COVID-19 and the Neoliberal Resilience of Food Provision in Istanbul: Non-Regulation and Agility in the Fruit and Vegetable Wholesale Markets

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Abstract

This research examines the impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic on the Istanbul fresh fruit and vegetable provisioning between March and September 2020. In line with global trends, the measures taken within the scope of the pandemic were expected to cause disruptions in various provision channels. Apart from the logistic problems experienced in the first couple of weeks of the pandemic, we observed that there was no severe crisis in the fresh fruit and vegetable provision systems of Istanbul in 2020. Based on our fieldwork conducted between June and September 2020, we attribute this resilience to two key factors: (1) the non-regulation and ineffective control of pandemic measures, allowing actors to operate without major constraints, and (2) the agility of provision actors in adapting to various channels and positions. By exploring these dynamics, we aim to contribute to discussions on neoliberal resilience, emphasizing the importance of reclaiming the concept of resilience without reinforcing the hegemony of the neoliberal agrifood system.

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Introduction

> *Turkey is currently not self-sufficient and is experiencing a partial famine. … There may be serious problems in accessing food in Turkey. … Famine has knocked on our door, now it will cross the doorsill. (Aysu, 2022)*[1]

> *COVID-19 did not affect much. Only certain intermediaries had trouble like those working with hotels, restaurants, and airports. But the products that they had been buying and selling were bought by other intermediaries like supermarkets or stallholders in the local markets (pazarcı). (Interview 8, shopkeeper in Bayrampasa Wholesale Market, Istanbul, 22.09.2020)*

Istanbul, with its almost 16 million inhabitants, is the most populous city in Europe, and the 13th most populous city in the world. Nearly one out of five people in Turkey lives in Istanbul, the population density of which is 2.905 people per square kilometre. According to the records of the Provincial Culture and Tourism Directorate of Istanbul, in 2019, before the COVID-19 pandemic, the number of foreign visitors hosted in the city was almost equal to its own population. Moreover, as of 9 September 2021, there were over half a million Syrians under Temporary Protection (SuTP) living in Istanbul, the majority of whom were considered to be among the most food-insecure social categories.[2]

The situation of food (in)security in Turkey, as reflected in and reverberating through the available data, estimations, and predictions, is contradictory. Although Turkey has no available data in the section on hunger and food insecurity statistics in FAOSTAT Country Profiles, some other globally used indices provide food insecurity estimates. For instance, according to the Economist Impact (2022) Global Food Security Index (GFSI), in 2022 the prevalence of undernourishment in Turkey was 2.5%, and of underweight children was 1.5%. The Global Hunger Index report (GHI), published jointly by Concern Worldwide and Welthungerhilfe, measures and tracks hunger at the global, regional, and country levels (Von Grebmer et al., 2020). In 2023, Turkey was one of 20 countries with a low GHI score of less than five. HungerMap developed by the World Food Programme (WFP), also tracks trends in household food consumption, which is one dimension for tracking acute food insecurity. The WFP (2022), contrary to the GFSI and GHI estimates, listed Turkey among the countries with the highest prevalence of insufficient food consumption. On 7 June 2022, 14.8 million people, almost 18% of the population, had not had sufficient food over the past 90 days.

The Istanbul Planning Agency (2022) conducts the monthly Istanbul Barometer survey, which provides information about Istanbul on many topics ranging from Istanbulites' economic situation to their emotional state. In November 2022, 66% of the respondents to the survey stated that they were worried about having enough food, and 70.3% of the participants stated that they could not buy the food they wanted during the month due to financial difficulties. Furthermore, 62.4% of the participants stated that they reduced their portions because they could not obtain enough food in the same month.

Although its role in these recent statistics remains indeterminate (due to the lack of relevant studies), it is plausible to state that the COVID-19 pandemic emerged when the majority of Istanbulites were already facing significant challenges in terms of access to adequate, healthy, and sustainable food. Yet, as the words of the shopkeeper in Istanbul Bayrampasa Marketplace quoted at the beginning of this article clearly reflect, the pandemic seems to have had no substantial effect on Istanbul's fresh fruit and vegetable provision. This is quite surprising, considering the expectations and comments of both mainstream and critical circles, especially those during the initial phase of the pandemic, and the words of the former president of the Farmers' Union (Çiftçi-Sen), Abdullah Aysu (2022, cf., 2020) quoted above.

[1] For Abdullah Aysu's early warnings on the risk of famine due to the pandemic, see his video interview published online in March 2020 (Aysu, 2020).

[2] As defined by the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations (FAO, n.d.), food insecurity is the situation when people 'lack regular access to enough safe and nutritious food for normal growth and development and an active and healthy life'.

How are we to understand this unexpected 'resilience' of the fresh fruit and vegetable provision systems of Istanbul faced with the COVID-19 pandemic? This question also brings to mind the following thought-provoking observation that emerged in the stimulating discussions held during the 'mini-conference' titled 'The Food System in the (Post-) Pandemic World: Disruptions, Vulnerability, Resilience, and Alternatives'[3] of the International Sociological Association (ISA)'s Research Committee on Sociology of Agriculture and Food (RC40): 'The hegemonic (capitalist-industrial) food system has proven to be "resilient" in the face of the pandemic!?'

Based on our fieldwork – conducted between June and September 2020, a period when the pandemic was continuing but the relevant restrictions and measures were reduced, with a claim of returning back to 'normal' – we attribute this resilience to two key factors: (1) the non-regulation and ineffective control of pandemic measures, allowing actors to operate without major constraints; and (2) the agility of provision actors in adapting to various channels and positions. By exploring these dynamics, we aim to contribute to discussions on neoliberal resilience, emphasising the importance of reclaiming the concept of resilience without reinforcing the hegemony of the neoliberal agrifood system.

The article consists of five sections. After this introduction, the subsequent part engages in a discussion about the theoretical underpinnings and directions of the paper, particularly concerning the processes of neoliberal restructuring and their observable durability, which is referred to as 'neoliberal resilience'. The third section sheds light on the fresh fruit and vegetable provisioning channels and actors in Istanbul, with a specific focus on wholesale markets, which serve as central elements in our analysis. The fourth section elucidates the fieldwork and analysis procedures, along with presenting our findings, which constitute the two primary pillars of the aforementioned neoliberal resilience in our case. The conclusion revisits the concept of neoliberal resilience and, drawing on the discussions presented in the preceding sections, it highlights the ways in which our findings contribute to both the neoliberalisation of resilience, and the attempts to reclaim the concept of resilience.

Conceptualising the Unexpected Resilience during the Pandemic under Neoliberalism

As it is still fresh in our memories, one of the widely debated issues in relation to the pandemic has been its effects on food provision systems. During the pandemic, related disruptions (as well as concerns about their possible escalation) in agricultural and food production, international trade and food circulation, supply chains, and consumption spheres prevailed on the popular agenda and in debates. There was a kind of common fear, though with different underlying motives, crosscutting various actors – e.g. the Food and Agriculture Organisation of the United Nations, transnational agrifood capital, and dissident grassroots movements and NGOs – that those disruptions could quickly turn into a food crisis, even a famine, for certain regions and communities (FAO, 2020a, 2020b; Harvey, 2020; Altieri and Nicholls, 2020; Clapp and Moseley, 2020; The Food and Land Use Coalition, 2020; van der Ploeg, 2020).[4]

Turkey was no exception to those escalating concerns and fears. Existing issues and food insecurities, as well

[3] For more information on the RC40 'mini-conference', please see the Introduction to this special section.

[4] During the pandemic, we witnessed once again the promotion of the 'we are all in the same boat' discourse, especially by those in power. For instance, here is what a member of the Coronavirus Scientific Advisory Board (an advisory group set up by the Ministry of Health specifically for 'the fight against the COVID-19 pandemic' in Turkey) said: 'Such epidemics are treated like a natural disaster. As in all other natural disasters, you will be successful in the fight against the pandemic if you put aside political fights, and personal interests, and act jointly as a nation (...) after all, we are all in the same boat.' Contrary to such a 'scientific' view, it is important to highlight the unequal impacts of the pandemic across different geographies and social categories, so much so that we are not all in the same boat and even some of us have no boat at all. For a critique of this discourse in relation to necropolitics in the context of Turkey, see Bakıner (2020), and for a discussion on the diversified impacts of the pandemic on agricultural producers in Turkey, see Keyder et al. (2020).

as vulnerabilities related to ecological problems,[5] climate crisis in particular,[6] were expected to escalate with the pandemic, especially for Istanbul, a giant metropolitan city, where complex food supply chains are vital for its food provision (cf., Aysu, 2020; Büke, 2020a, 2020b; Dogan, 2020a, 2020b; Günaydın, 2020; Keyder et al., 2020). The main underlying reason for such an expectation can be pointed out as the neoliberal policies that have been restructuring agrifood relations in Turkey since the early 1980s.

One of the important outcomes (if not aims) of neoliberalism has been the reshaping of the international division of labour based on capital's search for 'cheap labour' and 'cheap nature' (Clapp, 2012; Magdoff et al., 2000; McMichael, 2013; Weis, 2007; Wolf and Bonanno, 2014). Through policies such as market liberalisation, de/re-regulation, financialisation, and privatisation, producers of the Global South have been forced to shift their crop design towards more labour-intensive, export-oriented, and/or high-value-added crops such as fresh fruits and vegetables, or towards the production of crops (mostly based on extractivist production models) that are significant for the agri-food industry, livestock complex or biofuel sectors such as maize, soybeans, and oilseeds. Despite liberal mainstream arguments, which promoted the so-called 'free market' as the primary mechanism to achieve food security (Otero et. al, 2013), the rural and urban labouring classes of many countries, including Turkey, have experienced this process as a significant erosion in their rights to determine their own agri-food systems, and to produce and/or access healthy and sustainable food (cf. Aydın, 2001; Öztürk et al., 2021).

To make sense of the extent of this erosion, particularly in the field of agriculture, here are some macro statistical data (Turkish Statistical Institute (TurkStat, 2023). The proportion of the rural population in the total population decreased from 57.5% in 1980 to 6.6% in 2022. The share of agricultural output, including forestry and fisheries, in the Gross Domestic Product, which was approximately 31.2% in the 1970, dropped to 6.5% in 2022. In 1980, one in every two employed individuals worked in agriculture, but by 2020, this figure had decreased to one in every six people. The total agricultural area, which was around 42 million hectares in the 1990, has dwindled to 37.753 million hectares as of 2020. It is important to note that the burden of all these setbacks has fallen mostly on small producers (Aydın, 2001, 2010; Boratav, 2009; Ecevit, 2006; Ecevit et al., 2009; Keyder and Yenal, 2011).

There were thus clearly good reasons for the concerns about the likely negative effects of the COVID-19 pandemic on food provision systems, and this research has also been a product of those concerns. We have focused on fresh fruit and vegetable provisioning, which is not only considered to be indispensable for a healthy diet but also has a significant share in household food expenditures. For instance, according to Otero et. al's (2013: 277) calculations for the 1985-2007 period based on FAO statistics, fruits and vegetables have been among the top five basic food sources that constitute at least 59% of the total calorie intake in the country.

Here, fresh fruit and vegetable provisioning includes all the processes that products go through between production and consumption, such as preparation for the market (sorting, stacking, classification, etc.), preservation, transportation, packaging, and retail sales. Although the focus of this research has been Istanbul's wholesale markets (in Turkish: hals), to understand the overall picture of the entire provision processes, we reached out not only to the brokers (komisyoncu) and merchants (tüccar) (i.e., the main actors of wholesale

[5] According to the Environmental Performance Index published by Yale Center for Environmental Law & Policy at Yale University and the Center for International Earth Science Information Network at Columbia University, Turkey ranks 172nd among 180 countries in the Environmental Performance Index, 176th in Ecosystem Vitality, and 166th in Climate Change Mitigation (Wolf et al., 2022). The Chamber of Environmental Engineers Istanbul Office's 2023 report on 'Istanbul's Environment Status', in addition to mega projects as 'ecological destruction projects' threatening Istanbul's agricultural land and forests, states water and air pollution, and waste management as the major ecological problems of Istanbul. See below for more information on mega projects' impacts on Istanbul's agriculture.

[6] Considering the risk of extreme coastal events, Istanbul was identified as the most vulnerable to the impacts of climate change among the European coastal cities (Abadie et al., 2016).

markets),[7] and their professional organisations, but also to producers, 'organised' and 'traditional' retail actors, alternative food initiatives, and the representatives of Istanbul Metropolitan Municipality's related institutions. Admittedly, we found it surprising that during our research we did not encounter a significant disruption or hear a crisis narrative due to the pandemic. Except for the short period of shock and panic following the declaration of the pandemic,[8] there have been no major disruptions to supply chains, such as the physical inability of consumers to access food products, and there was no reported scarcity of food or beverages on market shelves. Almost all of our interviewees mentioned significant 'structural problems' with regard to the provision systems such as inflation and overall economic difficulties, fluctuating prices, long working hours, and infrastructural problems like inadequacy or lack of cold chains, the smallness of shops, traffic problems, and so on. However, none of them attributed these problems specifically to the pandemic.

To understand this, we have tried to analyse: (1) the main features of the pandemic management and regulation in the wholesale markets; and (2) the effects of the pandemic on the characteristic features of the provisioning channels and their actors. We argue that there are two main pillars underlying the seeming resilience of the fresh fruit and vegetable provisioning of Istanbul: (1) managing the pandemic and the related measures via non-regulation and/or ineffective control and monitoring of the implementation of the policies and measures, i.e., regulation of the pandemic conditions by non-regulation; and (2) the ability and capacity of the so-called 'traditional' provision actors to quickly move and shift among various provision channels and positions, in other words, the agility of the provision actors which are mobile and/or transitive.

We think that our findings can be discussed in relation to the concept of neoliberal resilience, which can also be seen as one of the features of the resilience of the capitalist-industrial agrifood system in general. Neoliberal resilience has been, on the one hand, a product of 'exploring the mechanisms that have allowed neoliberalism to spread and remain resilient' in the face of 'popular disapproval' (Axe, 2023: 637) and crises such as 'the Global Financial Crisis of 2008 and the Great Recession of the 2010s' (Jabko, 2021: 337) (cf., Madariaga, 2017, 2020; Rodríguez, 2021). On the other hand, it has been used to criticise the appropriation of the concept 'resilience' by neoliberalism, or, to put it differently, to scrutinise the neoliberal form of the concept of resilience itself (cf. Dobbins and Plow, 2023; Ferguson, 2019; Hamilton, Zettel and Neimanis, 2021; Meriläinen et al., 2022).

While these critiques might call for an abandonment of the concept, we care about not constructing a 'capitalocentric discourse' (Gibson-Graham, 2006, 2008) that would contribute to the hegemony of neoliberal agrifood system by obscuring the alternatives that already exist. Hence, in line with Meriläinen et al. (2022), we are also interested in reclaiming the concept of 'resilience' by focusing on the social relations between provisioning actors that cannot be interpreted as the resilience of neoliberalism itself.

In this regard, we claim that: (1) while non-regulation points to the resilience of the existing neoliberal agrifood regime through the sacrifice of decent living and working conditions of the provisioning actors in the wholesale markets, as they have no other option than continuing their business as usual; (2) the agility of the small and medium scale provisioning actors points to the informal connections between them, which appear to be crucial for the resilience of the provisioning networks while simultaneously made invisible and undermined by neoliberal regulations favouring supermarkets over wholesale markets in Istanbul.

In the next section of this article, we introduce the wholesale markets in the fresh fruit and vegetable

[7] According to the law no. 5957 issued in 2010, a broker is a professional who works on a commission basis on their own behalf and on behalf of others for the purpose of the wholesale of goods. The commission on the sales price is what the broker earns for this service. This commission is set at a maximum of 8% by this law, and it is also stipulated that this maximum rate may be reduced by the relevant ministry if necessary. The same law defines the merchant as a professional who works on their own behalf and account for the wholesale of goods. The merchant who does not work on any commission, carries out trade activities.

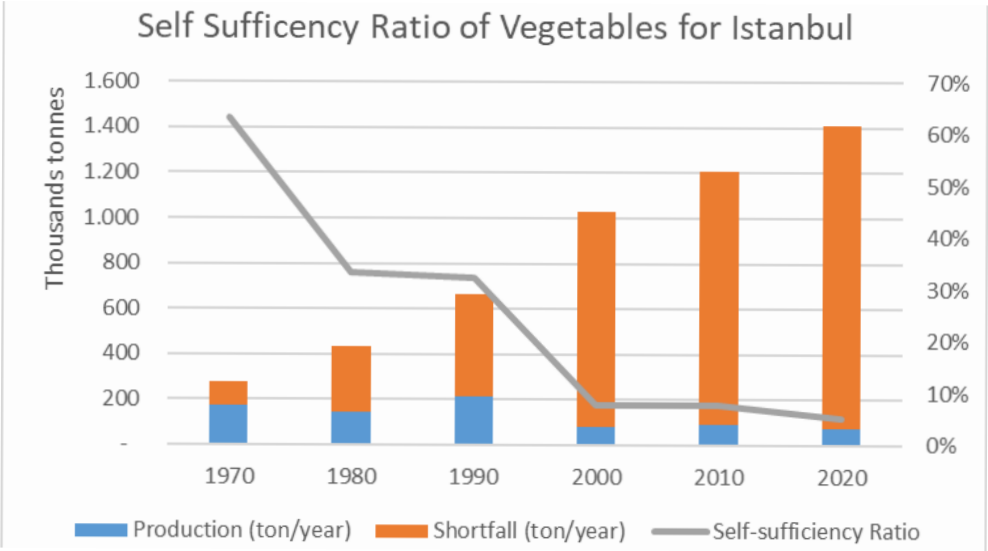
[8] Based on the measures taken against the pandemic and the experiences of our interviewees, it is possible to categorize our research period into three major episodes in 2020: (1) Shock and Panic (11 March – 11 April); (2) Lockdowns (11 April – 1 June); and (3) 'New Normal' – Controlled-reopening (1 June – 30 September).

provisioning networks in Istanbul. After setting the stage, we discuss these two main pillars of the apparent resilience of the fresh fruit and vegetable provision systems in detail in the following section.

Istanbul's Food Provisioning and the Wholesale Markets

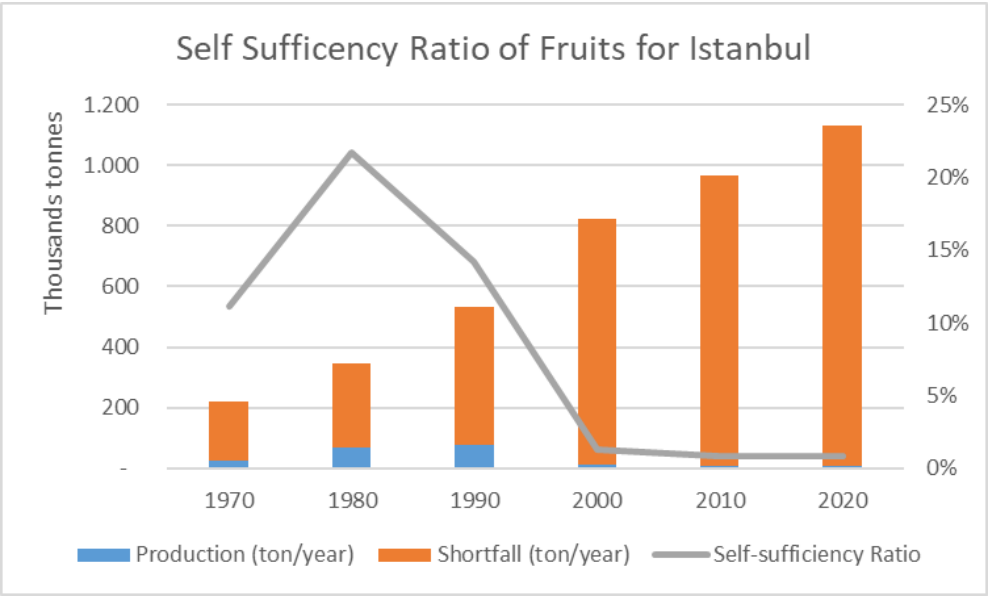
Given its massive population characterised by various forms of inequality, we have calculated that Istanbul residents consume around 1.5 million tons of fresh fruit and 2 million tons of fresh vegetables per year (Yerküre, 2021). It is worth noting that only 1% of fresh fruit and vegetables consumed in Istanbul is produced within the administrative borders of the city itself (Yerküre, 2021). There might be nothing surprising about this, given the enormous scale of Istanbul as a megacity. Yet it is important to note that, until the early 1970s, and the early 1980s respectively, Istanbul was capable of producing over 60% of the vegetables and over 20% of the fruit needed by its residents for a balanced diet (Yerküre, 2021). Figures 1 and 2 below provide an overall picture of how Istanbul's vegetable and fruit production-need balance has changed since the 1970s.

Figure 1. Istanbul's Vegetable Production and Need Balance (1970-2020)



Source: Authors' own calculation based on the National Statistical Institute (For pre-2004 data) and TurkStat (2020) statistics

Figure 2. Istanbul's Fruit Production and Need Balance (1970-2020)



Source: Authors' own calculation based on the National Statistical Institute (for pre-2004 data) and TurkStat (2020) statistics

The relatively better situation for vegetables compared to fruit can be attributed to the fact that some of Istanbul's famous historical gardens (called bostans in Turkish) in the inner city continue to produce, albeit with some difficulty, and that vegetable production continues, albeit marginally, in the few remaining agricultural production areas on the periphery of Istanbul. The best known of Istanbul's bostans are the Yedikule Bostans (which date back to the construction of the Walls of Istanbul (Constantinople) in the 5th century), the Piyala Pasha Mosque Bostan (the construction of the mosque was completed between 1563 and 1574, and the Kuzguncuk Bostan (its construction date is unknown) (Istanbul City Council, 2021). These bostans historically played a significant role in the food provisioning of the Istanbul of Byzantium and the Ottoman Empires, as well as of the Republic of Turkey from 1923 until the 1950s (cf. Kaldijan 2004, 2000). Regarding the current production of Istanbul's bostans, Shopov and Çakmakoglu (2013) estimate that a total of some 40 tons of vegetables (purslane, lettuce, dill, chard, cabbage, parsley, tomato, pepper, cress, lamb's ear, cauliflower, eggplant, corn, kale) and about four tons of fruit (fig, mulberry, pomegranate) are harvested from the bostans located in the historical peninsula (Suriçi) and around the Walls of Istanbul (cited in Istanbul City Council, 2021: 15).

It should however be noted that those bostans were already marginalised both spatially and in the memory of Istanbulites, and the remaining marginal ones are currently under significant threats.[9] In addition to the trajectories of agrifood policies, urbanisation and industrialisation processes, especially since the second half of the 20th century, have led to the loss of Istanbul's bostans as well as significant declines in the city's agricultural areas, orchards, pasture, and forests (Yerküre, 2020, 2019). While the population of Istanbul was three million in the 1970s, it exceeded 7 million in the 1990s. In the following 20 years, the population doubled again, and by 2022, Istanbul's population exceeded 15 million. As production areas decreased and fruit and vegetable production declined within the city, self-sufficiency[10] decreased dramatically with the rapid increase of the resident population and the number of tourists.

As Istanbul industrialised in the 1960s, it became the primary address of internal migration of the rural population within the country. Agricultural production areas in and around Istanbul were transformed into industrial facilities and slum areas built by the incoming population on their own. Becoming a mega metropolis by the 1990s, Istanbul expanded outwards, deindustrialising Istanbul itself and swallowing the countryside around it. As industry moved eastwards and westwards towards other provinces of the Marmara Region, Istanbul grew and became more crowded with the service and construction sectors. For instance, since 1995, while available total agricultural land in Istanbul has declined by 27.5%, this decline is 74.2% for vegetable growing land and 31.4% for fruit growing land (Yerküre, 2021). Recently 'mega projects' like the North Marmara Highway, Istanbul Airport, and the Third Bosphorus Bridge have also emerged as serious threats to the city's agrifood system. Together with the Istanbul Canal Project – the construction of which is currently one of the most contentious issues of the city – these four mega projects will cause Istanbul to lose a total of almost 20% of its agricultural land and pasture, and 4% of its forests (Yerküre, 2021).[11]

Given this socio-historical background, according to the records of the wholesale markets, Istanbul's current major fresh food suppliers are Turkey's fresh food production hotspots like Antalya, Mersin, Adana, Izmir, Bursa, and Eskisehir. The journey of fresh fruit and vegetables from the fields to the tables of the end consumers is organised by multi-actor and complex provision channels and processes (see Figure 3). It can be said that at the centre of this complex lie the wholesale markets, which are still the main intermediaries in Turkey, especially for fresh fruit and vegetables. Istanbul has two major public (Bayrampasa Hali and Atasehir Hali) and

[9] In addition to the ongoing construction and infrastructural projects, one of the recent threats that the bostans have been facing are 'green' threats, consisting in dedicating these spaces as parks, hobby gardens, recreation areas, playgrounds, etc. For a critique of these new 'green' policies, which prioritize recreational rather than productive activities, in terms of the creation of new rent areas through ecological gentrification and green washing, see (Istanbul City Council, 2021).

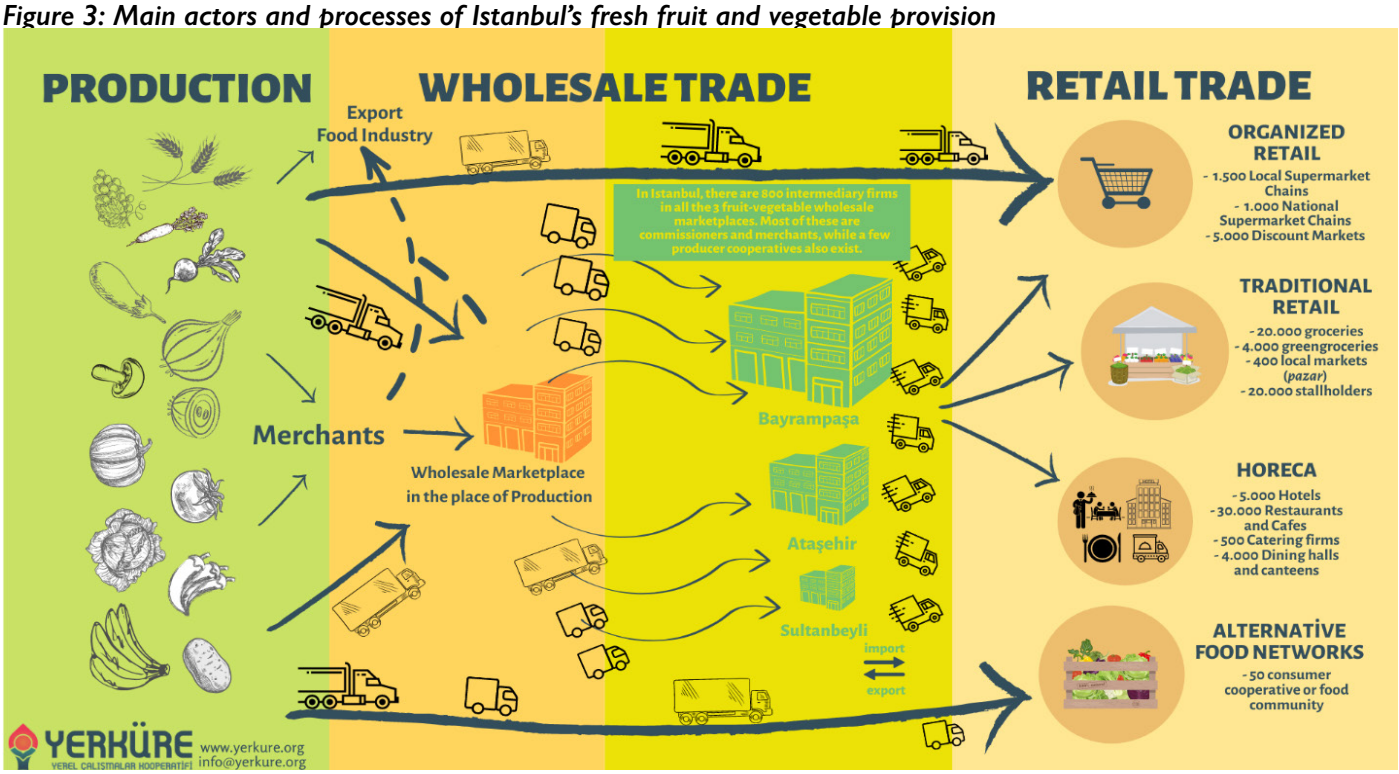
[10] In this context, the self-sufficiency rate was used as the ratio of fruit and vegetables produced within the city to meet the recommended nutritional needs of the urban population.

[11] Especially the Kanal Istanbul Project – which is the only one of the four listed above that has not yet been realized – has been at the center of urban as well as national politics. For instance, one of the major promises of the current mayor who was elected in 2019 from the main opposition party, has been to stop the project.

one small-scale private (Sultanbeyli Hali) wholesale markets. Until the latest legal change in 2010 (effective in the mid-2010s, see Turkish Republic Official Gazette, 26 March 2010), all fresh fruit and vegetables were obliged to pass through these marketplaces.

Today, Istanbul's annual fresh food input is estimated to be 7.5 million tons, and out of that, approximately 3 million tons pass through three wholesale markets of the city which are usually considered to be the 'traditional' distribution channel. In other words, approximately 40% of fresh food deliveries still pass through Istanbul's wholesale markets. This means that almost 10 thousand vehicles – 160 eighteen-wheelers, 1,100 trucks, 5,200 pick-up trucks, and 3,350 passenger cars – go in and out of the wholesale markets of the city every day (Yerküre, 2021).[12]

Figure 3: Main actors and processes of Istanbul's fresh fruit and vegetable provision



The rest of the fresh food is transported through national retail chains' own supply systems (usually referred to as 'modern' or 'organised' distribution), which is made possible by the legal change mentioned above. Although the literature lacks 'systematic research on supermarket-led changes in Turkey's agri-food system', it is clear that supermarkets have been increasing their hegemony in food provisioning, especially through policies and mechanisms like market liberalisation and joint ventures since the 1980s 'at about the same time as in Latin America, South and East Asia, and Central and Eastern Europe' (Atasoy, 2013: 549, 561). While the role of supermarkets has been marginal in fresh fruit and vegetable provisioning in Turkey, the share of supermarkets in perishable food provisioning 'is estimated to have risen from 30% in 2004 to 43% in 2009' (Atasoy, 2013: 561).[13,14]

[12] According to calculations from a previous study, which considered vehicle license plates (assumed to represent the provinces of departure to arrive in Istanbul), as of 2018, the total annual distance travelled by vehicles arriving at Bayrampasa and Atasehir was 158 million kilometres (Yerküre, 2019). This also translates to a carbon emission of 100 kilotons, equivalent to the annual electricity needs of 17,439 houses (Yerküre, 2019). For further discussions and alternative proposals to this model, deemed unsustainable in light of climate change, see Yerküre (2019).

[13] It is important to note that the definition of perishable food here includes dairy products and meat, in addition to fresh fruit and vegetables (Atasoy, 2013: 561).

[14] Although studies on consumers' choice for fresh fruit and vegetable channels are limited in Turkey, we believe, Akpınar et al.'s (2009: 220) research conducted in Antalya provides crucial insights regarding the underlying reasons for the increasing choice of supermarkets: 'The primary factors that lead consumers to opt for modern retailers when purchasing fresh fruits and vegetables are credit card acceptance, cleanliness and hygiene standards, availability of parking facilities, and opportunity to buy different products from single place.' This is also in line with our own findings. Supermarkets, during the pandemic, seem to have managed to

The data regarding the number of retail actors show the massive scale of retail. In Istanbul, there are around 1,500 branches of local supermarket chains, 1,000 branches of national supermarket chains, and 5,000 branches of discount supermarkets; all together these 7,500 stores constitute 'organised' retail. On the other hand, with its 20,000 grocers, 4,000 greengrocers, 400 marketplaces, and 20,000 stallholders, Istanbul still hosts a significant number of 'traditional' retail actors. In terms of the eating-out and food service sectors, there are over 30,000 restaurants and cafes, 5,000 hotels, 4,000 cafeterias and canteens, and 500 catering firms in the city.

Significantly, thanks to growing opposition at grassroots level to the corporate-industrial agrifood system, the number of alternative food initiatives and networks has also been increasing rapidly, especially since the 2000s. In this regard, there are currently around 50 consumer cooperatives and food networks in Istanbul trying to provide healthy and sustainable food to their beneficiaries (Degirmenci, 2019: 22). Although the search for alternatives to capitalist provisioning models is not new in Turkey,[15] alternative food networks (AFNs) are a rather recent phenomenon (Karakaya, 2016; Degirmenci, 2019; Ince and Kadirbeyoglu, 2020).[16] It is possible to say that the increasing public attention and interest in a healthy diet in the COVID-19 context led to a rising interest in AFNs that aim to provide sustainable, healthy, local, and ecological food to their beneficiaries. They have become more visible and, we would say, gained strength during the pandemic (cf., Keyder et al., 2020).

In order to understand how the complex fresh fruit and vegetable provision systems have (not) been affected by the pandemic, we focused mainly on the actors and processes at the public Bayrampasa and Atasehir fresh fruit and vegetable wholesale markets of Istanbul (see Photo 1 and Photo 2). There are 800 intermediary companies in these wholesale markets, composed almost exclusively of merchants and brokers, with only two producer cooperatives. The shops in the marketplaces are generally small areas of 70-80 square meters (see Photo 3). Fixed staff such as clerks, accountants, and porters work alongside the merchant/broker.

Photo1: Early morning traffic at Bayrampasa fresh fruit and vegetable wholesale market (Photo credit: authors)

create an image of 'safe' places for shopping since they exercised more control over the rules of wearing a mask and keeping at least 1.5 meters distance, which was a significant challenge at the open-air neighbourhood markets (pazars).

[15] With the increasing internal migration in the 1950s, different models were developed to facilitate access to food in the face of food inflation in large cities, particularly Istanbul. The most prominent of these models were publicly led and operated discount stores and consumption cooperatives established in public institutions and large private sector enterprises (Öztürk, 2006). Also see (Yenal and Nizam, 2020) for a historical analysis of the seed politics in Turkey since the 1960s, and the 'quiet activism' that has paved the way for alternative movements since the 2000s.

[16] For a discussion on the milestones in the emergence and spread of AFNs in Turkey, see Karakaya (2016: 183-207). See also (Nizam, 2017; Nizam and Tatari, 2022; Tatari, 2022) for cases of geographical indications that posit new place-based alternatives.

Photo2: Noon at Atasehir fresh fruit and vegetable wholesale market (Photo credit: authors)

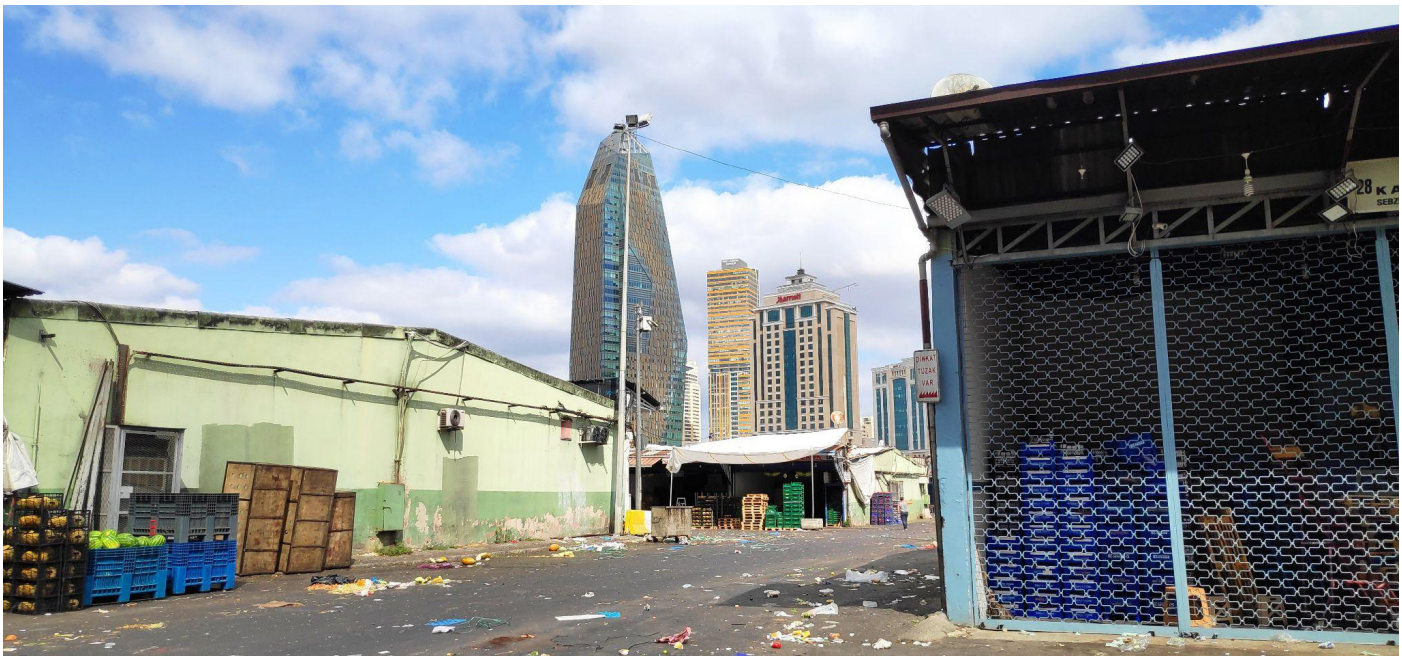


Photo 3: A stack of plastic containers in front of a shop in Bayrampasa Hali (Photo credit: authors)

In an average workplace, the number of employees is usually five but may increase in summer and autumn when trade is intense (IMM, 2015). In addition to fixed employees, the rickshaws and porters make up a significant part of the marketplace workforce, handling the products arriving at the store and carrying them to buyers' vehicles that cannot reach the store due to traffic. It is important to note that these rickshaws and porters are mostly composed of migrant and informal workers. Wholesale markets operate from night to morning. Trucks start to enter the wholesale marketplaces after 8pm, with most entrances being between 11 pm and midnight. The trade in the marketplaces starts to intensify after midnight as well and decreases with daylight. By noon, there is almost no one around (see Photo 2).

Given this structure and the daily routine of the marketplaces, we asked about the effects on it of the COVID-19 pandemic. The common emphasis of interviewees representing different actors was that the pandemic did not lead to serious problems in fresh fruit and vegetable provisioning. The next section delves into this conundrum.

Fieldwork, Analysis, and Findings

We had the opportunity to participate in two interconnected research projects in 2019 and 2020 on Istanbul's food provision systems (Yerküre, 2020, 2019), before embarking on this research. Both were products of the collaboration between Greenpeace Mediterranean and Yerküre Local Studies Scientific Research Cooperative. The first one is titled Turkey's Agrifood System and Istanbul's Food Provision System: Tendencies, Problems, Alternatives (in Turkish, Türkiye'nin Gıda Sistemi ve Istanbul'un Tedarik Zinciri: Egilimler, Sorunlar ve Alternatifler) and the second one is titled Feeding Istanbul: Alternatives and Opportunities with a Focus on Farmers' Markets (in Turkish, Istanbul Nasıl Beslenir?: Üretici Pazarları Odagında Alternatifler ve Olanaklar). While the former aimed to identify the limitations and major problems of Istanbul's food provision systems by situating them within the trajectories of the agrifood system in Turkey, the latter formulated policy suggestions for Istanbul by analysing good examples and practices (at the global, national, and Istanbul level) aimed at sustainable, fair, short, community-building, and local food provision systems.

Thanks to the research phases of these two projects, we became familiar with the actors in the food provision networks in Istanbul. When the COVID-19 pandemic hit in March 2020, and many concerns about food provisioning had increasingly become public by June 2020, we decided to design this research on the effects of the pandemic. As we knew from our previous research experience that the wholesale markets occupy a central place in Istanbul's fresh fruit and vegetable provision, we designed our research to investigate the effects of the pandemic on Istanbul's fresh fruit and vegetable provision networks and planned our fieldwork accordingly.

Our previous experience made it possible for us to implement a purposive sampling method. This in turn allowed us to select information-rich cases for the purposes of the research when it came to the actors in the wholesale markets, such as the only producer cooperative, the municipal authorities that were in charge, and the existing civil society organisations formed by the brokers. Besides these actors, we also used the snowball sampling method to interview brokers/merchants in the two wholesale markets, some of whom were also agricultural producers themselves. We also included in our research representatives of the relevant actors outside the wholesale marketplaces. While we used snowball sampling to reach stallholders in the local markets of Istanbul, we again used purposive sampling to interview 'modern' or 'organised' retail actors, representatives from the existing civil society organisations of 'traditional' retail actors and restaurants, and the alternative food networks.

In total, we interviewed 10 brokers/merchants in two wholesale markets, 3 agricultural producers, 4 'traditional' retail actors, 1 authorised local officer of an 'organised' retailer, 1 manager of a chain restaurant, and 1 representative of Tourism Restaurant Investors and Gastronomy Enterprises Association (TURYID), 2 representatives of brokers' associations (IMESKOM and AYMESKIAD), 1 representative of the stallholders' chamber, 1 representative of the agricultural engineers' chamber, 3 representatives of the municipality bodies operating in the wholesale markets, 4 members of consumer cooperatives and 1 activist of a neighbourhood solidarity initiative. Furthermore, we spent one day and night in each of the two public wholesale markets (Bayrampasa Hali and Atasehir Hali) and observed the working practices. We have also supported our qualitative analysis with the analysis of quantitative data based on the available statistics on the production, provisioning, and consumption of fresh fruit and vegetables in Istanbul.[17]

[17] For instance, the related data on production and supply were collected and analysed to assess the relative importance of different channels or market powers of various actors in fresh fruit and vegetable provisioning. Data on the prices of fresh fruit and vegetable products were similarly analysed to assess the impacts of the pandemic in terms of economic access to the related

We have focused our analysis on the wholesale marketplaces and used the other key actors' data as material for cross-checking. To do so, we categorised our interview data and fieldnotes according to the key actors' narratives and experiences of the impacts of the pandemic: 'traditional' retail actors (neighbourhood-based local marketplaces greengroceries, stand holders), 'organised' retail actors (chain markets, discount markets, supermarkets), HORECA (hotels, restaurants, cafes), alternative food networks (cooperatives, solidarity initiatives, etc.) and the wholesale marketplaces (brokers and merchants at the Bayrampasa Hali and Atasehir Hali). To understand the possible factors underlying the brokers' and merchants' experiences and narratives affirming that the pandemic had had no serious negative impact on the food provisioning channels (which is shared by other key actors except the HoReCa sector), we focused on two main questions during our analysis: (1) How was the pandemic itself managed in the wholesale markets so that the system appeared to be resilient? (2) What are the characteristic features of the provision channels and their actors that might lead to this rather unexpected 'resilience'?

Before going into the details of our findings/claims with respect to these questions, we would like to highlight that almost all our interviewees emphasised that 'structural problems' had characterised the provision channels and processes prior to the pandemic, as well as during and after it. Here is a list of those structural problems foregrounded during our fieldwork by the brokers and merchants: inappropriate locations of the wholesale marketplaces; the lack of cold chains; limited storage facilities; smallness of the shops, which also does not allow room for cold storage; traffic jams; long working hours and difficult working conditions; high prices and inflation; uncertainty regarding quantity and prices of products and hence unpredictability of prices; delays in payments and cash flows, and prolongation of maturity periods, which puts particularly small enterprises in jeopardy. The quotations below might be helpful to see how they phrased these problems:

> *There has been no increase or decrease in our product supply and sales. (...) However, we have already been in trouble, and we already had many problems such as difficulties in entry and exit, irregular and long working hours, etc. We don't have a warehouse, we sell daily. (Interview 22, shopkeeper at Bayrampasa Hali, 22.09.2020)*

> *This wholesale market needs to be moved out of here. There should be cold storage units in the shops. We have one here with three to four tons of capacity. But not everyone has this. It is needed for cherries etc. in the summer when it is very hot. It is a daily need or use. You throw away many items in the heat. (Interview 21, shopkeeper at Bayrampasa Hali, and representative of a professional association, 22.09.2020)*

> *What is needed is not being done at the wholesale markets. These hals do not suit Istanbul. I am ashamed to host and invite people. It is written in the law that laboratory, control etc. should be in place, but it doesn't work like that. (Interview 2, representative of a professional organisation, 24.06.2020)*

These narratives on the significant structural problems further intensified our curiosity regarding the bewildering question of why the fresh fruit and vegetable provisioning channels of Istanbul were not affected by the pandemic. We propose that the observed resilience can be attributed to two primary factors: (1) regulating pandemic conditions through non-regulation: provisioning actors navigating the pandemic and its measures through a lack of regulation and/or ineffective control and oversight in policy execution; and (2) mobility/transitivity: the adeptness and capacity of provisioning actors to rapidly adapt and switch between various provisioning channels and roles. The next two sub-sections discuss these two factors respectively.

Pandemic (non-)regulation in the wholesale markets

When we inquired in our interviews about the effects of the pandemic on the wholesale markets, people mentioned that only the first couple of weeks following the announcement of the first case in Turkey (11 March 2020) were in a sense an aberration from the routine of the wholesale markets. They talked about the rise in demand that peaked on 10 April, the last day before the first lockdown. 11 April was the only day

products. Based on our analysis of the available quantitative data, we have also prepared an infographic series titled 'Agricultural Production and Food Provision Systems of Istanbul with Infographics': https://yerkure.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/03/Yerkure-Koop.InfografiklerIeIstanbuldaTarimsalUretimGidaTedarikSistemleri.compr_.pdf

that the wholesale markets were closed in Istanbul. This period between 11 March and 11 April was typically narrated in the interviews as the period of 'shock and panic'.[18] Shopkeepers said that the prices increased during this period, yet this increase was temporary. A public officer in the Quality Control Department in the municipal office at Atasehir wholesale market expressed this panic as follows:

> *During the worst times of the pandemic, maybe the week around or before the first lockdown, the buyers did not even ask the price. Everyone was interested in getting the products no matter the price, all that arrived at the market was sold. (Interview 3, Officer, Atasehir, 17.09.2020)*

However, none of our informants told us that this price fluctuation continued. Another temporary increase they observed was the number of individual consumers who came to the wholesale market. In addition to the increase in demand and prices in the first couple of weeks, many shopkeepers mentioned a temporary shortage of porters and rickshaws in this period. They added that none of this lasted long; towards the end of April 2020, the wholesale market was back to 'normal' except for the traffic problem that lasted longer. Everyone highlighted that the biggest challenge of this period for the shopkeepers and buyers in the wholesale markets was the traffic jams.

> *The pandemic did not affect the food but the functioning of the marketplace, especially the vehicle density. For instance, Mondays, as the day after the weekend lockdown, became very crowded. People who would normally spend three hours here had to spend six to eight hours. This was mostly due to the problem of traffic. (Interview 6, Officer, Bayrampasa, 22.09.2020)*

> *We can say that the biggest effect of the pandemic here was the traffic jams. As part of the pandemic measures, the timetables for entry and exit have been changed. Before the marketplace was closed only for two hours every day; now it is closed for six hours for cleaning purposes. We also made changes to ensure that the ones who enter and the ones who exit do not encounter each other. This caused an immense increase in traffic problems, especially in the first couple of weeks. However, our records indicate that the number of vehicles entering and exiting the marketplace did not change. (Interview 7, Officer, Bayrampasa, 22.09.2020)*

When we asked whether the individuals had to share their HES code[19] (issued by the Turkish state to track the contagion) in the marketplace, the director answered that this would not be possible given the high number of people present in the marketplace. Given that most of the porters and rickshaws are informal labourers, the expectation of tracking everyone in the marketplace did not seem realistic to us either.

By the time we visited the wholesale markets in August, the traffic jam was also back to its normal pre-pandemic levels. During our visit, many told us that the pandemic regulations of the entry-exit timetables were no longer implemented. Except for the change in operation hours, almost nothing had changed for the actors in the marketplace during the pandemic.

The Istanbul Directorate of Fresh Fruit and Vegetable Wholesale Market took some new management decisions in its offices. For instance, employment shifts were reorganised so that only one or two employees were present in each municipal office every day. Yet the measures were not implemented in the same way in the marketplaces themselves. As the general secretary admitted during our interview in his office located on the upper floor of the marketplace: 'Precautions like social distancing were implemented in the offices but such a control is not really possible downstairs'. As we also observed in the marketplace, the use of masks and gloves was quite uncommon, and there were no special precautions regarding social distancing. The director stated that in the marketplace the municipality used large screens and audio announcements on social distancing and provided informative brochures and hygiene kits to all the shops. Yet it was difficult to observe whether the measurements were enforced.

No state or municipal authority was involved in a study of filiation inside the marketplaces.

[18] It is important to note that the marketplaces were closed due to the pandemic only on 11 April, which is also the underlying factor in the abovementioned peak of the demand on 10 April.

[19] Hayat Eve Sığar (HES) is an application obliged by the Turkish state during the pandemic.

> *Filiation officials [groups managed by the Ministry of Health] did not come here, probably they did not detect anyone here as the source of contagion. As far as we know, only one shop owner passed away due to COVID-19. (Interview 6, Officer, Bayrampasa, 22.09.2020)*

Some shopkeepers told us about the cases they heard of from their neighbours in the market, but each shop was responsible for taking care of their hospitalisation processes, and there was not a particular filiation study group that followed the cases inside the marketplace.

> *There is not any administrative unit keeping track of the pandemic in the marketplace. We also distributed masks and disinfectant; we keep constantly asking the shopkeepers about their needs. (Interview 4, Shopkeepers' Association, Atasehir, 17.09.2020)*

Most of our informants stated that COVID-19 somehow did not cause contagion in the marketplace. Some told us that a few shops they knew were closed for a couple of weeks when the owners or workers were infected.

Based on our interviews, it is clear that, apart from the change in entry-exit times in the marketplaces and a limited spread of the use of masks and disinfectants, the pandemic measures did not have a great impact on the functioning of the marketplaces. The measures taken were kept to a minimum and they had no legal sanction. Thus, the absence of a serious problem in the supply chains in this process was ensured by exempting the existing structure from the pandemic measures and the related restrictions as much as possible so that the actors could continue their 'normal' routine to a large extent. One of the main factors effective in the 'ineffectiveness' of the pandemic appears to have been the deliberate non-interventionist and non-regulatory role of the relevant public authorities and private sector actors, and/or their deliberate non-execution and non-control of the existing measures and procedures against the pandemic in the wholesale markets.

We think that this situation can be conceptualised as 'regulation by non-regulation'. While the pandemic-related regulations were implemented in Turkey, the agricultural sector as a whole and all the food provision networks were kept exempt from them. As they were declared exempt, the food provision actors were allowed to be mobile during curfews without being tracked through HES codes, unlike everyone else in Turkey who had to provide their HES code to travel. Hence, not only were the general pandemic regulations not implemented when it came to food-related activities in the country, there were also no regulations designed for the specific conditions in the wholesale marketplaces.

In this regard, it is possible to point out two dimensions implicit in this regulation by non-regulation. First, it is possible to talk about a consensus on not implementing the pandemic measures and restrictions in this area, so that the food supply would not be 'disrupted'. We interpret this consensus as a state of negligence of which the municipal bodies in charge of the wholesale markets, the wholesale market actors themselves (employees, merchants, brokers, suppliers, porters, etc.), and the consumers, were all part, albeit implicitly.[20] Secondly, it is possible to see this situation as an extension of the livelihood concerns of the small and medium-scale provision actors, and in this sense as their 'compulsory sacrifice'. In other words, the state of regulation by non-regulation can be seen as an indication that marketplace actors, who continued to work intensively under the threat of the pandemic, put their livelihood concerns before their health concerns.

Agility in the Food Provision Networks

During our research in the wholesale markets, one clear finding was that there was no significant shortage of any particular fresh fruit or vegetable during the first six months of the pandemic in 2020. *'There is not a significant change in the number of products bought and sold in the market; we can notice a slight decrease in some, but it is not likely that the reason is pandemic'*, the general secretary said.

[20] It is important to note that there are power relations underlying this consensus. State actors, including municipal authorities, did not design any particular regulations targeting the wholesale markets even though their position required them to do so. By contrast, the other actors in the markets did not have any alternative to simply being careful in their usual working circumstances.

While none of the shopkeepers mentioned any significant food shortage in the provision processes, they emphasised two main disruptions in the provision networks: 1) importation and exportation of the fruit and vegetables considered 'luxuries' (such as avocado and Mediterranean greens); and 2) food producers and intermediaries in the HoReCa (i.e., hotels, restaurants, cafes) sector were the most affected. Significant demand loss in HoReCa and export markets were underlined by our informants.[21] However, almost all brokers and merchants underlined that the intermediaries who used to work with the HoReCa industry were able to switch quickly to the sale towards other actors like markets and stallholders in local bazaars.

> *COVID-19 did not affect much. Only certain intermediaries had trouble like those working with hotels, restaurants, and airports. But the products that they had been buying and selling were bought by other intermediaries like supermarkets or stallholders in the local markets. (Interview 8, shopkeeper in Bayrampasa Wholesale Market, Istanbul, 22.09.2020)*

We observed that this mobility or transitivity between different food provision networks happened much faster in Istanbul than in Western Europe in particular (e.g., IPES, 2020), where the differentiation of food markets (wholesale, HoReCa, retail) led to temporary shortages due to the adaptation of provision networks to the effects of the measures taken against the pandemic. One important underlying reason is that the legal regulations, certification mechanisms, and production-packaging practices do not really differentiate between sales targeting HoReCa and other retail channels such as supermarket chains. As wholesalers in the marketplace and stallholders at local markets (pazarcılar) expressed in our interviews, it was easy for the seller to find a new buyer outside the HoReCa industry. Although some chains that were heavily affected resulted in a marketing problem for the producers (i.e. they were not able to sell their products due to the disappearance of the marketing channels with the pandemic; cf., Keyder et al., 2020), our research in Istanbul wholesale markets suggests that the intermediaries, which used to sell to the HoReCa industry before the pandemic, were able to sell to other intermediaries or buyers in the wholesale market.

The wholesale markets of Istanbul are still places where all the buyers (HoReCa, stallholders in the local markets, intermediaries for groceries and other retail, and supermarkets) meet and choose among various intermediaries. However, since the supermarkets choose to bypass the wholesale markets,[22] the majority of the wholesalers consist of small and medium-sized intermediary actors.

> *Most of the big supermarkets are not present here; there are only one or two offices here that work with these supermarkets. (Interview 7, Officer, Bayrampasa, 22.09.2020)*

> *We usually sell to the supermarkets that have one or two branches. The big ones take care of their own provisioning, they have many sales representatives in different areas of production and many distribution centres outside the wholesale markets. (Interview 9, Shopkeeper, Bayrampasa, 22.09.2020)*

> *60 to 70% of the buyers here are stallholders in local markets and 10 to 15% are greengrocers. Then there are intermediaries that buy the different products here in order to sell or distribute to the restaurants or small grocery shops. Our guess is that there are very few supermarkets as buyers in the wholesale market; most of the supermarkets have their own warehouses and provisioning networks. (Interview 3, Officer, Atasehir, 17.09.2020)*

This composition of the traders allowed for transitivity between networks, which apparently became a resilience factor during the pandemic. Once we focused more on the stories demonstrating these quick shifts between networks, we realised that this characteristic of transitivity in Istanbul's fresh fruit and vegetable provision system results not only from the easy shift of the products between provisioning channels, but also

[21] The HoReCa sector seemed to posit a more significant problem in the wholesale markets. An important effect of the pandemic concerning the HoReCa actors was the rise of credit use and the prolonged periods of payments. However, it is worth nothing that the sector seems to play only a marginal role in the provisioning networks, since, as stated in our interviews, 99% of the products sold at the wholesale markets end up with domestic consumers.

[22] There are not any studies on the impact of COVID-19 on the supermarkets in Turkey. Yet our findings suggest that the supermarkets did not experience shortages; on the contrary, they faced an increase in demand due to hygiene concerns, and they were able to buy from the wholesale markets when they needed extra supplies of fresh fruit and vegetables.

from the easy shift of the traders between different positions in the provisioning networks. In other words, the same actors may occupy multiple positions in the supply chain, and this multiple positionalities is also crucial for the seeming resilience of the provisioning networks.

In our interviews, we encountered many actors who were simultaneously producers, brokers, merchants, and stallholders. Many intermediaries told us that their extended families continued to be agricultural producers. A significant number of wholesalers in the marketplace used to be stallholders in local markets. This allowed them to closely follow the patterns of local markets thanks to their contacts: either through members of their extended families who continued to be stallholders, or through the stallholders who had been their regular customers in the wholesale market for many years. The case of Nejdet,[23] which is not an exception among our interviewees, illustrates this point. Nejdet had had a shop in Bayrampasa Wholesale Market for 25 years. He defined his shop as a continuation of 'father-uncle occupation'. His brothers and other relatives were also in this business and were running different shops in the marketplace. Before opening his shop, he had worked as a stallholder in local markets, selling lemons, and later he also became a merchant. With this background, he confidently explained:

> *That's why we know this business well. To supply quality products cheaply is the key. We bring products from Çanakkale, Bursa, Antalya, Izmir, Konya, etc. [His brothers are in some of these places, and he goes to other places during the harvest season, stays there, and buys crops based on his own 'fieldwork'.] We are better in the regions where my brothers are. We have connections. There are producers in other regions that we have been working with for a long time. (Interview 9, Shopkeeper, Bayrampasa, 22.09.2020)*

Another pattern we observed was that some wholesalers managed a group of supermarkets in particular districts of Istanbul. While large supermarket chains choose to use their own warehouses and bypass the transactions in the wholesale markets, they might also choose to outsource the management of their fresh fruit and vegetable sections. Ahmet's case is illustrative of this. Ahmet is 65 years old, and he is also a producer in Çanakkale. He contracts with other producers in Çanakkale and buys their products to sell to certain supermarkets in Istanbul. Given these connections, he states that 'The shopkeepers of the wholesale markets (halciler) know what is grown in which region and of what quality.' (Interview 8, Shopkeeper, Bayrampasa, 22.09.2020)

All these patterns indicate that the merchants in the wholesale marketplaces are organically well connected to the different channels of fresh fruit and vegetable retail trade in Istanbul. This transitivity or, better put, connectivity, which allows intermediaries (brokers and merchants, i.e. shopkeepers) in the wholesale markets to follow both the production and retail patterns closely, enables them to be familiar with the totality of the provision system, to be aware of the expectations, and to predict possible price changes, food shortages or buyer reactions in the retail markets. Hence, we argue that the seeming resilience of Istanbul's fresh fruit and vegetable provision system during the pandemic also relied on the agility of actors, based on their capacity to shift among various channels and their multiple positionalities within these channels.

Conclusion/Discussion: The neoliberal resilience and/or the resilience of the capitalist agrifood system

This article focused on the provisioning of fresh fruit and vegetables in Istanbul during the first six months of the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020. The starting point for the researchers was the unexpected resilience narratives of the provisioning networks. After providing the related conceptual underpinnings of the study, we first described the detailed picture of fresh fruit and vegetable provisioning networks, and the place of wholesale markets in them. We then analysed the ways in which the regulations to control the pandemic affected the wholesale markets. Our analysis suggests two main reasons behind the seeming resilience of the provisioning networks: non-regulation of the wholesale markets, and agility of the actors in the provisioning networks owing to their mobility, transitivity, and connectivity.

[23] Pseudonyms are used throughout the article for our interviewees.

First, we argued that the daily routines and operations under the pandemic conditions revealed two dimensions implicit in what we called 'regulation by non-regulation'. On the one hand, while the existing pandemic measures and restrictions were not implemented in this area, no new regulations were designed for these markets. On the other hand, this state of negligence meant that the wholesale market actors continued to work intensively during the pandemic by putting their livelihood concerns before their health concerns. Secondly, our research suggested that the actors in the provisioning networks were able to switch quickly between different sectors and positions. Almost all the brokers and merchants we spoke to emphasised that the intermediaries who used to work with industries affected negatively by the pandemic, such as hotels and restaurants, found new buyers from other sectors. In addition to the transitivity of the products and sectors, we also found that the wholesale market actors are organically connected, especially to the producers and stallholders in local markets. This allowed them to be familiar with the totality of the provision networks and with the expectations and ongoing patterns in the production and retail trade, which in turn contributed to their manoeuvres in the wholesale market.

As indicated in the second section, we suggest that the apparent resilience of the fresh fruit and vegetable provision systems of Istanbul in the COVID-19 context can be discussed in relation to the concept of neoliberal resilience. Combining the two trajectories of the concept, we think that neoliberal resilience can be seen as an important conceptual tool to explore the intricate relationships between adaptability and critique – in other words, the dialectical tension between neoliberalism's adaptive strategies and the socio-ecological challenges it creates and faces.

We interpret the two main pillars – regulation by non-regulation, and mobility/transitivity of the small and medium scale provision actors – underlying the apparent resilience of the fresh fruit and vegetable provisioning networks in the face of the COVID-19 pandemic through this dual meaning of neoliberal resilience. Regulation by non-regulation signifies the endurance of the prevailing neoliberal agrifood system at the expense of the well-being and working conditions of those involved in wholesale markets, who were compelled to carry on with business as usual due to a lack of alternatives. The agility of small and medium-scale provisioning actors underscores the informal ties among them, deemed vital for the resilience of provisioning networks, despite their devaluation by the neoliberal discourse and practices.

Within this context, we consider our interviewees' opinion that they did not experience a significant problem due to the pandemic, also in relation to their emphasis that they were already dealing with serious structural problems before the pandemic. In this regard, it can be argued that neither regulation by non-regulation, nor the agility of the provision actors through mobility, is sustainable. Both factors can be seen as forms of a lack of public regulation with regard to basic human rights like decent living and working conditions. They can also be seen as the primary mechanisms through which the small and medium-scale provision actors are connected to the market in a way that continuously reproduces their fragility and insecurity.[24]

This, we believe, also implies the significance of the interconnections between diverse economic models and relations that are variously (and mostly pejoratively) labelled as 'informal', 'traditional', 'disorganised', etc., and the capitalist provision channels labelled, approvingly, as 'formal', 'modern', 'organised', etc.[25] That is to say the making of the commodity relations and capitalist provision systems[26] on the basis of non-commodity (or at least less commoditised) social relations (and vice versa) – for example, subsistence relations based on care, reproductive labour, family and kinship, communal relations, etc. (cf., Mies and Bennholdt-Thomsen, 2000; Gibson-Graham, 2006, 2008) – require more attention and further study in our case as well.

[24] Here one can also recall Walker's (2020: 11) statement that 'resilience is not always good and desirable', and, as examples for such forms of resilience, he lists 'evil dictatorships, salinized landscapes, and psychotic states in people'. The resilience of capitalism in general, and capitalist agrifood relations in particular, can also be discussed in relation to Walker's (2020) point.

[25] We owe special thanks to the anonymous reviewer, who drew our attention to this point.

[26] We understand this process akin to 'the making of the "commodity-intensive society" [Illich, 1981] where "needs" are increasingly defined and met in terms of mass-produced packaged goods and services' (Atasoy, 2013: 548).

Here resilience seems to appear as both a paradox and a multifaceted nexus. The paradox lies in the dual role of resilience as both a defensive shield against 'external' challenges and a strategic tool for neoliberalism's 'internal' agenda. It underscores the tension between the adaptive strength of neoliberalism and the critical discourse that reveals its instrumental use of resilience. The 'nexus' refers to the fact that neoliberal resilience emerges from a complex interplay of interconnected networks of factors, forming a nexus of 'internal' adaptations and 'external' influences.

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