers' markets as one of a range of more sustainable alternatives to industrial food systems (Feagan et al., 2004). Researchers have identified multiple benefits of farmers' markets, including fostering agroecological production, strengthening community bonds and economic stability, contributing to local food security, and improving access to healthy food (Feagan et al., 2004; Hinrichs, 2004; Fonte, 2008). These markets provide vendors with new marketing opportunities (Feagan et al., 2004), allow business development and differentiation (Hunt, 2007; Brown & Miller, 2008), and enable farmers to capture more of the value of their products (Smithers et al., 2008). For the community at large, social interactions between vendors and consumers can engender a sense of belonging and trust (Sage, 2003; Sharp and Smith, 2003; Feagan et al., 2004; Milestad et al., 2010); however, they may also manifest relations of power and privilege of consumers over farmers (Hinrichs, 2000).

The nature of farmers' markets has been disputed, as they have been variously constructed by researchers and practitioners. For example, farmers' markets have been depicted as alternatives to industrial food systems, while other scholars have challenged such dichotomous representation and rather emphasized a more nuanced view of coexisting food systems (Kirwan, 2004; Sonnino & Marsden, 2006). While farmers' markets and notions of *local* food systems are closely intertwined in public discourse, the socially constructed nature of the local needs to be recognized (Feagan, 2007). Furthermore, while some researchers and practitioners stress the experimental character of farmers' markets and other short food supply chains (Hinrichs et al., 2004), others tend to highlight the performance of 'normal' social practices that involve such markets and other forms of food production and exchange outside of conventional, market-based circuits (Little et al., 2010).

These contrasting social constructions of farmers' markets and of other similarly unconventional systems of food production and exchange have important implications, as they influence the policy choices that can support, or rather hinder these initiatives and their benefits (Young et al., 2011; Feola et al., 2020). For example, constructions of farmers' markets as spaces of social experimentation may support policies for the creation of new agri-food social innovation initiatives, in line with international trends in the governance of urban agri-food systems (Hubeau et al., 2017), but with relatively high probability of techno-centric managerial approaches and neoliberal capture (Joassart-Marcelli & Bosco, 2014). In contrast, social constructions of farmers' markets as existing, 'normally' performed social practices may inform policies for the protection of such diverse forms of agri-food production, distribution and consumption, which may include the protection of existing spaces, resources, knowledge systems that embody not only economic but also cultural and social values, and that need nurturing and shielding from market and neoliberal capture (Leslie, 2017; Feola et al., 2020).

Farmers' and agroecological markets (*mercados agroecológicos campesinos*; hereafter FM) are an emerging phenomenon in Colombia. In Bogotá, various public and private entities have established permanent or occasional venues for small-scale farmers and entrepreneurs from the city and adjacent regions to directly market their produce. The Municipality of Bogotá has included FM in its strategy for food supply and security, mandating the Department of Rural Economy and Food Supply of the Secretariat of Economic Development to further develop them (Secretaría de Desarrollo Económico de la Alcaldía Mayor de Bogotá, 2016). Similar markets are also offered by private entities, including education institutions and cultural centers.

FM are a particularly interesting phenomenon in Colombia not only due to their potential impacts on sustainable food systems, as discussed by the international literature, but also due to those impacts that intersect with specific debates around rural development, socioecological conflicts, climate change, and peasant marginalization in this country.

Several rounds of trade and agricultural sector liberalization have exposed Colombian small-scale farmers to untenable competition and price fluctuations while also privatizing and thereby reducing their access to extension services (Machado, 2010; Feola et al., 2015; Marín-Usuga et al., 2016; Feola, 2017). The impacts of such privatization are among the main reasons that have fuelled massive protests by farmer and peasant organizations for decades, which have notably been met by considerable support from other social groups, particularly in urban areas (Cruz, 2014, 2017; Jiménez Martín et al., 2017). While agrarian organizations have been very active in the past decade to develop alternatives based, among other principles of agroecology, on food sovereignty and dignity (León-Sicard et al., 2017), contrasting visions of the future of agriculture and rural areas in the country, and specifically of the role of agriculture for sustainable development, have persisted (e.g., Andrade et al., 2013; Acevedo-Osorio et al., 2018; Feola et al., 2020). The liberalization of international trade and the agricultural sector compounds the exposure of peasants and smallholders to climate change, which is increasingly affecting agriculture (Ardila et al., 2013; Feola et al., 2015; Feola, 2017), and the legacy of decades of violent discord in a still uncertain post-conflict period (Feola et al., 2015; Ulloa & Coronado, 2016; Feola, 2018; Suarez et al., 2018).

Studies of Bogotá's farmers' markets have only partly explored the implications of FM for these debates. The emerging literature on FM in Bogotá has addressed specific issues such as peasant representations and vendor-customer relations (González Vélez et al., 2018), certification schemes (Roldán Rueda et al., 2018), environmental sustainability (Chaparro Africano and Calle Collado, 2017; Reina Usuga, 2018; Quitán Ayala, 2020) and commercialization and access to markets (López-Posada & Pachón-Ariza, 2017; Romagnoli et al., 2018). FM have been reported to increase vendors' income and productivity (Romagnoli et al., 2018), as well as provide market access to farmers who are excluded from the dominant food system (Roldán Rueda et al., 2018). In comparison with other retail channels, FM have been identified as the only channel that provides

fair prices to producers (Romagnoli et al., 2018), although other studies reported low profitability for producers (González Vélez et al., 2018; Reina Usuga, 2018). Involvement in Bogotá's FM has also been demonstrated to increase participants' self-esteem and reinforce peasant identity, which in turn facilitate political engagement (Roldán Rueda et al., 2018; Reina Usuga, 2018; Romagnoli et al., 2018). Furthermore, research on consumers' attitudes towards vendors at Bogotá's FM has revealed the verbal reproduction of power structures whereby the latter are often essentialized, infantilized, and subordinated due to social representations of peasants as hard-working, but nonetheless poor and in need of support (González Vélez et al., 2018). Therefore, there is the risk that FM are not designed to guarantee peasants' rights, but rather are presented as opportunities generously provided by the State and urban consumers (González Vélez et al., 2018). In sum, extant research on FM in Bogotá and Colombia has focussed primarily on specific aspects of their economic, social or environmental performance and impacts, but has largely overlooked the social construction of FM and the implications of social constructions in the context of contrasting visions of sustainability in the country.

This study contributes to this emerging systematic knowledge on FM in Colombia by examining the perspectives of vendors, consumers, and organizers involved in six FM in Bogotá. In doing so, this paper contributes to filling the gap on the social construction of FM in Bogotá, Colombia: who are the actors involved in the social construction of FM? Specifically, the study investigated how—in their distinct capacities as directly involved actors, these stakeholders socially construct situate FM in relation to debates on visions of sustainability, rural development, and alternative agri-food systems in Colombia.

Materials and methods

The study employed a mixed-method approach that combined descriptive statistics and ethnographic content analysis. Data were gathered in February and March 2019 through a combination of structured and unstructured interviews. A total of 87 unstructured interviews covered 47 market stalls (46 interviews), 54 consumers (35 interviews) and 7 organizers (6 interviews), and structured interviews were conducted with 50 vendors and 53 consumers. Vendors included both rural and urban dwellers and were mostly also producers, be it primary producers of plant- and animal products, producers of processed foods or both. Two organizers were interviewed in a semi-structured manner by appointment, whereas five were informally interviewed at the marketplace. All participants gave informed consent. In this paper, participants are anonymized, and interviewees are referred to by letter ("V" for vendor, "C" for consumer, "O" for organizer) followed by a sequential number (1–47 for vendors, 1–54 for consumers, and 1–7 for organizers). When percentages are given, they refer to the number of interviews, disregarding the number of respondents involved in each interview.

This study included a purposive sample of six markets that shared the following characteristics: (i) a focus on the commercialization of products from “clean,” “agroecological,” or “organic” production; (ii) spaces of direct marketing; and (iii) inclusion of both fresh and processed food.

Three of the sampled markets (Tab. 1) belonged to the *Mercados Campesinos* programme organized by the Unit for Rural Economy and Food Supply of the Department of Economic Development of the Municipality of Bogotá. These markets originated from peasant self-organization (Roldán Rueda et al., 2018). In their fight for recognition, peasant associations had successfully channelled their products for direct sale in Bogotá for 12 years, creating spaces in which their claims were made visible to consumers; however, the municipality excluded peasant organizations from the markets’ organization in 2016 (Guzman, 2017; Romagnoli et al., 2018). Because the sample is biased towards markets in middle- and high-income neighbourhoods, it likely underrepresents the perspectives of low-income consumers. Furthermore, while the selected FM differ in some important but contingent respects (e.g., governance, leading organization, products) (Reina Usuga, 2018; Quitán Ayala, 2020), we consider it appropriate to analyse them together as part of the same broad type of alternative agri-food systems.

Table 1

Farmers’ markets sampled in this study. Data on socio-economic strata (estratos; Secretaría Distrital de Planeación, 2016)

Name	Foundation year	Location (barrio)	Socio-economic stratum (estrato)	Frequency	Organizers	Type of actors interviewed
Mercado Campesino–Plaza de los Artesanos	2017 (in current form)	Barrios Unidos	Estratos 2-3	Twice weekly	Mercados Campesinos programme (Municipality of Bogotá)	Responsible public official, consumers, vendors
Mercado Campesino – Parque Alcalá	2017 (in current form)	Puente Aranda	Estrato 3	Biweekly	Mercados Campesinos programme (Municipality of Bogotá)	Responsible public official, consumers, vendors
Mercado Campesino–Rosales	2018	Chapinero	Estratos 2-6	Biweekly	Mercados Campesinos programme (Municipality of Bogotá) and local community members	Responsible public official, consumers, vendors, community co-organizers
Mercado de la Tierra – Slow Food Bogotá	2012	Chapinero	Estratos 2-6	Weekly	Slow Food (Network of Agroecological Markets of the Bogotá Region)	Organizers, vendors, consumers
Mercado Agroecológico Tierra Viva	2014	Teusaquillo	Estratos 3-5	Biweekly	Network of Agroecological Markets of the Bogotá Region	Vendors, consumers
Feria Agroecológica UNIMINUTO	2012	Engativá	Estratos 2-4	Monthly	Network of Agroecological Markets of the Bogotá Region	Organizers, vendors, consumers

The unstructured interviews aimed at capturing the discourse surrounding FM and thereby their social construction. According to Hajer (2002, p. 63), discourse can be defined as “an ensemble of ideas, concepts, and categories through which meaning is given to phenomena. Meaning is thus produced and reproduced through an identifiable set of practices.” Given the objective of this research to understand the linkages between FM and sustainable development in participants’ perceptions and experiences, an unstructured interview format was chosen in order to minimize biases caused by any presuppositions. Questions addressed motivations to attend, commercialization channels, modes of production, and experiences at FM, among other themes. The unstructured interviews were followed by structured interviews designed following similar studies of FM (Sharp & Smith, 2003; Hunt, 2007; Smithers et al., 2008), which focused on demographic data and habits such as modes of production (vendors), product choice (consumers), shopping behaviour (consumers), and frequency of attendance (vendors and consumers). In cases when several persons, e.g., a household, were involved in the interview, the demographic data of all interviewees were collected; however, responses related to habits were recorded only once. Herein, “consumer groups” refers to all consumers covered in one interview (1–4 individuals) and is used in the description of habits.

The interviews were analysed using descriptive statistics and ethnographic content analysis (ECA). This approach “allow[s] categories to emerge out of data” and emphasizes the importance of considering contextual factors when analysing meaning (Bryman, 2016, p. 285). The interview transcripts were coded with NVivo 12 Plus following a common approach in ECA, namely “a recursive and reflexive movement between concept development–sampling–data collection–data coding–data analysis–interpretation” (Altheide & Schneider, 2013, cited in Bryman, 2016, p. 563). Most coded units were a paragraph or longer to avoid taking statements out of context. Keyword-search complemented this process.

Results

We present this study’s findings regarding the social construction of FM in Bogotá in two sections. First, we draw on the unstructured interview data to identify vendors’, consumers’, and organizers’ perspectives on the problematics associated with conventional food systems. Second, we delve into the participants’ views on the potential of farmers’ markets to act as drivers of social and agricultural change.

Issues participants associated with the conventional food system

Vendors, consumers, and organizers appeared to share a common narrative on FM whereby the dominant, industrial food system was considered a threat for small-scale producers' cultural and economic stability as well as the health of consumers and the environment. In particular, four sets of issues were discussed by the participants: (i) small- and medium-scale production; (ii) conventional production in general; (iii) commercialization; and (iv) internationalization of the agri-food market. Table 3 summarizes the main issues associated with the conventional food system as well as the number of share of interviewees (by actor type) referring to each issue.

Table 2

Summary of issues participants associated with the conventional food system, incl. number of interviews and percentage of vendors (V), consumers (C) and organizers (O) mentioning each point

Issue set	Issue	Total number of interviews	Percentage of interviews (actor type)
Issues associated with small- and medium-scale production	The sanitary certificate INVIMA is too costly	6	10.8% (V) 16.7% (O)
	There are beneficial support programs in place	5	10.8% (V)
	Small- and medium scale production has limited economic viability	5	4.4% (V) 8.6% (C)
	Farmers face environmental and climatic challenges	4	8.7% (V)
Issues associated with conventional production in general	A key difference between conventional and clean/organic/ agroecological products sold at FM is the use of chemicals.	46	56.5% (V) 48.6% (C) 50.0% (O)
	Use of agrochemicals negatively impacts consumer health.	33	43.5% (V) 37.1% (C)
	Use of agrochemicals negatively impacts the environment.	9	10.8% (V) 11.4% (C)
	Agrochemicals have high monetary costs for producers.	5	6.5% (V) 2.9% (C) 16.7% (O)
Issues associated with commercialization	Intermediate trade under conditions of power asymmetry narrows the profit margin of producers and rises prices for end consumers, while benefiting intermediaries and retailers.	17	15.2% (V) 25.7% (C) 16.7% (O)
	International certification schemes are not suitable to ensure premium prices for environmentally friendly production, mainly because they are too costly and not always meaningful.	8	10.9% (V) 2.9% (C) 33.3% (O)
	Small scale producers have difficulties to find buyers.	7	10.8% (V) 33.3% (O)
	Within the main commercialization channels, products from alternative modes of production are not valued / recognized.	5	10.8% (V)
	Vendors find it difficult to position themselves and to gain consumer trust.	5	6.5% (V) 5.7% (C)
Issues associated with the internationalization of the agri-food market	Producer livelihoods and local diversity are negatively impacted by food imports, which are facilitated by political support for imports including free trade agreements.	6	4.4% (V) 5.7% (C) 33.3% (O)
	The Internationalization of the agri-food market favours the influx of genetically modified organisms and agrochemicals.	5	11.4% (C) 16.7% (V)

Regarding *issues associated with small- and medium-scale production*, respondents characterized small- and medium-scale agriculture as having limited economic viability and identified a lack of recognition and support for producers as causes of low competitiveness. Although some vendors mentioned beneficial support programs such as a zero-interest rate credit program as well as conservation-oriented programmes by water authorities, access to these programs, particularly to credit, was reported by others to be difficult due to strict entry requirements, corruption, and favouritism. As one vendor lamented, “To whom do they give [the credits]? If you have been recommended; if not, they don’t give you anything, they tell you that there are no subsidies” (V26).

In addition to financial challenges, farmers faced pressures to use genetically modified seeds and chemical inputs, weather extremes, environmental degradation, and climate change. For processed foods, the obligatory registration at the National Institute for Drug and Food Monitoring (Instituto Nacional de Vigilancia de Medicamentos y Alimentos–INVIMA) was criticized for being too costly, thereby imposing a barrier to business development; according to V17 “It doesn’t let us work.”

Regarding *issues associated with conventional production in general*, discourse analysis reveals that respondents from all three actor groups classified production methods into two distinct types, namely dominant and alternative production. Dominant modes of production (hereafter “conventional production”) were referred to as “normal”, “conventional”, and “traditional”, and were contrasted with “organic”, “natural”, “clean”, and “agroecological” production. These “alternative” modes of production shared low or no use of agrochemicals and were associated with recycling of resources within the production system, water-use efficiency, and rainwater irrigation. Boundaries between types of alternative production were blurred; many respondents used attributes such as “organic,” “clean,” or “agroecological” interchangeably.

According to the participants, the main sustainability challenge associated with conventional production were the impacts of chemical use (appr. 50% of interviewees of all actor types, see Table 3); when participants mentioned “chemical(s)”, in all but one case they did so without making further distinction, such as between fertilizers or pesticides. The use of agrochemicals was univocally viewed in a negative manner by the participants. A direct link between the use of agrochemicals and consumer health was established in 20 vendor and 13 consumer interviews (Table 3). Moreover, interviewees associated agrochemicals with environmental degradation, soil degradation, bee mortality, habitat destruction, climate change, and water contamination. The high monetary costs of agrochemicals were also emphasized by some participants. Finally, conventional agriculture was criticized for the prevalence of monocultures and for technological change and genetic modification leading to biodiversity loss.

Regarding the *issues associated with commercialization*, participants remarked that it could be difficult for small scale producers to find buyers, which pushed them towards a return to subsistence agriculture or processing perishable produce. A deficient transport infrastructure further complicated selling. Consequently, most farmers resorted to middlemen and intermediaries; however, as reported by vendors and consumers alike, intermediaries had the power to dictate prices, which narrowed profit margins for farmers and increased prices for the end consumer. Selling to large retailers (e.g., supermarkets) was not always considered a better option due to deferred payments and classification of products as “second choice”, which exposes the producer to high risks in return for low prices. In the words of V41, “...everybody wants to share the profit with the producer, but nobody wants to share the risk.” In this context, the small-scale producer “loses rather than wins” (V26), while large corporations and supermarkets benefit. These “unjust” (O5) practices continue because farmers lack other selling opportunities or are unaware of their product’s final value.

For farmers engaged in alternative (i.e., more sustainable) agricultural practices, commercialization through the dominant channels bore additional disadvantages. With the exception of spaces such as FM, the willingness to pay premium prices for alternative products was limited, thus leading to low sales or sales matching the price of more cheaply cultivated conventional products. Furthermore, prevailing aesthetic norms (i.e., the appearance of fruits and vegetables) favoured conventional over alternative products. Small-scale and alternative producers often found it challenging to position themselves and gain consumer trust.

Although voluntary certification has been adopted in other contexts as a way to attain premium prices for sustainable production, various participants, especially organizers and vendors (see Table 3), did not see it as a viable option. Particularly international organic certification was often considered to be too expensive, and one vendor withdrew his membership from the Rainforest Alliance because its standards were not adapted to local conditions. Furthermore, the added informative value of voluntary certification was questioned, as many producers who effectively meet high ecological standards are not certified, and not all certified products are of high quality. Still, certificates were sometimes used to promote products and were valued for training on agroecology. Overall, it seems that existing certification practices specifically, rather than the notion of certification altogether, were questioned. Local certification schemes were being developed as alternatives.

Finally, regarding the *issues associated with the internationalization of the agri-food market*, consumers and organizers were more concerned than vendors about the international market for food and agricultural inputs. consumers and organizers expressed frustration about the importation of products that can be produced locally, which some respondents linked to free trade agreements

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Function type	Function	Total number of interviews	Percentage of interviews (actor type)
To strengthen interaction and mutual learning	Explanation of product characteristics was a main purpose of customer-vendor interactions.	15	19.6% (V) 14.3% (C) 16.7% (O)
	Consumers and vendors also exchanged knowledge on other issues, including on rural life.	14	23.9% (V) 8.6% (C)
	In contrast to other outlets, vendors and consumers at FM establish personal relationships.	13	13.0% (V) 17.1% (C) 16.7% (O)
	FM were perceived as spaces for creating awareness, including on environmental protection and nutrition.	13	21.7% (V) 2.9% (C) 33.3% (O)
	FM have become spaces of knowledge sharing between vendors.	7	15.2% (V)
	FM are spaces to show and learn about ancestral or native plants.	7	8.7% (V) 2.9% (C) 33.3% (O)
	FM generate other forms of exchange such as farm visits.	7	4.4% (V) 8.6% (C) 33.3% (O)
	FM fostered relationships of affection and solidarity between vendors.	6	13.0% (V)
To safeguard traditional knowledge and culture	Traditional or artisanal (small-scale) production is a main characteristic of products sold at FM, as well as a motivation to engage in production.	14	30.4% (V)
	FM increase viability of products from traditional processing and small-scale production in face of multiple pressures.	11	13.0% (V) 5.7% (C) 50.0% (O)
To foster business development and innovation	FM serve to showcase products and make business contacts.	9	17.4% (V) 16.7% (O)
	FM help to gain consumers for home-delivery, on-farm purchase and advanced orders.	9	15.2% (V) 2.9% (C) 16.7% (O)
	FM are spaces to commercialize innovative products.	7	15.2% (V)
	Farmers markets are spaces to commercialize niche products.	6	13.0% (V)
	Vendors receive feedback from consumers, helping them to improve their products.	5	6.5% (V) 33.3% (O)

Regarding the *provision of direct economic benefits to producers*, all actor groups agreed that direct markets such as FM benefit producers through increased profits, higher unit prices, and/or higher overall income. As one vendor remarked, "...well, [in the past] agriculture wasn't very profitable, let's put it this way, because these markets did not exist" (V38). Five vendors relied on FM as their sole source of income.

FM vendors also benefitted from higher levels of consumer awareness and appreciation for alternative production. Consumer who gave importance to the specific mode of production built their consumption decisions mainly on trust in or guarantees by the producers, for which consumer-producer interactions (see below) were crucial. As one vendor (V20) stressed, "trust is the only certification that we have."

Participants identified various barriers to attaining economic benefits at FM, including transport expenses, low sales, irregular participation opportunities, and low consumer attendance. Several organizers had developed other opportunities for producers to sell their goods, including a not-

for-profit shop, public procurement, and a shared collection centre for vendors of the Network of Agroecological Markets. Furthermore, the Network of Agroecological Markets has established a participatory guarantee system, and the Municipality had plans to implement a certification system.

Regarding *access to food from alternative production*, 48.6% of all consumer interviewees mentioned access to “natural” or “organic” food as their primary reason for attending FM, thereby underscoring the markets’ perceived importance as providers of healthy food (Table 4). FM also allowed access to some products that could not be found in conventional retail channels, such as some types of vegetables and native potatoes. Furthermore, compared to the agroecological or organic food sold elsewhere, FM prices were considered affordable by most participants, albeit still more expensive than conventional products, which limited access to such food for low-income consumers. In addition, many consumers mentioned the sparseness of FM in the city, which indicates that the distance between market and neighbourhood of residence or work likely influenced the frequency of attendance.

Regarding *strengthening interaction and mutual learning*, there was agreement among participants that direct interactions between and within actor groups distinguished FM from other forms of food commercialization. Only two consumers stated that interactions are merely for purchase, whereas four customer groups mentioned interactions with vendors as one of their main motivations to attend FM. At FM, vendors and consumers established personal relationships, in contrast to the impersonal proceedings at supermarkets. In the words of one customer, “I particularly like to talk to them, I find that it’s not only about buying but also living the experience ... of the peasant, get a bit closer to him, oneself is sometimes so urban ..., so this is beautiful, it’s a whole experience to come to ... the market” (C28).

Explaining product characteristics was the most frequently mentioned purpose of vendor-customer interactions. Many vendors also shared knowledge on other issues with consumers, such as farming or rural life. As stressed by two vendors, “They are given a talk, it’s explained to them, it’s shown to them, and in this way, they take away ... knowledge and they take away a good product” (V7), and “The reason why I am here, standing six hours on a Sunday, is to be able to share with the people a bit that there is indeed a way in which we can have more health, more love and more help to other persons” (V9).

Other purposes of knowledge-sharing included fostering consumers’ environmental consciousness and improving eating habits. More generally, FM were considered a space to create consciousness (21.7% of vendors and 33.3% of organizers; see table 4), as illustrated by the following statement: “A market like this lays the foundation for this [more conscious] society that is coming into being” (V10). Conscious consumption habits and food culture were

key for sales at FM. Non-commercial vendor-customer interactions sometimes transcended the marketplace in the form of non-commercial farm visits or, in one case (C32), sharing of pictures via mobile phone apps. Farm visits already had been or were being institutionalized in both groups of markets included in this study.

Various vendors also highlighted the role of FM in fostering non-commercial vendor-vendor interactions. Only one vendor framed other vendors as competitors, whereas others welcomed vendors selling the same products, and one even left some products at home, explaining that “the idea is not to bring competition” (V29). Others spoke of friendship, fraternity, and mutual support between vendors. The market appeared to also have become a space for learning through sharing production methods and experiences.

Regarding the function of *safeguarding traditional knowledge and culture*, respondents described FM as spaces to show and learn about ancestral or native plants such as diverse potato varieties, quinoa, and cacao. Similarly, several vendors pointed out the artisanal elaboration of their products and mentioned safeguarding these forms of production as a main reason for engaging with food production. Two vendors described their cultivation practices as “going back to the past” (V2, V49). At the same time, the meaning of the attribute “traditional” was contested. Whereas “traditional” cultivation was perceived as production with chemicals and was heavily criticized, traditional processing was clearly positively connoted. FM were characterized as “spaces of resistance” (O4), in a context in which market dynamics, policies, and a sociocultural bias towards imported products are leading to the loss of traditional products. Two peasant vendors asserted that FM had made farming viable again, and another explained that after shifting to agroecological production and direct marketing, family members who had migrated to the city were planning to return. In that sense, by increasing the economic viability of small-scale farming and processing, FM also potentially contribute to protecting the knowledge systems and cultural practices linked to these activities.

Regarding opportunities for *business development and innovation*, a number of participants reported that FM facilitated other forms of direct marketing. Markets were portrayed as a showcase and a place to make business contacts as well as gain consumers for on-farm shopping, home delivery, and advance orders. Furthermore, direct feedback from consumers helped vendors to adapt products to consumer demands. As one organizer explained, “I feel that this space is also very suitable for the direct interaction with the client, where he himself tells you ‘I would like this, I would like that, you could maybe improve this’, so it becomes a feedback from the client who is really the one who pays you for what you are doing, so I do think that this helps to grow the project and develop them further” (O1-2).

FM were used for testing new products such as uncommon vegetable or fruit varieties that facilitated differentiation from other vendors. While alternative food is a market niche in itself, FM also hosted other sub-niche markets for emerging dietary trends such as gluten-free, sugar-free, and vegetarian/vegan food. Other vendors built on traditional products to innovate, such as developing novel versions of steamed maize bread (*envueltos*), chocolate, or chips. Three vendors explicitly characterized their product as “innovative” and one customer mentioned learning about food innovations as a motivation to attend the market.

Discussion and conclusions

This study found that farmers' market vendors, consumers, and organizers in Bogotá held largely similar constructions on FM and their relations with the dominant food system. The high degree of coherence among the perspectives of three distinct types of actors suggests the existence of a strong basis for cooperation and political coalitions to further develop and strengthen FM in this city.

The issues identified by FM stakeholders in Bogotá reflect and support earlier discussions in the literature on agriculture and rural development in Colombia: (i) the socio-cultural impacts of conventional production and the challenges, including the threats of commercialization to small- and medium-scale producers (Feola, 2017; Acevedo-Osorio et al., 2018), and (ii) the social and economic consequences of agri-food market internationalization on smallholders (Marín-Usuga et al., 2016). Furthermore, this study confirms that FM increase participants' self-esteem and reinforce peasant identity (Roldán Rueda et al., 2018; Reina Usuga, 2018; Romagnoli et al., 2018), whereby FM, like other alternative food systems, reflect discourses of food activism and socioecological awareness that are absent or less prominent in conventional agri-food systems in Colombia (Reina Usuga et al., 2020).

Similarly, participants identified five key functions of FM that have been discussed in the scientific literature: (i) providing economic benefits for producers (Guarín, 2013); (ii) improving access to food from alternative production (Feagan et al., 2004); (iii and iv) strengthening social interaction and mutual learning and safeguarding traditional knowledge (Hinrichs et al., 2004; Fonte, 2008; Milestad et al., 2010); and (v) fostering business development and innovation (Brown & Miller, 2008).

One important distinction in emphasis was observed between consumers on the one hand, and vendors and organizers on the other, whereby the former tended to place more emphasis on the consumption of “clean” food than on other, more systemic functions of FM. This denotes differing levels of understanding of the food system among the three types of actors who participated in this study, hence varying abilities to ‘connect the dots’ among such seemingly separate issues as health, environmental sustainability, international trade, rural development, culture, and underscores their differentiated agency in coalition building for strengthening FM and alternative food systems in Bogotá.

Three aspects of the social construction of FM need to be especially reflected upon. First, all participating stakeholders viewed FM and related agroecological farming practices as alternatives to the dominant food system. The dominant, industrial food system is considered a threat to small-scale producers’ cultural and economic stability as well as the health of consumers and the environment, whereas FM are seen to support production and consumption of variously defined “clean,” culturally rooted, respectful, and genuine food. Earlier studies of FM in Bogotá and Colombia partly, albeit not fully, support this perspective (Chaparro Africano & Calle Collado, 2017; Reina Usuga, 2018; Quitán Ayala, 2020). Thus, this study illuminates that FM are experienced as spaces in which the utilitarian relations that characterize vendors and consumers engagement with each other and their environment in the dominant food system are eschewed in favour of “alternative” values and practices that include learning, care for other human beings and ecological systems, and limited economic competition. Although various scholars have argued that the dichotomy of alternative versus conventional food systems should be abandoned in favour of more nuanced views of coexisting food systems (e.g., Kirwan, 2004; Sonnino and Marsden, 2006), this study suggests that Bogotá’s FM can be seen as spaces in which diverse economic relations—both utilitarian and social—take place. FM can be understood as spaces in which non-utilitarian values and an ethics of care are practiced and reproduced; they support different, more reflexive governance (Reina Usuga et al., 2020), which is informed by, and in turns supports the practice of such value and ethical orientations.

Second, this study shows that FM simultaneously function as protective spaces for peasant knowledge and culture. Regarding the above-mentioned point about FM’s alternativeness, this study uncovered a discrepancy between the narrative shared by vendors, consumers, and organizers alike, which is framed in terms of a re-evaluation of the peasantry, and the lived realities of these actors. In fact, many vendors are not traditional peasants, although some might recognize themselves as “new peasants” (Van der Ploeg, 2008), nor do they live in rural areas. Previous studies have found that paternalistic ideas of the peasantry are reproduced in FM (González Vélez et al., 2018); however, this study suggests that despite the risk of such misguided constructions, peasant culture and identity serve as a core notion around which actors align. Discourses of food activism and socioecological awareness, which characterize FM (Reina Usuga et al., 2020) and

project their alternativeness in the participants' perspectives, find a pole of attraction in the re-evaluation of peasant culture and identity. While it is beyond the scope of the present study to investigate the causes or conditions for such alignment among different types of actors involved in FM, it can be hypothesized that it may be related to, or the result of, recent peasant mobilizations, which have been met by substantial urban support (Cruz, 2014; 2017).

Finally, and related to the first two points, this study clearly shows that FM are understood, especially by vendors and organizers, as an attempt put in place by a coalition of diverse actors to lay the foundations of a more conscious society that they wish to see come into being. Such a broad view of the role of FM in a process of societal change is underscored by the ability of many participants to take a systemic, rather than sectoral perspective on sustainability; that is, to “connect the dots” between their experienced realities of distinct realms of life such as health, environmental sustainability, international trade, rural development, and culture. In other words, participants in FM not only practice alternative economic values and ways to produce, sell, and consume higher quality or more sustainable food alone, but also express the hope for a different development model altogether.

Thus, FM are spaces of re-production of alternative ethics that many of the actors involved perceive as being needed not only by agri-food systems, but by society at large. Actors practice and defend social relations based on values and principles such as dignity, care (for humans and non-humans), responsibility, cooperation, and health. In doing so, they learn about each other, build mutual trust and weave a social fabric, and develop a hopeful attitude, all of which participants believe are needed to recompose at least some of the social fractures that characterize an unsustainable, highly unequal and divided society.

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Conflict of interest

The authors declare that there is no conflict of interest with any commercial institution or association.

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