5 Participatory systems of certification and alternative marketing networks
The case of the Ecovida Agroecology Network in South Brazil

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Introduction
While Brazil’s southern region is best known for its ‘modern agriculture’, it also happens to be the cradle of an innovative and promising experience in the production of organic food, fibre and raw materials. This region (which consists of the states of Paraná, Santa Catarina and Rio Grande do Sul) is home to the Ecovida Agroecology Network, which was established in 1998. This was the result of the confluence of social organization, resistance and political struggle by small farmers seeking not only to adopt new production practices and techniques, but also to establish ‘another way of doing farming’: a shared manner and lifestyle that reflects and embodies a set of common values and beliefs and the sharing of knowledge (Radomsky 2010b).

Ecovida Agroecology Network brings together groups of family farmers who follow agroecological principles. These groups are organized territorially, generally within a single municipality, although sometimes the groups span various municipalities. This territorial rootedness engenders the grassroots nature of each organization, which is fundamental for sharing information and technical knowledge and for gaining access to marketing channels to sell the produce. These groups are connected to each other through a coordinating body, which can be a cooperative, an association, or an NGO. This entity takes on the role of linking farmers, farm technicians and consumers within the region or municipality where it operates (Rover 2011, Radomsky 2013).

The network currently has 28 regional centres, which serve groups in around 170 municipalities in the three states of southern Brazil. There are 3,500 farmers involved, belonging to some 300 groups. These groups in turn are associated to 35 organizations and 8 consumer cooperatives (Ecovida 2012). The farmers’ groups play an important role: it is here that the farmers make decisions and plan local activities, such as meetings, field work, the assignation of labels, set priorities for farm inspection visits and register farmers with the relevant authorities. These groups are linked via regional centres which also oversee labelling requirements and standards. They offer technical support, provide the structure
needed to meet farmers’ requirements and coordinate and strengthen the network. These centres can adapt the labelling process to local contexts, as long as the standards remain within the criteria established by the Ecovida Network and national standards on participatory systems of guarantee (Isaguirre-Torres 2012, Perez-Cassarino 2012, Radomsky 2010b, Niederle et al. 2013).

This chapter examines the innovative practices adopted by these ecological farmers in southern Brazil to create markets for organic products, through marketing strategies that emphasize both their high quality attributes and those related to their socio-cultural and regional embeddedness. Participatory ecocertifying systems play a central role here, helping to create nested markets and promote new pathways for rural development. The chapter draws on several research projects, conducted by the authors with the various regional centres of the Ecovida Agroecology Network. These centres operate as learning spaces that help to promote development in the region.

The Ecovida Network exhibits many of the features of nested markets. Van der Ploeg’s analysis (Chapter 2 in this volume) of lamb meat production in Texel (the Netherlands) states that a nested market differs from other forms or types of markets in its distinction, and in the mobilization of local and regional resources and infrastructure, and also in the generation of a common pool of resources. Distinction, he argues, can be generated at three levels: through the social construction of quality with differentiated prices; through building trust between producers and consumers; and by means of symbolic exchanges. Van der Ploeg defines infrastructure ‘as the set of specific artefacts and rules that are used to channel flows of goods and services between places and people’. In turn, common resources emerge from the infrastructure and the distinction of these nested markets, insofar as they allow participants to share their knowledge and build collective values that are locally embedded and shared by larger groups through trust and reputation. This explains why, despite being strongly rooted in a locality or territory, nested markets can reach distant consumers and other agents who share the same values.

Ecovida also plays a major role in ‘creating the infrastructure’ that allows producers to connect with consumers. The participative certification process is a mechanism for building bridges that connect ecological producers – who prize and protect the natural and organic bases of their products (that define their distinction and brand) – and consumers – who seek not only a commodity but a food product with a guarantee of origin, quality and compliance with ecological production standards.

To achieve this, Ecovida has built a socio-technical network that enables farmers to overcome entry barriers to markets and marketing channels. So, besides providing infrastructure, represented by the trucks and other vehicles to transport agroecological produce to street markets or other outlets, the Ecovida network established a further, and most important, mechanism – the participatory certification (ecolabeling) system. Participatory certification is a mechanism of ‘socio-material infrastructure [that] can be defined as the set of specific artefacts and rules that are used to channel flows of goods and services between places and people’ (van der Ploeg, Chapter 2 in this volume).
In this chapter we analyse the challenges involved in constructing these organic and agroecological markets. Besides this introduction and the closing remarks, the chapter is divided into three sections. The first section describes the Ecovida Agroecology Network and discusses how the participatory certification process acts as a mechanism that guarantees the quality of the products and has helped develop bonds of belonging and identity among the actors within the socio-technical network. The second section relates this experience to broader ongoing processes and the institutional environment in Brazil that together are leading to shifts in the rules that influence initiatives of this kind. We explore how Brazil’s organic food markets have opened a space for the emergence of a distinct market logic, one that is not dominated by supply and demand mechanisms or solely regulated by the relative prices of products, goods and services. The third section analyses the processes of social interactions that underpin these distinct markets and the social networks required for these to flourish. Once these markets have been created, they require an infrastructure to ensure their continued operation, which is maintained by sales channels and intermediary agents. In our final remarks, we highlight some of the challenges facing the Ecovida Network and other similar initiatives and reflect on how it has changed participants’ and other stakeholders’ perceptions of markets.

The Participatory Certification System of Ecovida Agroecology Network

There are three different ways in which products can be certified as organic in Brazil. The first, the most commonly used internationally, is the third-party certification system, in which certification is provided by an independent organization. In this system, seals are issued following an independent review and assessment of the farm or food processor by an outside organization. Trust in the system is based on this division and is supported by documentary responsibility and objectivity.

The second model covers participatory systems of organic certification which, in Brazil, are backed by administrative acts, norms and laws. The participatory guarantee system is ‘a set of activities performed within a given organization governed by principles, as well as organizational and operational rules (…)’, which aims to ‘assure that a product (including product, process, and service) meets the technical regulations and standards of organic farming, and went through a participatory assessment of conformity to such standards’ (Fonseca 2007: 10). In this system, both the evaluators and applicants are stakeholders, and the guarantees stem from the collective accountability and participatory inspection by those who are directly involved and by their social partners (such as consumers, political and/or technical agents).

The third model allows ecological farmers to sell their products directly to consumers without certification. This is possible for those organized either into cooperatives or into groups and associations registered with the Ministry of Agriculture, Livestock and Food Supply as Social Control Organizations (SCO).
In this case, farmers can sell products with the inscription: ‘Organic produce for direct selling by organized family farmers, not subject to certification in accordance with Law no. 10,831 of December 23, 2003.’ This system is still little known and barely used by farmers, even though it can be used to sell produce in the institutional markets created by government procurement programmes, such as the Food Purchase Programme (Programa de Aquisição de Alimentos – PAA) and the National School Feeding Programme (Programa Nacional de Alimentação Escolar – PNAE) (Schmitt and Grisa 2013, Grisa 2012, Schmitt et al. in this volume).

This participatory system allows for various methods and forms of social organization (within certain set parameters defined by law and other government acts regulating the market). While every organization must comply with some general principles, there is also room for flexibility.

The Ecovida Agroecology Network uses the participatory guarantee system. According to Radomsky (2010b) Ecovida’s system of certification is guided by the principles of co-responsibility, active participation and involvement and a specific farming lifestyle based on co-production between nature and society. This implies that members of the network share more than just relations of exchange and flows of technical or even pricing information. Rather it creates a relationship marked by partnership and an adherence to certain values that are reflected and actualized in a set of practices, discourses and procedures. These, in turn, make up the cultural repertoire of the social group as a whole and become the source or locus of the social identity that distinguishes the Ecovida Network.

Figure 5.1 Schematic representation of the Ecovida Agroecological Network (source: Ecovida (2007: 16) and Perez-Cassarino (2012: 191)).
To be certified by Ecovida, applicants must meet several criteria to obtain the seal. First, family farmers who wish ‘to convert’ must attend local group meetings for one or two years, while their farm goes through the transition process towards meeting Ecovida’s standards. They must provide a map of their property and complete a registration form. After that, an agronomist from the local agricultural extension service will visit the farm and prepare an assessment report. This report then goes to the ethics committee of the local group, which will also visit the farm after they have examined the report. A subsequent ‘external review’ (‘olhar externo’) is then carried out by members of other groups and technical assistants from the Ecovida Network. This forms the basis of an evaluation that is referred to the regional coordination committee. If the reports demonstrate that Ecovida’s standards are being met, the regional coordination committee will give its endorsement and the family farmer will be granted Ecovida’s seal.

A farm may have just a part of its area certified, but only when the family farmer is committed to expanding the certified area to cover the whole farm. Certification involves very few expenses for the farmer, just a small annual fee for issuing and printing labels. Nonetheless, participation in the scheme does entail other costs, as members are obliged to take part in external reviews for conformity assessment, and the time that they devote to the network’s activities is an opportunity cost, in terms of the time lost working on their own farm. This system of certification relies greatly on the knowledge that the members of the network have of each others’ farms, and on regular visits by each farmer to their peers’ farms. The ethics committee, particularly, is involved in regular farm visits.

While this scheme may seem to be very formalized, it is less schematic in practice and can be adapted to different local conditions. The seal is granted to growers insofar as they begin to participate in the meetings, open their farms to inspection by others and adopt agroecological farming as a lifestyle choice.

Figure 5.2 Ecovida Agroecology Network Seal (source: www.ecovida.org.br).
There is a (variable) conversion period (usually not less than one year) before a farmer can obtain the right to use the seal.

Ecovida participants claim that regular peer monitoring of farms is crucial to this process. They contrast this procedure to third-party certification, which usually involves an annual assessment and does not provide the support needed to guide a farmer through the gradual learning processes involved in the transition towards being agroecological. While the monitoring process cannot provide a complete guarantee that growers are behaving honestly, it does develop relationships of mutual trust. In this sense, Ecovida has redefined the concept of control, turning it from a formal and bureaucratic procedure into one led by informal monitoring.

What is the outcome of this collective mechanism? Ecovida’s seal implies two opposing, though complementary, principles. On the one hand, it takes the farmers’ ‘word’ about meeting standards, that is to say, their earnestness in ensuring that production is done without the use of agrochemicals. Yet it also establishes local ethics committees (composed of farmers, technicians and consumers) to ensure compliance with the guiding principles, and carries out inspections. Hence, the system applies a double criterion – it is based on mutual trust among participant farmers upon meeting the standards, and also on an evaluation process that grants a seal that endorses the goods, which per se could suffice. However, the agents involved in the process recognize that getting a seal may not be so difficult for someone willing to cheat the system. Therefore, they never waive the element of trust in the farmer’s *modus operandi* (based on the assumption by both consumers and the other farmers that his/her farming is organic). This double criterion is constitutive of the Network and the continuous monitoring of peers’ practices by participant farmers and technicians (during meetings at street markets, events, gatherings and visits to farms) reinforces the certification, while substantiating the intrinsic distinction between this model and that of third-party certification.

Participating farms are monitored throughout the year. Every one or two months, meetings are arranged at a different participating farm. The programme is quite flexible: there is an opportunity for informal discussions at the start of the meeting while the group members are arriving. There is then a formal structured meeting to discuss the group’s activities. This is then followed by a group farm tour, visiting the crops and livestock of the host. Guests have the chance to observe the farm, exchange ideas and information with each other, ask the host about his/her practices and provide feedback. The tour usually takes about one hour, although it can take longer depending on the number of people and the geography of the land.

The group then returns to the meeting site and begins an evaluation of the host farm, raising questions, sharing impressions and giving advice. There is no fixed pattern of dialogue, since the subjects overlap and new issues appear, some not necessarily linked to the practices observed at the host farm. These discussions are usually harmonious and try to develop farmers’ understanding of their farming methods: but sometimes they can be contentious, and dissenting views

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can be raised. The last part of the group meeting focuses on the problems and challenges facing the group and the network. Sometimes there are discussions about whether or not group members are showing sufficient commitment to agroecological farming.

Each meeting is more than just an opportunity to talk about agriculture. It becomes an opportunity for evaluation that ensures the continuance of certification for family farmers. Equally important, it is a way to create and maintain group cohesion and to meet the standards agreed upon within the Ecovida Network (Radomsky 2013). Since most groups are very localized, this monitoring is more connected to daily coexistence and knowledge exchange between farmers as part of their day-to-day activities, rather than just being confined to these meetings.

This participatory certification system plays an important role in the construction of nested markets. It means that participants are involved in a set of practices and experiences that extend far beyond guaranteeing the intrinsic qualities of their produce. It also involves the construction and sharing of social values that characterize a particular way of farming (Radomsky 2010b). In this sense the certification process is related to the formation of new marketplaces that create opportunities for collective learning and social action. In these new markets, producers and consumers engage in practices and discourses that seek to confer new meanings not only upon food, but also upon eating as a cultural and political practice.

Several scholars have shown that seals are a very important tool for giving consumers confidence in the authenticity, typicality and originality of food products (Ilbery and Maye 2007, Ilbery et al. 2005, Cruz and Schneider 2010). In this sense, certification is more than just an artifice for reducing information asymmetries between economic agents (reducing fraud and opportunism), or even a mechanism for reproducing the power of the market. It is, in fact, a means for enabling connections between distinct attributes linking processes, products, places and people. This is a crucial aspect of the certification process, since consumers who are concerned about food purity and quality have demanded certified products (Renard 2005). Therefore, on the one hand, certification is a mechanism that provides broader information on products and, at the same time, is a tool of power and control that bears contention (between certifying agents and accreditation entities). On the other hand, it is guided by the ideals of reconnection (Dupuis and Goodman 2005, Renting et al. 2003) and can establish relationships between social and symbolic values, which promote the appreciation of regional specialties (Niederle 2013, Bowen and Valenzuela Zapata 2009, Pratt 2007).

However, one should note that there are some inconsistencies between the organic farming daily practices and the formal certification procedures set by the agencies. Brazil has seen the emergence of a wide range of accredited certification agencies, largely as result of the strengthening of rules and legal provisions (both nationally and internationally). This process paved the way for other forms of equally legitimate certification that do not rely on third parties.
There is an emerging debate on how these different certification methods relate to the growth and recognition of ‘new’ food markets, particularly the alternative circuits of production and consumption, in which the definitions of quality as a set of inherent product attributes are not the only guiding principle (Lancaster 1966). Viewing quality as a socially shared value opens up new perspectives about the merits of different certification processes. Allaire (2004) shows that by considering the holistic nature of quality with a particular focus on immaterial aspects, it becomes clear that products are valued for representing symbolic values that are shared within the social networks within which they circulate.

Natural, social, cultural and economic attributes, which are provided by socially constructed images, can give food a recognizable identity. This involves more than just controlling farming techniques, but also the manipulation of cultural signs (Lash and Urry 1994). When a product leaves the market it also loses its ‘condition as merchandise’ and acquires a different meaning in the other spaces that it crosses during its social trajectory. Thus, when organic food circulates within different markets, its qualities are redefined. This means that the same product can have different attributes if sold in a street market, a supermarket, or through a government procurement programme.

Participatory guarantee systems attempt to validate these aspects, insofar as they seek, by means of solidarity and reciprocity, to integrate the dimensions of craftsmanship, tradition, know-how and locality within agroecological farming systems. Even so, there are limits as to how far this whole range of values can be represented by a seal. That is the reason why some agroecological movements place such a high value on direct markets, such as farmers’ street markets. The social spaces that these markets provide create cultural interfaces that promote a re-enchantment of the relations around food consumption. In such settings, quality is based on values created through the relationships between producers and consumers. This at least partially replaces institutional symbols, such as seals and brands, with the trust and reciprocity that emerge from the recurrence of economic transactions and shared social values (Niederle and Radomsky 2008).

Emerging markets for organic food and the place of family farmers

The rapid growth of the Ecovida Network has occurred against a background of increasing production and consumption of organic food in Brazil in recent years. This growth has been followed by a deep institutional restructuring of the different markets in which these products are traded (Schultz 2007, Boström and Klintman 2008, Blanc and Kledal 2012). This is a multifaceted process, whose roots and implications can be interpreted in different ways. In general it is a reflection of three major changes: (i) the recognition by the state of ecological production systems, and the formulation of public policies designed to support this sector; (ii) the emergence of new actors at different stages of the production
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and marketing chains and in providing technical assistance and (iii) a substantial redesign of the regulatory framework, including new mechanisms of control and the increased involvement of certifying bodies (Niederle and Almeida 2013).

Such changes have prompted a rapid shift towards what Brandenburg et al. (2013) term the ‘institutionalization of agroecology’, which they define as the combination of increasing market penetration combined with the creation of a specific regulatory framework governing production. This process raises new challenges and opportunities for all of the actors involved in processes of agroecological transition, particularly for family farmers, the group that is the main supplier of organic foods in Brazil (Schmitt 2009, Sauer and Balestro 2009). According to the Brazilian Association of Organic Food, which represents growers, processors and certifying agencies, 80 per cent of organic food producers throughout the country are family farmers (Brasilbio 2012). Data from the Ministry of Agriculture, Livestock and Supply indicate that there are about 15,000 farmers producing certified organic food on an area of 1.7 million hectares (Brasil 2012).

This clearly brings some benefits. There has been a huge increase in market demand in recent years, which has encouraged other farmers to convert to organic farming and to form groups and social organizations. The creation and consolidation of new groups, associations and networks reflect these changes and have increased agroecological farmers’ ability to connect with other actors. This is well illustrated by the creation of the National Alliance of Agroecology (Articulação Nacional de Agroecologia – ANA), a nationwide network of organizations dedicated to developing the production and marketing of agroecological products.

On the other hand, the requirements for entering markets have become increasingly stringent. It is not easy to gain access to the large retail chains, processing enterprises or export markets, and dealing with the institutional markets also poses significant challenges. Organic marketing channels are becoming increasingly diversified and segmented, with each one imposing a more or less specific set of requirements on producers, such as production scale, product diversification, frequency of delivery, quality standards etc. The implementation of such systems involves complex social engineering. The operation of each market clearly bears the imprint of the ‘visible hands’ of actors, who connect networks and the institutional arrangements needed to enable effective economic transactions. These arrangements include an array of different certification systems.

The institutionalization of distinct mechanisms for conformity assessment reflects the heterogeneity of organic food production and sales systems in Brazil. The coexistence of the three mechanisms discussed earlier in this chapter reflects the struggles of various organized social movements that have historically opposed agricultural modernization, developing innovative agroecological practices, and sought state recognition of the legitimacy of these approaches. These practices filled some of the voids left by the modernizing model, generating diverse local production systems, which have been able to reproduce themselves
despite the lack of supportive public policies. Thus, they have given rise not only to multiple and varied ecological ‘styles of farming’ (van der Ploeg, 2008), but also to different markets, particularly alternative networks of production and consumption, which are strongly embedded in rural areas. Despite the pressures exerted by food empires, the street markets, growers’ associations, small retailers, producers for home consumption and food bartering have survived and, in some regions, began to foster new models of endogenous rural development (Schneider and Niederle 2010).

From the mid-1990s onwards, official recognition of family farming has boosted these alternative systems, which are now no longer perceived as a remnant of traditional agriculture, but as examples of the most innovative practices of the contemporary food system (Schneider, Shiki and Belik 2010). Therefore, although the main policies towards family farms have maintained a focus on the production of agricultural commodities, they have also encouraged some initiatives related to organic production, either directly, by financing production and processing, or indirectly, by strengthening social organizations and encouraging the consumption of organic and agroecological food (Petersen 2013, Altieri et al. 2012).

It is also true that it took a long time for the issue of the environment to appear on the agenda of most rural social movements. Despite this, the activities of such movements have been crucial for the development of agroecology. The role that these movements have played in advocating ecological family farming and participatory certification undoubtedly contributed to the current regulatory framework for organic production and the institutional architecture of this market (Brandenburg 2008).

Moreover, these transformations in production have converged with equally important changes in the urban environment, especially within a segment of ‘consommacteurs’ keen not only on organic foods but also on some kind of political engagement in the context of the new societal paradigm of sustainability (Stassart 2010, 2012). Hence, the institutionalization of agroecology has also been supported by the emergence of movements and consumer organizations that began to demand practices and policies to encourage the consumption of healthy foods, produced without the use of pesticides and GMOs. This has been a crucial aspect in the trajectory of the Ecovida Network, especially in southern Brazil, since the network is also supported by regular consumers of organic food, who have helped to build a community that brings consumers and producers closer together (Rover 2011).

As a result the cities have regained street markets (feiras livre), which were once seen as an outdated model of market relations, whose extinction was only a matter of time, depending upon the pace of expansion of large retail chains. At the same time there has also been a significant growth in dedicated organic and natural products stores. These are outlets that, although not providing a direct link between producer and consumer, shorten the marketing chain and add value to local products, sometimes identifying the farmers by name as a marketing strategy. Nowadays, the newest frontier of organic consumption is the internet:
among the online organic stores there are also producers who are creating home
delivery systems, and organic baskets are now included on group buying sites. 
Ecovida and its member groups make use of all these new marketplaces (Silveira
2013).

These phenomena indicate the rich diversity of new marketplaces, which is a 
clear reflection of the complexity of the social construction of organic markets in 
Brazil over the last two decades. Some of these markets are fully embedded in 
local relations, while others are attempting to interact at a distance, as Ecovida is 
doing. Both cases involve a process of social change that reinforces and strength-
ens local nested markets, extending their reach through the expansion of the 
network. Theoretically, this might be understood as a way in which the social 
material infrastructure unfolds at new and wider levels without losing its con-
nection or embeddedness with the place of its production and its values (Massey 
2005). This is what van der Ploeg (Chapter 2, this volume) means by ‘building 
bridges’, or ‘by-passes’ that allow people to overcome the ‘structural holes’ of 
conventional, globally controlled, networks and commercial exchange.6 These 
new paths for accessing organic products also seem to reflect how actors are 
dealing with the significant shifts in Brazilian society as a whole, that are related 
to changing values towards food and its quality, purity and freshness together 
with new ways to build individual distinctiveness and common public goods.

Another key feature that has recently emerged is the involvement of the State 
in increasing demand for organic products. Public procurement is being used to 
create institutional markets7 that aim to promote adequate nutrition through 
building channels for distributing and selling food produce. Both the Food Pur-
bu\ac{}ch Programme (Programa de Aquisici\~{o}\ac{} de Alimentos – PAA) and the 
National School Feeding Programme (Programa Nacional de Alimenta\c{c}"\~{a}o 
Escolar – PNAE) now play a key role in creating demand for local foods and 
provide a strong incentive for agroecological production systems (Schmitt et al. 
Chapter 4 in this volume, Grisa et al. 2011, Schmitt and Grisa 2013).

The social construction of markets and further developments

New challenges are posed for participatory guarantee systems in Brazil by the 
growing demand for organic food, the economies of scale achieved by some 
organic production experiences and the access of these products to institutional 
markets. Such challenges include the need to maintain and improve the mecha-
nisms that guarantee the distinction of organic products. An organic seal has two 
roles: it distinguishes an organic farmer/product from a conventional one but it 
also provides a gateway to certain markets. One can only gain access to some 
markets by being certified. Carneiro (2007) emphasizes that certification is 
needed to expand markets. Brazilian law recognizes third party and participatory 
certification and a farmer, or group of farmers, may legally make simultaneous 
use of the two systems of certification. The existence of different certification 
options allows organic producers to expand their marketing channels beyond the 
local market, to build larger markets and reach new consumers. But it also raises
challenges, which Meirelles (2002) has discussed in regard to the Ecovida Network. There is the implicit risk that meeting the demand from new markets will become the main motivation of the network, displacing the farmers’ ‘agroeological project’. Radomsky (2010b: 100) also noted the dilemma between the ‘risk of decharacterization’ and the preservation of the lifestyle of the members of Ecovida Network. He claims that belonging to the network involves sharing a set of values and beliefs, which recognize the practice of agroecology as a ‘lifestyle choice’, whose central aim is not “making too much money” (ibid.).

These paradoxes need not necessarily restrict the expansion of the network and its development in terms of production and sales volume. The question is not whether or not to enter new markets or expand sales volume, but how to conduct this process and how to maintain the autonomy of farmers’ groups and even the network as a whole, in terms of decision making and control. The risk, therefore, does not lie in larger markets and higher revenues per se, but in whether or not involvement in them will erode the behaviour, values and ethics that sustain the network. The moral obligations that bound the members of Ecovida network allow them to adopt either one or both types of certification – participatory and/or third-party certification.

Farmers who choose to sell their products to food processors, exporters or large retailers are required not only to hold a third-party certification but also to meet additional requirements such as, for example, exclusive supply agreements, thus restricting their capacity to expand alternative markets. Such requirements expose social struggles within these markets and challenges to the legitimacy of the certification systems.

These different market segments are based on distinct standards, rules and values, which determine the different attributes of goods that flow through the networks. In a street market, for example, the market space is defined by a network of proximity. Producers and consumers interact through exchanging products whose value is highly related to the artisanship involved in their production. By contrast, in institutional markets, the government is a central actor in the network, and the social origin of the product (family farming) is the fundamental distinctive value. Large retail networks (and the certification systems that they adopt) in turn use industrial and commercial mechanisms for sustaining the standards that demonstrate the quality and safety of the produce. Family farming produce and participatory certification as well face barriers to enter this market segment.

However, many farmers wish to supply different markets and do adopt more than one certification system. Besides raising costs, this brings out some challenges for farmers, which are manifest in the dissenting logics that guide each system. The desire to link to more than one market is a question of autonomy. This is part of a broader struggle to create space for manoeuvre, to avoid ‘marginal’ exchanges at the local marketplaces and becoming completely overshadowed by a system of exchange governed by more or less ‘free’ interplay of price, supply and demand (Shanin 1973).
Institutional markets driven by public procurement policies (the PAA and the PNAE) have the potential to provide a major spur in shaping the structure of markets for organic foods and stimulating the participation of family farmers. However, there are still organizational and productive barriers to entering this market, which limit the proportion of organic produce sold in these markets to very small figures – about 2 per cent of the total food purchased from family farmers in Brazil. Nevertheless, family farming organizations are very optimistic about the potential expansion of their members’ participation in these markets.

Grisa et al. (2010) and Grisa (2012) have studied these programmes and observed that there are both synergistic and competing dynamics between institutional markets and the other marketing channels used by family farmers. In some municipalities of Rio Grande do Sul, the demand for family farming products from institutional markets seems to have strengthened other existing markets, or even led to the creation of new ones. In other cases, the option of supplying institutional markets may have contributed to the breakdown of some traditional marketing spaces, such as street fairs. This has been the result of limited supply (and competing demand) but also of the work involved (in terms of sales and transportation) to supply both markets simultaneously.

These changes are already having a visible impact on the operation of family farming social organizations, including the Ecovida Network. A recent study by Perez-Cassarino (2012) makes clear that the network’s technical assistants have increasingly focused on participation in government food procurement programmes, and somewhat neglected training and social organization, which are essential in order to build farmers’ skills and knowledge and ensure their transition to ecological farming practices. It is notable that farmers involved in the Ecovida Network generally make use of more marketing channels than conventional producers. This is not only because they have more opportunities to find alternative outlets, but also because creating alternative markets (either individually or collectively) is a conscious strategy among network members.

Ecovida has been involved in bringing together consumers, state bureaucrats and local politicians in order to establish booths for its farmers at public markets, to set up street fairs in new locations and to supply food to budget restaurants. As Medard et al. (Chapter 10 in this volume) note, such strategies can be characterized as having a counter-development dynamic, in the sense that these ‘strategies and attempts of the local actors (e.g. farmers, traders, consumers, collectives) [to] actively respond to “failures” of the global markets they are confronted with’.

The construction and maintenance of these marketing channels raise questions and challenges. The main challenge concerns the maintenance of street fairs as favoured spaces for selling the produce and interacting with consumers so that to build trust and awareness. These farmers’ fairs have resulted from the advocacy initiatives of farmers sometimes supported by consumer groups and a number of other intermediary agents. Recent developments in the organization of such fairs point to the relevant role of advocates, such as university professors familiar with agroecology, members of social movements and technical
assistants (from both NGOs and government and at municipal and state levels). Street fairs also require substantial involvement from the municipalities that organize the spaces and oversee the marketing activities.

Some fairs are attended by both conventional and ecological farmers. The ecological farmers often attempt to distinguish themselves as organic and members of the Ecovida network, by wearing Ecovida T-shirts or hanging agroecology banners or posters promoting their farms on the booths or handing out small booklets on ecological food to differentiate themselves – always highlighting their link to the network and their status as organic farmers. The farmers’ fairs allow direct interactions with consumers, often building bonds of trust and empathy between the two. Some booths become a favourite with consumers and the social ties built from repeated visits are another way of strengthening nested markets.

Yet these farmers’ fairs are more than just a market for selling food. They are the social and symbolic nodes within a network that emerges from the acts of buying and selling. Regular interactions lead many consumers to establish a commitment to organic farming and empathy for the stallholder farmers they visit. In this way, the act of purchasing connects people through a relational dimension that goes beyond a particular event (as in impersonal markets) and is reinforced over time, creating a shared sympathy. Thus, for some consumers, purchasing ecological food involves acquiring goods that contain social, moral, and symbolic values.

Although these proximity relations are important, the seals and signs that distinguish certified ecological farmers are also necessary at farmers’ fairs. Both Ecovida and the individual farmers make clear and constant efforts to ensure their products are known and marked as being certified as organic. While there are a number of loyal organic customers at these fairs, many other shoppers do not distinguish between agroecological and conventional products. Many others primarily shop on the basis of price. This problem can be overcome when municipalities hold farmers’ fairs that are exclusively agroecological or organic, but attracting new customers to these fairs is not always easy.

In view of this, farmers’ fairs are also spaces of contention. There is much discussion about which seals (third party or participatory certification) have the most credibility among consumers and the value of and conflicts involved in using more than one seal. Another issue is that conventional farmers sometimes hitch a free ride on the organic fairs, raising their prices closer to organic ones.

Among direct sales markets, street fairs are one of the most complexes regarding both its structure and its operation. This is not just about the strenuous work required from farmers, especially from those who work at several street fairs along the same week. It is also about the high risk of losses it involves, because of the huge variation of sales, which result from a number of factors. Among these latter, there are seasonal factors such as school holidays, when the number of customers decreases, despite this often being the period of highest supply. Often it is also difficult for a market to acquire enough ‘critical mass’ to
attract sufficient customers on a regular basis to make it worthwhile attending. Many street markets have not succeeded as they have been located in inaccessible places or were in competition with other more established markets.

**Future prospects for the Ecovida Network**

The largest challenge currently facing the Ecovida Network and other organizations supporting agroecology in Brazil is the risk of ‘conventionalization’ exerted by the pressures that stem from the rapid expansion of the organic market. Conventionalization implies the appropriation of agroecological values and practices, reducing them to mere procedures for handling agroecosystems that closely resemble the patterns found in conventional agriculture (Niederle and Almeida 2013). This process largely occurs through specialization, intensification, scaling-up and input substitution (Buck et al. 1997; Guthman 2004; Lockie and Halpin 2005). This process of conventionalization does not only occur within production (with the increasing participation of large-scale enterprises), but also in the proliferation of new certification bodies, the repositioning of political mediators (driven by the emergence of new advocates of a ‘green economy’) and perhaps most of all through the increasing participation of large retailers in the distribution of organic food, previously restricted to local and regional short circuits.

It is worth noting that, in Brazil, the prevalence of family farming in the organic sector results from various historical and cultural factors, although until recently it has also been related to a lack of interest from the business sector in organic production (van der Ploeg et al. 2012). This lack of interest can be attributed to either the perception of a lack of demand, the lack of appropriate technologies for large-scale organic farming and, perhaps most of all, the lack of an institutional framework to ensure a stable market dynamic. All these factors have changed over recent years and though no detailed data is available there is much evidence that new actors are now exploring the potential of this market.

The introduction of new agents and new values into the Ecovida Network also raises several other questions. As previously mentioned, the network provides a mechanism for connecting local farmers and organizations, which means it is highly heterogeneous. There are striking differences between farmers from metropolitan areas, such as Curitiba/Paraná, and the family farmers located in the rural western region of Santa Catarina. These differences make it difficult to produce a clear profile of the production units that constitute the network. In some regions, farmers have been strongly embedded in ecological movements for quite some time, whereas in other regions there is an increasing number of entrant farmers who are motivated by the potential gains from increased demand.

These new agroecological entrepreneurs have responded to the changing markets with increased scale of production, specialization and aggressive marketing strategies. These farmers often remain at the first stage of the agroecological transition, essentially just avoiding the use of chemical and industrial inputs.
Yet they also bring new skills to the network – they show an impressive networking ability, combining participation in innovative circuits (e-commerce, basket deliveries, speciality stores, etc.) with participation in the conventional large retail segment.

For some of these new ‘family entrepreneurs’, their main reason for joining the Ecovida Network is the high cost of third-party certification. This has led many of them to migrate to the participatory system, provided that they don’t lose access to the larger markets. This is possible now since the major retail chains are slowly beginning to recognize and accept participatory certification, whereas, until recently, they would only accept third-party certified products. Dissent and contention begin to arise within the network, stirred up by the admittance of these new entrepreneur farmers, the emergence of new intermediaries (including ex-farmers who have begun to buy and process food and are often perceived as middle men who are appropriating the value added) and the entry of these agroecological products in large supermarkets. The admittance of new values within Ecovida – profit, efficiency, scale, productivity – which are typical of the business and industrial worlds, is leading to the creation of distinct ‘styles of ecological farming’ inside the organization. This is provoking a serious debate within the network about its values and legitimacy, what Ecovida represents and which actors should represent the network.

In the light of this it is worth asking how these organic production networks will develop in the future and what contribution they will make to rural development in a broader sense. An outstanding consequence is that this experience is producing a real turning point in the most purist and orthodox conceptions about the role and characteristics of the markets. It is worth emphasizing this point. Until quite recently sociological debate over markets in Brazil tended to view them as ‘satanic’ (to recall Abramovay’s (2004) insightful turn of phrase) something that can never provide a solution within a capitalist system. This view has now lost much strength as a result of both empirical research and theoretical developments and has given way to a more complex and nuanced view of markets (in the plural), whose value, especially when they are embedded, nested and perceived as socio-cultural constructions, are now seen in a different light. Markets are no longer a taboo and now attract interest from farmers, policy makers and public administrators.

A final issue to bear in mind is the challenges facing Brazilian organizations involved in developing agroecological and organic food markets, particularly that of preventing these spaces from being captured by outside, hegemonic, actors. While there is some evidence that these markets are, in places, being appropriated by new entrants, the future development of organic and agroecological markets is likely to involve an extension of their heterogeneity which should protect them from ‘outside capture’. Instead of an unidirectional process of conventionalization, the emergence of short marketing circuits, especially the street markets, supported by agroecological producers and engaged consumers, suggests a kind of Polanyi’s ‘double movement’ (Schneider and Escher 2011), in which the markets themselves are converted into arenas for socio-political struggles.
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Notes

1 The network was officially founded on 28 April 1999 at a ceremony held in the Legislative Assembly of Santa Catarina. For further information, see: www.ecovida.org.br.

2 In Brazil, there are both domestic and foreign companies operating in this segment. The Brazilian certifiers include: Instituto de Tecnologia do Paraná – TECPAR; Ecocert Brasil Certificadora Ltda; IBD Certificações Ltda; IMO Control do Brasil Ltda; Instituto Nacional de Tecnologia (INT); Instituto Chão Vivo de Avaliação da Conformidade.

3 Three key documents regulate the production of organic food and the systems for certification and guarantee: Law no. 10,831 of 2003, Decree no. 6,323 of 2007, and Normative Instruction no. 64 of 2008, from the Ministry of Agriculture, Livestock and Food Supply.

4 The ‘olhar externo’ is a process of peer review and surveillance provided by other farmers and technical bodies involved in the participatory certification methodology.

5 Curitiba and Porto Alegre, the two largest cities of the South, have more than a hundred open air markets between them, two dozen of them exclusively for selling organic products.

6 In the same vein van der Ploeg points out that ‘nested markets reconstitute, as it were, local and regional markets through short-cutting past the obligatory passage points of the general commodity markets. In this respect, they represent new and contrasting modes of governance. They are nested in new networks and distinctive qualities and are sustained by new socio-material infrastructures’ (Chapter 2 in this volume).

7 Although, in essence, all markets can be defined as institutional, this term has acquired a particular meaning in Brazil. It has been widely used to define a specific market design, in which the networks of exchange are defined by norms and conventions negotiated between actors and institutions, with the state playing a central role through its public procurement activities.

8 This diversion of technicians’ work priorities is hindering the agroecological transition process: the development of knowledge, practices and technologies that further agroecological production. This could mean that some farmers do not progress much beyond the stage of input substitution and do not make more substantial changes in the way their production systems are organized. This is also due to inadequate rural extension and research for devising creative agroecological production systems.

References


96  G. Radomsky et al.


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