What is left after the pandemic? Solidarity and Reciprocity from Kayambi agroecological producers during COVID-19

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Abstract

In many places worldwide, government-imposed lockdowns during the first months of the COVID-19 pandemic resulted in harshening food insecurity for urban residents. The lockdowns had contrasting effects in the rural areas of the Cayambe canton, north of Ecuador. This article shows the different forms of solidarity and reciprocity that emerged amongst consumers and producers from Kayambi communities during the pandemic. Based on interviews and ethnographic fieldwork amongst agroecological producers in 2020 and 2021, I describe their challenges in guaranteeing food security and their strategies for generating new local markets for agroecological production. At first, like peasants in other parts of the world, producers in Cayambe faced challenges in distributing food in mainstream distribution channels, a worldwide phenomenon of food surplus accumulation (de Wit 2020). Later, a shift towards increasing agrobiodiversity and decentralizing agroecological markets became the primary strategy of Kayambis. In dialogue with Altieri and Nicholls (2020), I expand on the relevance of agroecology to reconstructing agriculture in the post-covid. I show that when capitalist structures fail to guarantee peoples' food security, other economic principles become more evident in daily life practices.

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Introduction

When everybody was confined during the COVID-19 pandemic, the primary concerns were feeding ourselves and caring for one another. Suddenly, the actions that once seemed ordinary and often taken for granted became our main priority. A dignified life and death have become central in individuals' lives worldwide. To be together with family members, eat sufficient and nutritious food, and access medicinal treatment in its varied forms regained importance over being a productive and exemplary worker.

Indeed, the COVID-19 pandemic caused high levels of unemployment and poverty, limited access to food supply chains and school nutrition programs and created food insecurity throughout the world. Consequently, a food crisis unevenly affected populations worldwide, making it evident that the food system based on global dynamics and capitalist principles needs to be replaced. Even the World Food Programme recognized and alerted to the urgency of transforming food systems (Clapp and Moseley, 2020).

In many places worldwide, government-imposed lockdowns during the first months of the COVID-19 pandemic resulted in harshening food insecurity for urban residents. The World Food Program (2020) envisioned a famine of "biblical proportions" would affect at least 30 countries.[1] If "normality" in the system previously consisted of exploiting a mass of workers to maintain levels of wealth growth, individuals began to realize that such "normality" pulled us away from ordinary everyday activities and enjoying life with our loved ones. Consequently, "a new normality" gained traction. Subsistence daily activities were more important than fulfilling a particular institution's goals or a certain company's productivity levels.

For some actors, the correct solution for the crisis in food systems was to improve their efficiency and resilience, maintaining industrial agriculture models and expanding global supply chains. This strategy was used to tackle the food crises in the 1970s, 1980s to 2000s, and 2007 to 2008. Others, however, have been advocating for the search for alternatives to the system (Altieri and Nicholls, 2020) since applying the same recipe is the reason populations worldwide could not escape the food crisis during the COVID-19 pandemic (Clapp and Moseley, 2020).

As a contribution to this debate, this article describes the dynamics before, during, and after the COVID-19 pandemic in the Ecuadorian Andes. Based on ethnographic fieldwork held between July 2019 and March 2020, January 2021 and January through March 2022, *I describe how Kayambi people*[2] *mobilized ongoing agroecological transitions as an alternative to cope with food insecurity.* This case is particularly relevant because the lockdowns had different side effects in the rural areas of the Cayambe canton, north of Ecuador. Both tendencies of maintaining industrial and agricultural models and expanding agroecological transitions happened in this territory, with fresh-cut flower plantations relying on food production from agroecological fields.

The article is organized as follows. Firstly, I establish the theoretical lenses that enabled my research project and subsequently the analysis of this case. Secondly, I briefly describe the methodological approach. Thirdly, I provide some research context, describing the socio-economic and agricultural landscape before the

[1] Available at: https://www.theguardian.com/global-development/2020/apr/21/coronavirus-pandemic-will-cause-famine-of-biblical-proportions, last access on September 27th, 2023.

[2] In Ecuador, Indigenous peoples are recognized as legal subjects that can claim to constitute a nacionalidad or a pueblo. Following other authors working in Ecuador (Whitten, 2003:185; Colloredo-Mansfeld, 2009:10; Becker, 2011:3-5; Erazo, 2015:205; Radcliffe, 2015:17; Martínez Novo, 2021:36) I translate nacionalidad as nationality and pueblo as people. The Ecuadorian Constitution of 2008 recognizes 14 Indigenous nationalities in the country—Awá, Chachis, Épera, Tsa'chila, Achuar, Andoa, Cofán, Huaorani, Secoya, Shiwiar, Shuar, Siona, Zápara and Kichwa—, and also 18 peoples. The Kichwa (a definition based on the spoken language) nationality encompasses 14 pueblos that speak Kichwa with dialectic variations while having some cultural similarities. Those different forms of recognition reflect how individuals and communities identify themselves. For some individuals, on the one hand, nationality is their identity marker, like in the case of the Shuar and Achuar nationalities. On the other hand, individuals from the Kichwa nationality tend to identify themselves according to the pueblo they belong to (Chibuleo, Karanki, Kañari, Kayambi, Kisapinsha, Kitukara, Natabuela, Otavalo, Panzaleo, Pasto, Puruhá, Salasaka, Saraguro, Tomabela, Waranka).

COVID-19 pandemic when I arrived to do research fieldwork. Fourthly, I narrate what happened during the pandemic, and in the last session, I describe what remains from the transformations that occurred because of the pandemic. I conclude the article by responding to some questions that enable a conversation on a larger debate that speaks to this case but also goes beyond the context of this research.

Theoretical basis

The analysis of this case is built on alternative ways of interpreting people's economic principles, decolonial perspectives, and abolitionist agroecology. Critical perspectives about the economy challenged the reliance on orthodox economics to explain plural economies worldwide. Mauss (1950) and Polanyi (1977) were essential to developing such perspectives. Before them, anthropologists and historians were expected to focus on a grounded and empirical interpretation of so-called exotic and archaic societies. In contrast, economists could employ "rational" methods to explain a modern abstract institution known as "the market", thus retaining an important intellectual position. As Hann and Hart (2011:14) stated, these authors contributed to the endeavors of economic anthropologists on reviewing "the sociocultural dimension of the economy against the 'naturalisation' of the market system and the fiction of 'Economic Man (or Woman)' as allegedly best suited to 'human nature'" (Schulte-Tenckhoff 2015:28).

On the one hand, Marcel Mauss reviewed how exchange practices work, drawing attention to the plurality of meanings they could have. He thus conceived society as a historical project of humanity that should not be taken for granted as a pre-existent form. The reviewers of Mauss explain his main conclusion was that both attempting to create a free market for private contracts and collective structures solely based on altruism are utopian and unattainable (Hart, 2007:481). Hence, Mauss (1950) considered systems of social-prestations still endured in several societies, and advocated for an "'economic movement from below' in the form of syndicalism, cooperation, and mutual insurance" (Hart 2007, 481).

Drawing on Mauss' perspective, Polanyi explained how the plurality of societal distributions *organizes* and, in turn, *is organized* by economic institutions. Capitalist societies are not inherently capitalists, as liberal economics suggests. The process of becoming a capitalist society is as historical as other economic systems, which means that capitalist values and market rules are as important as other forms of economic organization present in other societies. The novelty brought by the capitalist system was that it produced an inversion in its process of organization: economics is what defines societal relations in capitalist societies, whereas, in other societal organizations, it is the society that defines the role of economics in individuals' lives. There is nothing inherently good or better in the capitalist system compared to other economic systems. Indeed, it is not necessarily the desired historical process of all societies, nor is it inevitable or a sign of modern and civilized societies.

Decolonial perspectives reinforce and extend this view. Decolonial scholars share a common view on how the world system, constituted as a modern world during colonial times, carries colonial relations at its core. The modern is colonial, and vice versa. Hence, the modern/colonial world system, nowadays capitalist, is constituted of other economic forms, including non-capitalist ones. According to Aníbal Quijano (2000), this is because the colonial/modern world system comprises two structural axes: work and race.

In the first axis, the author explains that the capitalist system was built during colonial times since the relations between metropoles and colonies were at the basis of the early capitalist relations. Enslavement and servitude were the colonial economic forms that made possible the oppression and subjugation of workers in the modern era. Once capitalist relations became hegemonic, these economic forms did not cease to exist. They remain, in fact, at the core of the capitalist system. For instance, in the United States, meat plants continued to function during the COVID-19 pandemic, even though 49,954 meatpacking workers had tested positive, and 254 were dead by November 2020. Not coincidently, at least 60% of the workers were Black,

Hispanic, or Asian, which indicates that the racial profile of this labor tells of an already-known history of modern slavery (Montenegro de Wit, 2021). Such an example is symptomatic of coloniality in capitalist food systems nowadays.

Moreover, according to Altieri and Nicholls (2020), agroecology became even more relevant as an alternative to reconstructing agriculture in the post-COVID context. Hence, drawing on the idea that the capitalist system is hegemonic but is not homogenous and depends on other economic forms to exist (Quijano, 2020), I argue that alternatives of living (including alternatives to hegemonic food systems) already exist, coexisting and opening breaches of the capitalist systemic hegemony. Agroecological transitions constitute one possible alternative to hegemonic food systems, but the socioeconomic changes they produce, to be fully transformative, depend on an abolitionist approach to food systems. In other words, it should aim at the liberation of racialized subjects throughout the world as they are the main exploited workforce in industrial agriculture.

Methodological approach

To build the interpretation presented in this article, I relied on the qualitative information learned during the months of ethnographic research among Kayambi people between July 2019 and March 2020, January 2021 and January through March 2022.

The collaborative research developed with Kayambi women doing agroecology (self-identifying as chakareras) enabled daily close interaction. Such interaction happened in their fields, organization meetings, exchange workshops, and markets, for which I could grasp the nuances and details of the agroecological transitions happening in the territory before, during, and after the pandemic.

During fieldwork, I lived in Cuniburo, a community in the parish of Cangahua, in southern Cayambe, at the home of the Villalba Falcón family from July 2019 to March 2020. Besides undertaking an ethnography, I initiated a collaborative project to explore the meaning of "good living" (from Kichwa sumak kawsay) for Kayambi chakareras and to develop an ethnobotanical catalog documenting the medicinal and culinary uses of their crops. I conducted 20 semi-structured interviews, divided into two phases.

In the first phase, I carried out "walking interviews" in the home gardens of chakareras with the highest biodiversity among agroecological producers from the northern and southern parishes of Cayambe. Walking interviews, a type of "go-along" interview Kusembach (2003), are particularly relevant to enable participants describe the environment while also using visual methods (Clark and Emmel 2010). While walking through the chakras (home gardens) with them, I photographed the plants and asked about the species and varieties cultivated, their uses, benefits, harvest times, and how they obtained their seeds.

Beyond facilitating conversations about biodiversity in their chakras, these walking interviews often led naturally into the second phase of the semi-structured interviews. The script for this phase was designed around questions concerning personal, family, community, and environmental aspects of the chakareras' lives. Some of those interviews (both phases) happened before the pandemic, while others were conducted in 2021 and 2022. I had designed also a focus group, specifically for the review of the ethnobotanic catalog, that was postponed to after the pandemic and occurred in September 2024. This last one is not object of inquiry in this article.

The ethnographic material as well as these interviews were the basis for identifying the Cayambe context before and during the pandemic. The continuous virtual contact and interviews during field visits during some months of the pandemic and as well as virtual and personal informal conversations after the pandemic allowed me to accompany the changes the pandemic brought to Kayambis closely. The field visits happened in a few instances in January 2021 (undertaking all the recommended sanitary measures) and January 2022,

when researchers and local collaborators were vaccinated against the COVID-19 virus. The use of social media enabled virtual communication with agroecological producers as well as the collection of the news posted in the Facebook profile of the Cayambe municipality.

Both sets of interviews were manually codified and analyzed with the help of a Kayambi symbol used as a "system of knowledge organization" known as the "Andean cross", or the chakana. The chakana represents the annual calendar, where each quadrant corresponds to a quarter of the year, with the summer and winter solstices on the vertical axis and the spring and autumn equinoxes on the horizontal axes. The first quadrant relates to the nurturing of the family, the second to the nurturing of the community, the third to the nurturing of the chakra, and the fourth to the nurturing of Pachamama, often translated as Mother Earth or nature, which they rendered in Spanish as geobiodiversity. All these quadrants are permeated by the presence the ancestry and spirituality. Therefore, the collected information was classified according to quadrant it related the most, that is individuals' definitions and its relations with the family, the community, the chakra and the geobiodiversity.

Additional to the use of the chakana for organizing the information from the semi-structured interviews in general, the ethnographic notes for this article were revised following a chronological reasoning, that is, which actions were undertaken for enabling agroecological transitions in the canton before, during and after the pandemic and which stakeholders were involved in such transitions. Being external to Cayambe – that is, having inhabited the community of Cuniburo only before the pandemic and leaving the country during the months of lockdown – interfered on my ability to directly interact with chakareras. While before I had witnessed myself the kinds of processes that agroecological transitions have enabled in the territory, during the pandemic I relied mostly on their testimonies and the materials gathered online. A research assistant from Cayambe contributed with first-hand impressions as well as with some walking interviews. However, the fact that I had established a relationship of trust with chakareras prior to the pandemic, contributing to a project that was of their interest and not only undertaking ethnography for my own research interests, enabled a consistent long-term interaction also online, specially with the Villalba Falcón family.

> *Upon my return to Ecuador in February 2021, I visited Maria Gu, a chakarera living in the Pesillo community. Unfortunately, the COVID-19 pandemic was still happening, and I canceled the plans of making a focus group with chakareras to revise the material I had collected with them for the catalog we were organizing together. However, as Maria Gu had been a close collaborator, like Hilda Villalba, we agreed to meet, complying with all the recommended safety measures: open space, masks, no close contact, and hand sanitizer. The couple is known as "the scientists" in their community due to their interest in experimenting with plants and machines. They updated me on what had happened in their community and house during the pandemic; in summary, at the beginning (March 2020), they were stuck within communities and could not leave because they feared contamination. Nobody could enter the communities either, which caused them to worry about Maria Gu's son, who was serving in the army and impeded from visiting the family. They used to spend most of their days in the house and often walked to the páramos, where they were isolated from others but in contact with wild nature. In some of these walks, they came across species of fungi and plants, rare species in their experience, that sprouted in the apparent hopelessness and lull of the pandemic. Also, they had everything they needed in her chakra to eat well without being concerned about food contamination. I laughed with them, remembering how extremely worried I was while living in Quito and Brasilia, where I immediately washed all food packages upon returning from the supermarket. They proudly shared they had obtained a transport permit to travel to another canton at the beginning of the pandemic. The permit allowed them to provide grains and vegetables to their family members and neighbors in peri-urban neighborhoods in Quito. "In solidarity", they said. They also shared food with neighbors in the community, but in their view, city dwellers were the most disadvantaged.*

In this sense, ethnographic work proved to be a pertinent methodology for closely reviewing a context already altered by a previous agricultural change - the arrival and establishment of agroecological transitions in the territory. As the first impact of the pandemic was indeed a negative one (as I will show in the next sessions), undertaking ethnographic work allowed me to gain a detailed and nuanced view of what emerged as a change (different from the already ongoing changes) beyond such negative impacts and the possibilities

of agroecological transition as pertinent alternatives for hegemonic food systems.

Moreover, as this story shows, field visits during and after the pandemic were also crucial to capture and understand the changes that both the pandemic brought to the livelihoods and projects of chakareras as well as how the ongoing agroecological transitions also enabled navigating the challenges posed by the pandemic.

Research context

Cayambe is a canton located in the northern part of the Ecuadorian Andes, in the Pichincha province. It is constituted of different ecological levels, from 2,400 meters above sea level in the valley of the Pisque River to 5,400 meters above sea level on the imposing and icy Cayambe volcano. Cayambe is also the historical scene of agrarian conflicts in Ecuador, where the Ecuadorian Indigenous movement was born with the organization Federación Ecuatoriana de Índios (Ecuadorian Federation of Indians - FEI). Women like Dolores Cacuango and Transito Amaguaña[3] – Kayambi women whose biographies are enmeshed with the Indigenous struggle in the country – are the example and pride of most of the inhabitants who consider themselves Kayambi. The Kayambi territory, according to CPK estimates, is already made up of the territories of 170 communities that occupy areas in the cantons of Cayambe and Pedro Moncayo (Pichincha province), Otavalo and Ibarra (Imbabura province) and Chaco (Napo province).

The estimated population living in the Kayambi territory is 148,813, according to the Confederation of Kayambi People (CPK) and the Confederation of Indigenous Nationalities of Ecuador (CONAIE).[4] Most of the inhabitants are engaged in agricultural production, with emphasis on the production of flowers for export, milk and onion production for sale in the national market, and various foods – such as corn, potatoes, barley, wheat, oats and other foods – for self-consumption and sale at local fairs. The data regarding the population of the Kayambi territory remains incomplete due to its span across multiple cantons. The Cayambe municipality estimates that, in 2019, the canton population totaled 105,781 individuals, distributed in rural (50.6%) and urban (49.4%) areas (GADIP Cayambe 2020). According to the official census in 2010, 42.6% of the population was active in the primary sector in agricultural activities, while 32.34% was in the tertiary sector (which includes daily agricultural services for flower plantations, for instance). The secondary sector accounts for 14.39% of the population; 8.49% do not declare their activities, and 2.17% are classified as "new workers".

Around the 2000s, according to Hilda Villalba, the first women started to recover and build agroecological chakras.[5] Later, they would form groups of agroecological producers who dedicated themselves to the chakra biodiversity, which incorporated food from both the Andean diet and non-native vegetables. According to data from the municipality, based on the 2010 census, 14.5% of the productive area of Cayambe is dedicated to the production of short-cycle and fruit crops, such as onions, maize, wheat, barley, potatoes, quinoa, strawberries, beans, broccoli, chochos, peas, avocado, lemons, tree tomatoes, among others (GADIP Cayambe, 2015: 154). More individuals joined agroecological production to take advantage of this biodiverse farming

[3] Biographies of FEI founders and leaders attest they were also responsible for founding the sindicatos (peasant unions) and leading Indigenous uprisings in Cayambe (Becker, 2008). Transito Amaguaña worked in the north of Cayambe while Dolores Cacuango worked in the south of the canton.

[4] According to Instituto Nacional de Estadísticas y Censos (National Institute of Statistics and Censuses) in the 8th National Census in Ecuador (2022), the population that self-identified as Indigenous in the Cayambe canton is 37.339 individuals, equivalent to 35.5% of the cantonal population. However, Indigenous organizations consider the census to underestimate the size of the indigenous population in the country, as identifying with the category Indigenous still carries the negative connotation that "índios" had. As a colonial concept, índio (Indian) is laden with derogatory meanings: being an illiterate (in Spanish education), a traditional person that works the land and lives in a rural area, the servant of a landlord (a private organization or the state), etc. Being recognized as Indigenous, not as índio, is still a fight for Indigenous peoples.

[5] Generally, it is the small plot of land an Indigenous family cultivates for their subsistence, known in Western terms as a "garden." Furthermore, it is the house space where the Kayambi and other Andean peoples undertake productive and reproductive agricultural, medicinal, and spiritual activities. The self-identification "chakarera" relates to chakra, meaning "the one who takes care of the chakra".

tradition. In 2019, there were 13 identified agroecological groups, with about 160 qualified producers with agroecological cards and nearly 500 qualified producers in the initial stage of the agroecological transition.[6] In addition, 222 individuals organized in the Movimiento Cantonal de Mujeres (Cantonal Women's Movement – MCM hereafter), an association dedicated to women's organization that also promotes agroecological transitions in the canton. They produce for their families' consumption and sell at the agroecological fairs. The agroecological market used to take place in Cayambe city, in the central parks of parishes, and on roadsides.

Looking at the landscape of Cayambe from the highest altitudes, however, one can see an enormous number of greenhouses occupying large tracts of land. In 2015, according to data from the municipality, the canton had an area of 1,350km², of which 49.2% had distinct purposes: environmental conservation, anthropic use, watercourses, or unproductive land. Large plots of over 25 hectares account for 4% of the land and are used to produce roses and livestock farming. Rose production occupies mainly the plains of volcanic deposits. Thus, valley lands that formerly belonged to the colonial haciendas benefited from favorable soil for production and had access to water streams. Nowadays, such lands belong to flower plantations and cattle ranches (GADIP Cayambe, 2015: 163).

The rose production in Ecuador started in 1984, when the first companies established greenhouses in Cayambe and Tabacundo cantons. It spread to other provinces during the 90s, but the most extensive plantations are still in this region. Flowers are the country's second-largest agricultural export commodity, and their "export volume has been converted into the agricultural product with the greatest increase in production in the last decade" (Yagual et al., 2018). An international commodity, these flowers hold the sixth place among Ecuadorian export products (equivalent to US$937 million, 3.84% of the national exports) in 2021.[7]

Located south of the Cayambe canton, Cangahua parish is home to the Cayambe Coca National Park. This ecological reserve protects one of the main water supplies in the country.[8] Cangahua parish accounts for 42 communities and is inhabited by 16,231 individuals, in 5,533 homes (INEC 2010), in an area of 33,235 hectares (GAD Cangahua 2014, 135). Compared to other Cayambe parishes, Cangahua's population has higher levels of impoverishment, mainly due to its agrarian structure. Nowadays, plain and fertile lands belong to foreign landowners who use them mainly for flower plantations, which total eleven companies in this parish. On the way to Villalba-Falcón's house in Cuniburo, we can see the two flower plantations, Falconfarms Ecuador S.A. and Rosaprima Cia Ltda. They are the country's second and third biggest rose companies. Falconfarms has an annual profit of $35.7 million and the same amount in assets. Rosaprima has around 1,200 employees and has an annual profit of $28.2 million and $28.8 million in assets. Community inhabitants remain at the margins of these flower plantations, often owning pending small plots of land with a fragile soil structure (Gualavisi, 2016). In those properties, they reproduce a variety of crops for subsistence and the local markets in their chakras. In the communities found in higher altitudes, some comuneros invest in the production of onions for the national market.

In the next session, I will present what changed from a context in which agro-ecological transformations were already in place. Both agroecological groups and fresh-cut flower plantations expanded their activities during

[6] To ensure that producers comply with requirements to identify themselves as agroecological and to assure consumers of agroecological product quality, a Participatory Guarantee System (SPG) of certification was put in place in 2018. The SPG technical and ethical committees are responsible for undertaking the monitoring process and the data analysis, respectively. The technical committee comprises the chakareras and technical members of the municipality. At the same time, the ethical committee also integrates external members of an institution that works as a neutral body for evaluating the stages of the agroecological transition of chakras. Chakareras receive other inspectors in their houses to collect the data in a sort of peer-review process. Still, this data is analyzed externally through a "sustainability of complex socio-environmental systems framework" called MESMIS (López-Ridaura, 2002) Through MESMIS, each producer receives a score, which informs consumers whether the producers are "fully agroecological", "in transition to agroecology", or in the "initial stage" (López Toaquisa, 2019).

[7] Available at https://oec.world/en/profile/country/ecu?depthSelector1=HS4Depth&tradeScaleSelector1=tradeScale0&yearSelector1=2021, last access on September 27th, 2023.

[8] Available at https://www.ambiente.gob.ec/parque-nacional-cayambe-coca/, last access on September 27th, 2023.

the pandemic. However, the capacity of fresh-cut flower plantations to continue fully paradoxically depended on the re-localization of food systems in the indigenous communities.

What happened during the pandemic?

Temporary increase on food insecurity

In the first weeks following the sanitary measures implemented in Ecuador , Kayambi people living in indigenous communities had difficulties accessing different food products. With the entrance and exit of communities more restricted, it became more difficult for inhabitants whose diet depended on food bought daily. That was especially true for those living in the highlands, physically accessing mainstream food channels (food stores and wholesale marketplace). Elders, particularly those already in a vulnerable situation regarding food security, became a target public for food distribution initiatives that emerged within communities and counted on the municipality's leadership.

Besides, fresh-cut flower plantation laborers also faced difficulty accessing food because their income was reduced considerably during the confinement. Working with a contract of limited duration, those laborers do not have work stability. Most laborers are recruited for specific time frames (in seasons of high demand), with daily or weekly payments, and often do extra hours to increase their salary. Some authors (Korovkin, 2003; Friedemann-Sánchez, 2009; Tutillo, 2010; Gualavisi, 2016) describe in detail this labor's working contracts and conditions largely reliant on female work. Unable to leave their houses to work on the flower plantations because of the sanitary measures, their income was not enough to guarantee food purchases. Additionally, considering women have been the main ones responsible for households' food security and, paradoxically, are the ones most affected by food insecurity worldwide (Broussard, 2019), a situation that is also replicated in Indigenous communities in Ecuador (Kuhnlein, 2017), the inability to access food markets and reduced income increased food insecurity among the Kayambi people.

Surplus accumulation

While consumers had struggled to reach mainstream food markets, producers also had difficulty releasing their products. Onion producers in the highlands had little transport available, and even when it was the case, they were impeded from crossing province boundaries due to sanitary restrictions. Milk producers faced an even more serious challenge, as their production should be released daily. Agroecological producers who normally used to sell their products at farmers' markets on certain days of the week and in urban settings encountered the same restrictions. The less connection with public authorities, the fewer possibilities one had to release their production.

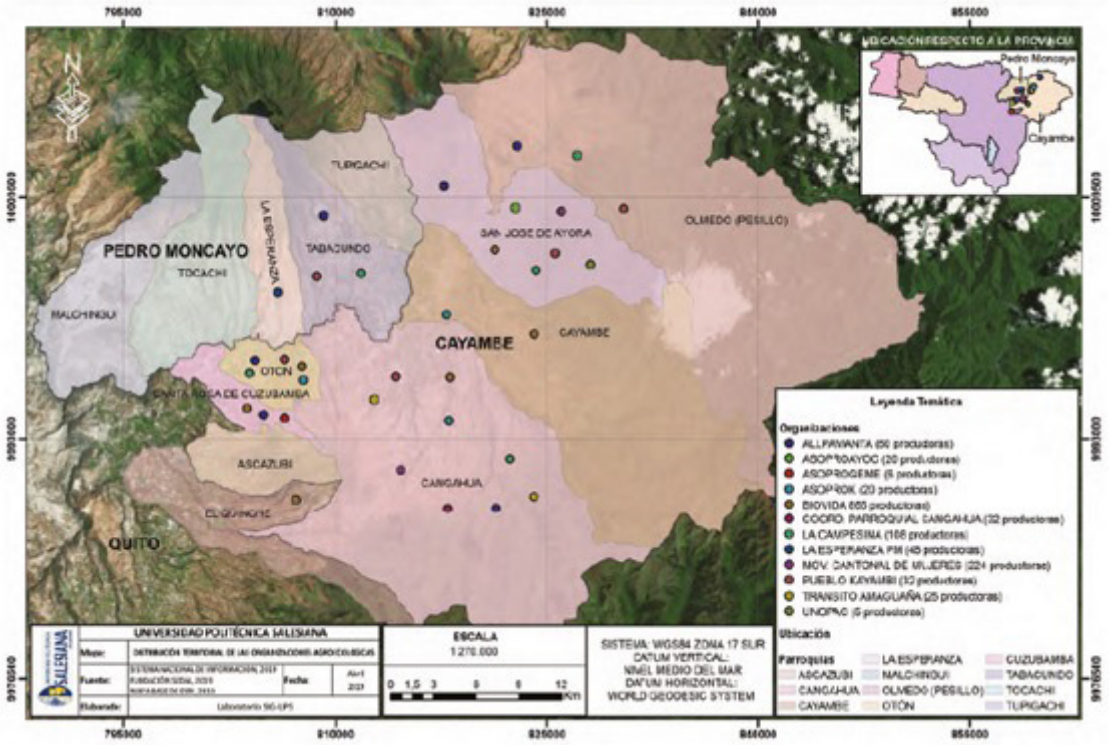
However, I recall that food supermarkets were fully functioning while I was in confinement in Quito in March 2020. Angus Lyall et al. (2021) show how the national government eased curfews and other sanitary restrictions for the country's three most prominent food companies while maintaining strict sanitary restrictions in the distribution channels of the agroecological producers. Therefore, while consumers and producers have not yet found creative solutions for coping with the sanitary restrictions and keeping their market interactions outside the hegemonic food system, there was a concentration of wealth in the hands of large food companies. In this case, the worldwide food surplus accumulation trend (Montenegro de Wit, 2021) was also confirmed.

Decentralization of the community market

This map shows where agroecological producers from fourteen different agroecological organizations were allowed to place their food markets in the Cayambe territory before the COVID-19 pandemic. Although

the public ordinance[9] allowed them to set up their food markets in stable public locations, such as parking lots, parks, and squares, in 2019, chakareras considered the market infrastructure unsatisfactory. They had received some subsidies from partner institutions (such as NGOs, foundations, and the municipality) to buy frame tents, tables, and other materials for their food markets, but a place for storing and cleaning products, for instance, was unavailable. From their viewpoint, such temporary structures were still insufficient to assert their market relevance before consumers.

Figure 1 Agroecological groups in the territory of the Kayambi People. (Requelme et al., 2019:24)



With the COVID-19 pandemic, the infrastructure of these food markets changed, and decentralization ensued. Reviewing sanitization became urgent, and the temporary structures of the markets had to be improved to ensure the health and safety of producers and consumers. At first, the municipality tried to control the agroecological food markets. They concentrated sellers in one ample space in the northern part of Cayambe town, with "safe distance" between stands, a sanitizing cabinet placed at the entrance to sanitize everyone who walked in, and producers were placed a few meters away from consumers.

As a result, the agroecological food markets began to lose their role as places for the community, where producers and consumers would get together, eat together, exchange, and interact. Its commercial function overshadowed its relational aspect, which became central in the extraordinary context. Hence, in the first moment, the purpose of the agroecological food markets was solely to provide an environment where trade transactions could happen without the risk of virus contamination.

Although chakareras usually consider contamination arguments with prudence, in this context, they took advantage of public discourses around it to expand agroecology in the territory. Marta Tutillo argues that "without facing flower plantations in the canton, one that says agroecological products were freed from agrochemicals is telling 'lyrism', because the soil, the water, and the air are already polluted" (personal

[9] The "Ordinance for the use of public spaces for the commercialization of agroecological products in the municipality of Cayambe" was approved in 2018. Since then, agroecological producers can obtain legal authorization to commercialize their products in public spaces and other aspects of certification became regulated in the territory.

conversation, September 2019). Following this reasoning, chakareras consider their food "healthy" because it has less agrochemicals, and also because they are produced in an environment where multiple beings co-exist in harmony. They had the same approach regarding the virus, and tried to develop natural medicines that would slow down the action of the virus, depending on its interaction with the body. They did not, however, deny the relevance of preventive measures to impede the spread of the virus, especially because they knew the local health system would not be able to assist a great number of infected patients. Considering that, it was necessary to disperse human contact, and the best way of doing it was decentralizing their markets and the interactions within them.

Figure 2 Agroecological food market in Cayambe, 2020. Screenshot of GADIP Cayambe Facebook, 2020.

Then, what ensued was a decentralization of agroecological food markets, which began to emerge within communities, finding a place in communal houses or school patios. Experienced chakareras were responsible for integrating new participants and organizing a rotation system among them to ensure equitable and secure market access for producers and consumers. Their inspiring example instilled a renewed interest in agroecology within the communities, a process that occurred in similar fashion in other contexts during the COVID-19 pandemic (Levidow, Sansolo and Schiavinatto, 2022). Chakareras recounted that their neighbors showed increased enthusiasm for cultivating vegetables, resulting in a surge in demand for seedlings. Prior to the pandemic, local NGOs and the municipality were the primary sources of seedling donations which probably generated patterns of paradoxical dependent autonomy from these institutions (Lind 2005). During the crisis, however, chakareras had to assume the responsibility for seedling growth and reproduction to ensure the sustainability of their chakras and meet the growing local demand for their produce. A collaboration between the municipal and provincial governments and the Ministry of Agriculture and Livestock[10] provided them with some fertilizers and seedlings. Nevertheless, the budget initially allocated for agroecology was redirected to funding biosecurity measures to prevent the spread of COVID-19.

New incomers, initially, tend to be enthusiastic about producing agroecologically since the local ordinance guarantees property tax exemption for producers who achieve certain stages of transition to agroecology. The tax exemption is granted to chakras well evaluated in the cantonal Participatory Guarantee System (Sistema Participativo de Garantía – SPG). However, it is not yet known what advantages this brings to agroecological producers since it is necessary to have a property deed to benefit from the exemption. If

[10] Information from the social networks of GADIP Cayambe. Available at https://www.facebook.com/watch/?v=942358612876342, accessed on August 25, 2020.

Cayambe follows the same trend as the rest of the country,[11] and considering that women tenure only 25% of agricultural properties in Ecuador, it is unlikely that they are benefiting from the acquired right.

Breaking of resistance to adopting agroecology.

Before the pandemic, agroecological producers and activists were often criticized for romanticizing food systems' transformation. In Cayambe, during small-scale producers' meeting I encountered arguments against agroecology because it was seen as an elitist form of production, that targeted a "market niche". Besides, since the income resulting from sales of agroecological food was not extraordinary, local producers tended to be more resistant to engaging in agroecological transitions.

Despite that, before and during the COVID-19 pandemic, chakareras received expansion proposals in two formats (expansion at the field level and by incorporating more producers) and each agroecological group engaged with the proposals differently. Before the pandemic, I once participated in a meeting between them and council members of the cantonal legislative house, who offered to facilitate expansion of agroecological initiatives by incorporating two types of consumers into their portfolio. The first type would be online users that could buy "on-demand" baskets via an online application to be developed by a partner start-up. The consumer should use the online application to choose the products they wanted, and a basket should then be prepared with products of different chakareras and delivered to them.

Such a "community-supported agriculture" (CSA) model has been widespread as an alternative that makes food systems local (Desmarais, Claeys and Trauger, 2017). Chakareras had already been involved in CSA with other partners (universities and restaurants) when they received this first proposal. Despite being a supply-based scheme, as the baskets should be made according to the availability of products and would not necessarily imply a yield increase, chakareras did not receive this proposal well. The reason was that it would include a faceless intermediary they thought would represent an employer. They had higher regard for their autonomy and direct relationship with the consumer than for increasing their sales.

Also, before the pandemic, the municipality invited them to engage in another CSA proposal: to produce food to feed workers at flower plantations. This second type of consumer would therefore be the plantation farms, that would buy the chakarera's produce daily to provide daily meals for their workers. The intention was to massify local production via consumption demand, reducing transportation costs for both the chakareras and the plantations farms. Instead of producing only for self-consumption and selling at the agroecological food markets, chakareras would have a guaranteed market for their products.

Hilda Villalba recounted that after much deliberation, they rejected the proposal for several reasons. Firstly, it would pressure them to increase their production, requiring more labor, which, intensified, could result in physical strain. Secondly, to increase production, they would require water, land, and other inputs that they did not have access to because, ironically, they were concentrated in the flower plantations in question. Thirdly, without means for expanding, they would have to intensify their practices, changing their production relations not only quantitatively (pursuing more yields per hectare) but also qualitatively (imposing temporalities of external demand on the rhythms of the chakra). Finally, although it could promote a local change in food systems, it would be at the expense of exploiting chakareras and their chakras.

During the pandemic, they were proposed the same idea, and this time they decided to accept it, for two reasons: there was an increment on food insecurity in the region and also because new producers were joining the movement. Such a proposal was another form of massifying agroecology by opening markets to an increased pool of producers. Instead of intensifying agroecology, it would be extending and multiplying it.

[11] According to the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations (FAO) statistics on Gender and Land Rights, in the 2000 census, 25% of land ownership was under the name of women. Available at http://www.fao.org/gender-landrights-database/data-map/statistics/en/, accessed on August 25, 2020.

In fact, that is one of their main concerns at present: ensuring their family would have enough land to follow the same pathway, staying in the countryside instead of facing hardship with underpaid urban jobs. Reversing migration and enhancing the lives of rural families through agroecology were some of their political bets. In addition to access to land, another factor that worried the chakareras was that more producers joined the movement without becoming politically engaged. Being convinced of the agroecology advantages is not evidence of political engagement, since many smallholders adopt agroecology envisaging mainly monetary gains.

Those are ways of massifying agroecology through "out-scaling" – when a growing number of social groups across a territory join in on horizontal alliances, promoting changes in the practices of food production, distribution and consumption (López-García, 2020). A social movement is strengthened when such horizontal alliances are built not solely due to market incentives but because individuals become politically convinced of the need to transform agriculture, food systems, and beyond. These processes were reinforced during the COVID-19 pandemic in Cayambe when more people joined the movement after experiencing the hardships of the food crisis.

In addition to the conjunctural pressure, agroecology became a more realistic project for formerly resistant peasants because chakareras work became exemplary. Their example of solidarity towards community residents facing food insecurity raised questions about the presupposition that agroecological initiatives are inherently classicist and elitist. Besides, chakareras became the very source of seeds (again, the lack of access to formal seed markets led producers to search for alternative sources) and also their socio-economic and agro-ecological knowledge became recognized as an expertise. Hence, serving as an example, chakareras promoted a political awareness about the pragmatic possibilities for producers turning into agroecological transitions and to consumers about the benefits of short-circuits in food systems.

Solidarity with peri urban residents

In addition to addressing food insecurity within communities, Kayambis living in the countryside also provided for peri urban residents in the province of Pichincha. Besides sharing their grains and tubers with their Indigenous individuals living in communities in the outskirts of cities like Quito and Ibarra, chakareras also engaged on preparing food baskets with products from several chakras to be also distributed among Indigenous city dwellers. As Maria Gu recounted, because her son could not enter the community due to sanitary restrictions, her family decided to provide not only for him, but also for other neighbors they identified were facing difficulty to access food. Such connection between the Indigenous communities in the countryside and the city centers (Colloredo-Mansfeld, 1999) already existed prior to the pandemic, and the solidary practices were shown also in other extraordinary events, such as the national strike that happened in October 2019 (Araujo and Da Silva, 2022). When the pandemic emerged, Kayambis strived to active their network connections, reciprocating the solidarity Indigenous communities have demonstrated in previous moments.

Exchange and trueque amongst regions

Chakareras recounted that seed and produce exchange continue to happen amongst agroecological producers during the pandemic and thanks to that they could overcome their own challenges on reproducing a biodiverse chakra. Such a practice, locally called *trueque*,[12] has historical roots and is one manifestation of the reciprocity principle that constitutes Kayambi people economic values.

[12] Emilia Ferraro (2011) similarly identifies that this form of barter exists between the exchange forms observed in "markets" and "gifting". Furthermore, she explains, "trueque entails ideas, values, and visions of the transacting 'other' and of 'oneself', as well as different perceptions of the economic process itself".

In addition to solidarity between comuneros, reciprocity between producers within and outside the Andean region became more evident as a relevant source for agricultural alternative systems. Hilda Villalba recounted that, under the leadership of the national Indigenous organization (CONAIE), regional organizations in the Andes and the Amazon (Ecuarunari and CONFENIAE respectively) collaborated to promote trueques between communities.

Considering the ecological microverticality[13] characteristic of the Andes and the complementarity between different ecological floors in Ecuador (Murra, 2013), food production varies across regions. Therefore, species and varieties mainly produced in the Andes became available for Amazonian communities and vice-versa, guaranteeing not only food security for consumers but reinforcing Indigenous autonomy and management of peoples' food sovereignty.

Expantion of agricultural frontier

Figure 3 Food baskets for Quito dwellers, April 2020.

Photo by Maria Guatemal

When I returned to Cayambe at the beginning of 2022, I visited the community of Cochapamba, located in the high parts of the canton. Cochapamba has lower temperatures than most communities, and the agroecological conditions only allow for a few varieties of crop production. There, I could observe the incredible expansion of greenhouses into the communities, as more comuneros begin to invest in flower production on their properties. Even a small plot of land of 1-ha has been sufficient for such an enterprise, and because of that, it became attractive during the COVID-19 pandemic. Former daily workers in flower plantations acquired the technical knowledge to produce roses and began to use it for their benefit. Thomas Aules, an inhabitant of Cochapamba, explained that each hectare would require an investment of around $10,000.

The expansion of micro flower farms within the communities' frontiers was already happening before the pandemic, but accelerated during it. Since the land purchase seems less interesting to flower plantations – since communities had imposed a limitation to their expansion – their owners started to incentivize the expansion of the businesses within communities through contract farming. Former laborers of those plantations, benefiting from the technical knowledge acquired during their work, began to install greenhouses in their chakras and establish contracts with flower plantations to sell them the finished commodity. In this sense, despite being advertised as a participatory alternative for smallholders to engage in large scale business, the cooptation of community dwellers through contract farming has been denounced by chakareras as a renewed form of land grabbing happening in the Kayambi territory.

What continues after the COVID-19 pandemic?

Even before the COVID-19 pandemic was controlled with the vaccination in mass, the "old" normality related to food systems seem to return. Even amidst the still critical scenarios of new waves of contamination with new variants of the virus, the informal sector in the cities was fully working already. Food crises in

[13] The subsistence apparatus had a concentric structure: a "micro-vertical" organization at the center, a system of generalized exchange connecting the center with ecologically complementary zones of moderately distant chiefdoms, and a long-distance organization to attain exotic good from beyond the working radius of people with agricultural commitments (Salomon, 1986:13).

other contexts have also generated alternatives. On the one hand, during the Argentinian crisis in 2001, for instance, the *comedores comunitarios* (community kitchens) were an alternative that city dwellers found to come together, and fight hunger caused by hyperinflation. Some of these efforts evolved into other forms of work collectivization, while others were temporary measures that only lasted for the duration of the crisis. On the other hand, Cuba had become an example in the agroecological literature, which developed peasant-to-peasant methods for tackling food crisis after the end of the USSR and the beginning of the "special period", when the country faced US blockades for importing food and agricultural inputs (Mier Y Terán Giménez Cacho et al., 2018). In this view, some questions emerge: did the agroecological transitions that have been happening in Cayambe since the beginning of the 2010s transform after the COVID-19 pandemic? If so, how? From the changes that happened during the pandemic, which of them resisted the reinstallation of the hegemonic food regimes? Are those changes enduring?

The work the Kayambi People Confederation started doing towards mitigating food insecurity continues to be in their agenda: their workshops for forming teachers to work with families on the revalorization of local varieties and native recipes are still being offered as a regular activity. Teachers from kindergartens continue to have access to an intercultural methodology developed specifically to address food insecurity and malnutrition in the territory.

During the pandemic, individual consumption of agroecological products increased within communities. The proximity of community markets to comuneros' houses and seeing the sellers as their neighbors resulted in consumers and producers fostering closer relationships, to the point that, community markets still endured when I returned to Cayambe in 2022. The municipality also incentivized CSA, but this time as intermediaries between consumers and chakareras. These out-scaling initiatives seem to hold after the pandemic, which leads to other questions to draw longitudinal comparisons and contribute to debates on the *longue durée* of agroecological transitions.

Meanwhile, the decentralization of the agroecological markets was sustained by the municipal government after the agroecological groups pressured it. The markets that existed prior to the pandemic were reinstalled, expanded and more consolidated. Hence, agroecological markets are happening more times throughout the week and the whole weekend, which opened more opportunity for old and new incomers to experiment with different forms of marketing their produce.

Consequently, more producers adhered to the agroecological groups – both the Women's Cantonal Movement and the Producers Council reported an increase on their membership – generating the need for the political formation of new incomers about the role of a political agroecology. More than an economic opportunity, agroecology is being consolidated in the territory as an alternative to hegemonic food systems. Adopting agroecology means, in this territory, working for the recuperation of a biodiverse chakra as well as the valorization of local species and native recipes. Moreover, it is also the entry point for remembering and recovering ancestral practices and knowledges related to taking care of nature. In this view, the agroecological groups, with the support of local and national NGOs and the municipal government, began to offer a series of workshops for new incomers to acquire practical and theoretical knowledge about agroecology so their economic engagement with agroecology was also coupled with their politicization about it.

Even though chakareras have inspired out-scaling agroecology in Cayambe by being *exemplary* and engaged in market decentralization for "local agroeconomical dynamization" (López-García et al. 2020), they remain critical of the sudden increase in producers joining the agroecological groups, mainly because the SPG requires a level of participation and engagement with the movement that demands commitment. As mentioned, they remain skeptical of participatory methods that are lauded as a transformative for out-scaling agroecology.

Regarded not only as practice, science, and social movement but as a framework that is transdisciplinary,

participatory, and action-oriented (Mendez et al., 2015), agroecology enters a fourth phase. According to this perspective, scholars have warned that participatory-oriented research and actions in agroecology should encompass a shared interest between research participants, a belief in the power of collective action, a commitment to participation, the practice of humbleness, and the establishment of trust and responsibility. Furthermore, to sustain it for extended periods, time and resources are required, as well as the facilitation of processes with multiple actors. Finally, development organizations and public institutions that do not fully integrate such a transdisciplinary approach to agroecology often pose challenges to a bottom-up out-scaling approach (Méndez et al., 2017).

Therefore, the increased number of producers joining agroecological groups generates numerous complications. More producers doing agroecology leads to an out-scaling through the increased supply. However, finding market innovations, such as the CSA initiatives that emerged during the pandemic, seems to be a temporary solution to solve the market competition problem. Additionally, ensuring quality through the SPG process requires time and resources for the training of new inspectors and of new incomers to fulfill the technical criteria necessary to receive their "stage" recognition (such as building a post-harvest space or space for raising animals). In short, nobody can become agroecological producer overnight.

Indeed, even the most experienced chakareras sometimes complain they do not have enough to bring to the market, when their yields are insufficient, on a particular week, to justify paying transportation costs. Reaching an optimal stage is rare, and becoming "fully agroecological", where one can work in a fully developed chakra, is difficult to attain. It is challenging to reach the point where the relation between crop productivity, chakra labor uses, and market responsibilities does not represent a feeling of self-exploitation. This type of expertise is developed with time, and with understanding nature's multi-temporalities.

Moreover, even though the municipality supports them in developing agroecological production technically, chakareras still do not have a market incentive that would allow them to create, maintain and sustain their productive initiatives. Apart from the ordinance, no other public policy to support agroecology is concretized into a bonus or credit program, for instance. There are plans to implement a redistributive policy, in which taxes are collected from the flower plantations and allocated to agroecological production, but this has not yet materialized. During COVID-19 pandemic, they had to rely on the growth of their seedlings for reproduction, for instance. So, if they do not have sufficient market incentives for agroecology, why do they continue to do it?

I argue that they initiate their engagement with agroecology in their houses, with domestic needs in mind, more than incentivized by external circumstances. Since they are proposing these alternatives in their houses, it can completely reshape their lives. Their engagement is embedded in the identification process with this political subjectivity. In addition to producing agroecologically, they identify a reconnection with their memories, with the ways previous generations made it possible to raise their families and endure oppression through taking care of the chakra, the community, and the Pachamama and vice-versa.

Chakareras are thus politically convinced of agroecology. Their example is based on relationality and affection for the body, the land and the territory, and their agroecological engagement stems from such values. It is not an approach toward the external consumer – obviously, they do respond to those consumers who decide to integrate a "value chain" – but an approach toward themselves first. For those reasons, chakareras are skeptical of out-scaling without a politicization process, where new incomers would do not understand and share a collective awareness of agroecology as a political project for transforming capitalist, racist, colonial, and patriarchal structures.

The process of politicizing agroecology in Cayambe is unique because it is a novel one in Ecuador. However, it is situated in a broader political conjuncture, which Indigenous and other social movements have fostered

in the country since the beginning of the 2000s. The incorporation of sumak kawsay and the Rights of Nature into the national normativity enabled Indigenous peoples to articulate discourses of autonomy and sovereignty into concrete practices of interculturality and plurinationality, such as intercultural education, Indigenous justice, and economic pluralism, among others yet to be documented.

According to Richard Intriago et al. (2017) the principle of *sumak kawsay*[14] worked as a framework for the articulation of the Agroecological Collective of Ecuador, formed in 2007, and paved the way for a new law about agroecology in the country in 2012, the Organic Law about the Food Sovereignty Regime (*Ley Orgánica del Régimen de Soberanía Alimentaria*). Similarly, other authors (Giunta, 2014; McKay, Nehring and Walsh-Dilley, 2014; Peña, 2017) have reported that the institutionalization of food sovereignty, starting in the Plurinational and Intercultural Conference on Sovereignty (*Conferencia Plurinacional e Intercultural para la Soberanía*) from 2009 to 2012, has been permeated by essential contributions from various sectors of the Indigenous movement in the country. According to them, sumak kawsay has been at the base of the discussion about food sovereignty in the country.

Despite being regarded as a top-down approach, this method of scaling up agroecology, which aims to build political leverage and agency while promoting the institutionalization of experiences and the development of public policies (López-García 2020), seems to be appropriated by chakareras in their day-to-day discourses about agroecology. It allows them to define their political subjectivity as embedded in a larger framework of national politics. In this sense, despite being a localized alternative, the experience of chakareras regarding agroecological transitions speaks to more extensive changes in the country, communicating with cross-country experiences. That is what chakareras do in their daily lives, exchange with other groups at the community, parish, and cantonal levels, and with other agroecological collectives and experiences around the country. They share and expose what happens in their houses, thus connecting, comparing, differentiating, and identifying with others pursuing similar political goals.

While Ferguson et al. (2019) interpret such politicization as a complementary and interwoven merge of up-scaling and out-scaling approaches, other authors construe it as the formation of a "political agroecology" (Rivera-Ferre, 2018; González De Molina and Lopez-Garcia, 2021; Levidow, Sansolo and Schiavinatto, 2022). Adding to these views, I draw attention to the scale of agroecology in chakareras' perspectives, which goes from corporal (eating healthy) to territorial (healing the nature).

For these reasons, the dynamics between community dwellers with the expansion of the agricultural frontier through contract farming are worth investigating. The extent and impact of such expansion still needs to be assessed more thoroughly, for which mixed methods research would be an important contribution. In some instances, farmers abandoned the flower business after the pandemic because the capital return was insufficient to sustain the fields.

Conclusion

In the Ecuadorian Andes, as in other parts of the world, the production of global commodities stopped during the COVID-19 pandemic. Producing roses in the middle of a global health crisis has become unimportant. Since workers could not go to the flower plantations, their source of income became scarce. In the search for an economic alternative, they found that a small production in the backyard was one solution to prevent starvation in the rural areas and the peripheries of cities.

Contrasting agro-ecological models emerged more consistently during the COVID-19 pandemic. On the

[14] Sumak kawsay is an expression from the Kichwa language and is commonly translated to "buen vivir" in Spanish and "good living" in English It may have different meanings, primarily "life in plenitude" (Macas 2010) or "harmonious life" (Dávalos 2011, Viteri et al. 1992). In 2008, sumak kawsay was introduced as one of the basic principles of the new Ecuadorian Constitution to describe development policies.

one hand, COVID-19 pandemic exposed frauds and flaws of the current global agri-food system. In different contexts, for instance, it was possible to observe the concentration of market power in a small number of large agribusiness corporations. In Cayambe, I observed agrarian frontiers expansion within Indigenous communities – a pattern to which Tania Li (2014) had brought attention before the pandemic. According to decolonial perspectives, the modern/colonial capitalist system depends on racialized forms of labor. Due to these characteristics, the dominant agrifood system exacerbated racialized vulnerabilities (Montenegro de Wit, 2021).

On the other hand, the pandemic also highlighted positive dynamics, within and at the margins of the global agrifood system, the urgency of changing extractive agriculture, and the possibility of expanding agroecology through smallholding farming. In Ecuador Angus Lyall et al. (2021) identified trends in urban groups and collectives that, associated with agroecological producers, provided healthy and affordable food to low-income neighborhoods, which resulted in "spatial and social 're-localization' practices that challenge the hegemony of conventional food circuits." In this context, Kayambi chakareras managed to gain social leverage and visibility and expand agroecology at the local level.

Additionally, different forms of solidarity and reciprocity emerged during the pandemic amongst consumers and producers from Kayambi communities. Despite being apparently marginal, the principles of care,[15] solidarity, complementarity, and reciprocity are underlying the lives of individuals from several different societies to different degrees. During the pandemic of COVID-19, the necessity of care work for sustaining life worldwide, for instance, became even more evident. In this thesis, I describe how the Kayambi people chose to emphasize those principles in their political projects.

The main response to transforming food systems was to re-localize food production, distribution, and consumption, and turn it into agricultural alternatives such as agroecology. Agroecology, which had previously been regarded as a return to "backward agriculture", turned out to be more relevant as a source of life alternatives. However, agroecology is not a new solution. Like other life alternatives, it relies on economic values that scholars have studied for a long time. It relies on some market structures, on the local dynamics more than global ones, on solidarity among producers and between producers and consumers, on strengthening connections among regional intermediaries, and on reciprocity among humans and other-beings and other-than-beings. Moreover, agroecology as practiced by chakareras is based on various notions and practices of care, and as such, it is a matter of care (Puig de la Bellacasa, 2017). In this sense, agroecology is an alternative because it departs from capitalist values as it depends on and predicts the need for the reproduction and recognition of plural economic values. Such recognition has been an endeavor of critical scholars for more than a century.

In this view, this article contributes to decentralize the hegemonic (capitalist-industrial) food systems as the main source of food security. Through the Cayambe case, I described how non-capitalist economic forms continue to exist despite the resiliency of the hegemonic system, that as a matter of fact, depend on such economic forms to exist. Without the solidarity and reciprocity within communities, life amidst the crisis would be poorly reproduced. In his sense, recalling Quijano's teachings: the capitalist system is hegemonic but not homogenic and it matters to put other economic forms, striving at the margins, to the center of our analysis.

[15] Looking into permaculture practices, Puig de la Bellacasa's book explores the simultaneous difficulties of decentering human agency as the starting point of care, situating it within the interrelations of other-beings and other-than-beings – whose biological labor that materializes care –, and enriching the interpretations of care as "keeping maintenance work, affectivity and ethics together" (2017, 217–18, my emphasis). In this line, the word "matter" in this article often means both "the importance of" something and how it materializes.

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