Grassroots food initatives at the rural-urban interface: Potential and constraints in Ankara

Paper first received: 30 November 2023; Accepted: 24 April 2024; Published in final form: 15 December 2024
https://doi.org/10.48416/ijsaf.v30i1.564

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Abstract

This article explores how grassroots associations in the food sector, implementing practices such as solidarity economy and agroecology, have responded to the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic in Ankara. The COVID-19 pandemic had a major impact on Turkey's food supply chain, and this was particularly evident in a city like Ankara, where green spaces and agricultural production have shrunk dramatically over the past 30 years. The grassroots associations were born in response to the consumption of land and the commodification of food chains over the last 30 years. They aim to propose alternative practices to the dominant policies in the food chains, promoting local inputs, the protection of urban agricultural spaces, environmentally friendly techniques, short supply chains and urban-rural interactions. During the pandemic, the practices promoted by these groups have proved effective and resilient, managing to find new spaces and attention. We argue that this resilience is linked to the very structure of these initiatives and highlights the fragility of neoliberal Turkish development policies in the food sector. However, these networks were effective thanks to the strong social cohesion made possible by their small size, which effectively managed the changes during the pandemic. Extending this model in the post-pandemic context poses difficulties. Moreover, although some of their practices seem to be valued and implemented by municipal institutions, there is a risk that they will be used to alleviate specific problems and lose the transformative charge that grassroots associations attribute to them.

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ISSN: 0798-1759 | This Journal is double blind refereed.

Introduction

This study analyses how networks of grassroots solidarity economy associations in the metropolitan municipality of Ankara dealt with the food price crisis triggered by the COVID-19 pandemic and aggravated by the start of the war in Ukraine and the unorthodox economic policies of the Turkish government. These factors led to skyrocketing inflation in food prices, which severely affected the socio-economic life of Turkey. The disruption of food chains during COVID-19 globally demonstrated the fragility of the current food system. The Turkish case is particularly interesting because the impact here has been very harsh due to sustained contraction of the agricultural sector coupled with unorthodox government economic policies. It can therefore provide interesting insights into opportunities for transformation in the post-COVID context.

We explore this issue through the lens of small grassroots solidarity economy associations in the metropolitan municipality of Ankara. These associations are increasing in importance in the food sector in Turkey, as government policies over the last 30 years have focused on strengthening corporations' capacity to export cash crops and prioritise the use of land for real estate investments and mining extraction rather than food production (Gajack and Peleck, 2019). Ankara is an advantageous point of observation for these dynamics: the city has faced a process of rapid urbanisation, but thanks to its geographical location and the attention paid to agricultural production in the early years of the republican period, it has maintained significant potential in terms of agricultural production (Sınacı Özfındık, 2019; Ribeiro et al., 2020). Grassroots associations present their activities as a revitalisation of urban farming, which was long an important activity in the geographical territory of the municipality of Ankara. We hypothesised that an investigation of how such efforts are impacted by the fluctuation of food prices could afford interesting insights into transformations of food systems in Turkey. Furthermore, we wished to ascertain whether the practices of these associations were proving to be resilient alternatives to the commodification of food and exposure to the market vagaries created by neoliberal reforms, and therefore whether they could offer guidance for the possible transformation of food policies in Ankara.

Scholars have recently analysed grassroots solidarity economy associations in relation to food chains in Ankara and their impact on food production (Atalan-Helicke and Abiral, 2021; Ay et al., 2023). In our research, we observed deep-rooted experiences and consolidated networks that already produced a good amount of practice and knowledge. We conducted an ethnographic assessment of these organisations: we collected most of the data between April 2022 and December 2023 and then started a still on-going process of discussion of them with the association involved. Although we noted structural limitations in term of the extension and impact of these experiences, we also saw their potential value in terms of advocacy and the promotion of alternative policies at the municipal level. Methodologically, we drew on classical ethnographic methods of anthropology, and particularly participant observations, as we are also members of some of the analysed associations. We worked together with activists and producers, exploring their social networks from within, as we assumed that only active engagement with them could lead to a full understanding of the knowledge and practices they produce on the ground. We started with cooperatives for food production and distribution of which we were already members, and then used snowball sampling to progressively contact wider networks of cooperatives relevant to our theoretical framework. We organised semi-structured interviews, participant observations, and discussions on the data with the participants, as the research also offered opportunities for self-reflection for them. In total, we interacted with ten associations and conducted interviews with 33 individuals, achieving variety both in terms of practices (i.e. food collectives, urban gardens, and cooperatives) and of the types of actors involved (i.e. producers, activists, and organisers). We triangulated the ethnographic data with documents produced by these networks of associations and with the existing literature. This article first contextualises the problem of food prices within the broader literature on moral economy, peasantry and food democracy. It then describes the main transformation of the food system in Ankara and the impact of the food price crisis that began in 2020. Finally, it offers an analysis of how associations have dealt with the food price crisis and the main consequences it has had for them, allowing us to draw some general

conclusions about their ability to deal with this issue.

Food, peasants, and agri-business from the neoliberal reforms of the 1980s to the COVID-19 pandemic: 'food regimes' under stress

Food exchange is at the centre of social life and, unsurprisingly, food prices have been a source of tension and revolt throughout history. The concept of 'moral economy' elucidates how deprivation of essentials, such as food, is generally deemed morally unacceptable and can consequently give rise to popular protests. James Scott's (1977) framing of 'moral economy' is rooted in the assumption that access to food must have been ensured in rural societies for which subsistence-oriented farming played a major role. However, the transition from a system in which everyone had access to land to produce what they needed for themselves, to a system in which the efficiency of the market was supposed to guarantee production volumes capable of providing food security for the whole of society, has often led to crises such as the frequent riots that Scott (1985) defines as 'peasants' revolts' when certain goods are not available on the expected terms. Globally, green revolutions and the liberalisation of food markets have shaped debates about food since the 1960s. These transformations boosted production to catch up with the growing global population but simultaneously led to the commodification of all elements of food chains, controlled and traded by a few powerful global actors. Philip McMichael (2009) uses the concept of 'food regimes' to describe this process, which has led to the rise of a small number of globally powerful agri-business actors specialised in specific crops or production inputs and exerting strong power. This process proceeded alongside a reduction of the agricultural workforce, with human labour replaced by machines, and consequent urbanisation. The focus of policymakers shifted to food security and famine prevention, based on the technocratic assumption that more efficient farming would boost production and prevent food shocks or famines.

This process significantly impacted the livelihood of rural communities, from which the first forms of resistance against it emerged. The first global peasant movements originated in Latin America and led to the creation of the large and influential La Via Campesina network, which linked peasant movements worldwide and played a major role in promoting the concept of 'food sovereignty' globally. The term 'peasant' connotes the idea that the people who work on the land do not produce exclusively for profit-making sales but rather base their livelihoods on broader control of the land with implicit resistance to the complete commodification of food production. Bernstein and Byres (2001) emphasise how the peasantry is not necessarily a conservative force protecting moral rules about food, but it has transformed over time with adaptations to different contexts and elaborations of original forms of both internal organisation and production. These movements are linked to political actors who criticise the massive exploitation of land and natural resources for its environmental impact and high social costs. The ideas of such movements initially emerged in a context where rural lifestyles intersected with indigenous customs and traditions based on a relationship with nature that is radically different from capitalist exploitation. They then spread in different forms and among other actors, united by the quest for localised and democratic control of the food chain (Resler and Hagolani-Albov, 2021; Oba and Özsoy, 2023). Hence, strategies such as direct interactions between buyers and producers or the promotion of agroecological techniques, which aim to regenerate most agricultural inputs, emerged as means of resistance to the control exerted by large corporations (Van Der Ploeg, 2021).

These practices originated to protect specific needs but gradually expanded and garnered attention among both global civil society and the urban dwellers constituting the final 'consumers' of foodstuffs. In addition to the idea of 'food sovereignty', which holds that each community has the right to produce and eat the food that they find to be culturally and ecologically suitable, the concept of 'food democracy' has become important. Food democracy stresses the need for all communities connected by food chains to play roles in the choices related to food, to assess the 'ecological risks and benefits', and consequently to 'respond collectively and accordingly' to those assessments. Hence, this concept does not contradict but rather complements food sovereignty, valuing the actions of 'urban food producers' as another means for progressing on paths to 'food system transformation' (Resler and Hagolani-Albov, 2021: 325). Among urban actors the commitment to a

different food chain emerged not only through the implementation of agroecological techniques and short chains in the green areas of cities, but also and more commonly through consumers' choices, the creation of food collectives, and what Jasmine Lorenzini (2019) defines as 'political lifestyles', such as veganism or vegetarianism. This framework reveals that current practices aimed at resisting the commodification of food chains may bring together rural workers and urban dwellers. Their common goal is to manage the food chain autonomously and cooperatively, although their strategies and agendas might differ.

The intersection of the agendas of these different actors is an engaging arena to explore. The COVID-19 crisis exposed many contradictions of the existing 'food regimes' and made this arena politically very relevant. While the discomfort caused by such social and environmental impacts has long been clear, the recognition of the risks they pose to food price stability is more recent. The COVID-19 pandemic triggered a global food price crisis that was subsequently exacerbated by the war in Ukraine. The FAO Food Price Index, which measures changes in the prices of groups of commonly consumed foods, rose from 95.1 before the pandemic to 143.7 in 2022, a level significantly higher than the 131.9 reached during the previous food price crisis in 2011. These global shifts in food prices are potentially problematic for some strata of the population and can have severe impacts on the poorest urban areas. We found the case of Ankara relevant because the dependence on external inputs impacted food prices very heavily, and because that impact simultaneously contributed to increased awareness about the relevant issues while also testing the resilience of grassroots associations and the limits of their transformative capacities.

Neoliberal agriculture, real estate, and unorthodox monetary policy: Turkey and Ankara at the time of Covid-19

The stress placed on food chains by the COVID-19 pandemic must be contextualised both within the wider transformation of the Turkish agricultural sector, which was self-sufficient for most of its food prior to the transformations described here, and within the identity of Ankara, an ancient settlement that is relatively young in terms of massive urbanisation. Turkey's transition towards an agri-food system based on private profit and exportation started in the 1970s. In the last 20 years, farmland has shrunk by about 20%, while the number of farmers has halved and the rural population now accounts for only 7.5% of the country (Yücer, 2020). Land gradually ceased to be an ancestral source of livelihood under the control of local communities and became a financial asset to be valued according to more rentable opportunities. Ankara's own history dates back to the Hittites and Phrygians, but until it became the capital of the Turkish Republic in 1923, it was a rural town. The rural character of the capital was not immediately lost; even in 1990, agricultural land still accounted for 54% of Ankara's total surface area and local producers remained important suppliers of agricultural products (Oncel and Levend, 2023). However, this landscape has changed radically in the last 30 years, as the harsher implementation of neoliberal policies has driven the massive expansion of urban areas. Agricultural land decreased to 39.8% in 2000, 18.7% in 2012, and only 9.7% in 2018, while artificial surfaces expanded to cover 82.5% of the total area (Oncel and Levend, 2023). The progressive shrinking of green areas together with urban sprawl and infrastructure expansion has displaced previous inhabitants, limited the space for agriculture, and increased prices and infrastructural demands (Varlı Görk and Rittesberg Tılıç, 2016; Sınacı Özfındık, 2019). Furthermore, neoliberal reforms have reduced the role of the state and delegated decisions about the urban development of the city to private interests, leading to top-down and market-oriented approaches to urban policies that have contributed to escalating property prices and the shrinking of agricultural land (Korkmaz and Balaban, 2020).

Similarly to the pattern observed globally, the first form of resistance to these transformations in Turkey came from rural areas, mainly through protests against mining exploitation or the construction of infrastructure jeopardising the livelihoods of rural people. A crucial actor in these movements was the Çiftçiler Sendikası, or Farmers Union, which claimed an identity as a peasant organisation to explicitly oppose these transformations in agriculture (Oba and Özsoy, 2023; Ribeiro, 2023). This momentum continued to grow, and movements of

peasants and local civil society groups became increasingly common in Turkey. Many large infrastructure projects triggered or are triggering resistance, and rural people are at the forefront of these protests. While in rural areas direct resistance to projects intended to exploit land for non-agricultural purposes is the main form of political expression, in urban areas dissent against mainstream neoliberal policies has emerged in the form of consumer choice and the associationism related to it. In this respect, it is worth mentioning the Buğday ('Wheat') Association for Supporting Ecological Living. Buğday began as a small market for local products in Bodrum in 1990 and subsequently became a national movement affiliated with the International Federation of Organic Agriculture Movements (IFOAM) that now provides training in organic production and agroecological techniques to other associations. Although this type of effort was aimed at developing a different relationship between urban dwellers and their food, without necessarily pursuing acts of resistance, significant events have also occurred in urban centres. The most famous of these has been the Gezi Park movement, which started in Istanbul in 2013 and then spread across the country. This movement united a variety of grassroots actors calling for more participatory governance from the state, and one of its first demands was the protection of urban green areas as spaces of sociality and production (Korkmaz and Balaban, 2020). Here, the promotion of alternative approaches to production intersects with a broader national struggle to protect agricultural and pastoral lands, linking newer urban movements to broader dynamics that have been present in the country since the neoliberal reforms of the 1980s.

Gezi Park represented a moment of rupture that expressed discomfort with a model of development based on the heavy exploitation of natural resources, and it followed a global wave of grassroots protests where the occupation or alternative use of public urban space was common. After the repression of the Gezi Park movement, most of the actors who had fought to protect common spaces developed other forms of resistance. Analysing the movement against a new law on seeds in Turkey in 2006, Derya Nizam and Zafer Yenal (2020: 751) use the term 'quiet activism' to define a challenge to the dominant mode of production through 'small, everyday, embodied actions' and moments of socialisation to share criticisms and experiences that also apply to most of the associations we worked with in this study. The discomfort with neoliberal transformations created a variety of localised social movements that mixed direct protest with the creation of networks aimed at developing alternative practices based on direct democracy and protection of the environment. Eric Dacheux and Daniel Goujon (2011) frame these in the context of 'solidarity economy', a type of 'transition' economy aimed at transforming society with a focus on the needs of excluded groups. Olivier Gajack and Selin Pelek (2019) emphasise the connection between decentralisation and solidarity economy initiatives, and the efforts of such initiatives to bridge gaps in terms of local democracy and representativity.

While grassroots movements in rural areas of Turkey remained active in trying to protect those areas from major construction, in urban areas consumer sensitivity regarding the quality of food and relationships with producers increased among the upper middle class. The development of a network of organic markets and products reflects the expansion of this interest throughout the country in the last decade, and research on food habits during COVID-19 has demonstrated a growing focus of consumers on food quality as well as on shorter supply chains (Akdemir et al., 2020; Guney and Sangun, 2021). These movements have continued to grow in terms of numbers of active members, and some cooperatives, such as Buğday in Istanbul or Ovacık in Tunceli, have managed to develop projects, open shops, and create networks nationwide. However, these movements have largely remained on the local level, acting for the protection of specific green areas – in Ankara, for example, the protection of Atatürk Forest or the green areas around Middle East Technical University – without structuring a nationwide movement.

The COVID-19 crisis further highlighted some of the weaknesses in Turkish food chains targeted by these associations. In Turkey, the first measures to contain the pandemic were launched in March 2020, and until July 2021 there were frequent restrictions on the mobility of citizens. Many office jobs were carried out online with the implementation of remote work, while agricultural work was to be carried out with specific permits. The difficulty of recruiting labour for field activities and the global rise in the prices of commodities

significantly increased food prices. These dynamics were further aggravated by the unorthodox monetary policy of the government, which led to a spectacular devaluation of the Turkish lira: in January 2020, 1 US dollar was worth less than 6 Turkish lira, while four years later 1 US dollar was worth more than 32 Turkish lira. This was the most relevant factor that impacted food prices, which are tightly connected to the currency exchange rate (Orkun Oral et al., 2023). Hence, food inflation severely affected Turkey; from rates of about 10% in 2019, food inflation increased to 20% in 2020 and over 40% in 2021. These rates then regularly exceeded 90% for most of 2022 and hovered between 50% and 70% between 2023 and the first semester of 2024, according to the Turkish Statistical Institute (TÜİK).[1]

The government developed two main strategies to curb food inflation: it expanded state-subsidised cooperatives and bakeries, which guaranteed basic foods at lower prices, and it reduced taxes on food imports, especially cereals, for which import duties were completely cancelled in 2021. Michaël Tanchum (2021) emphasises how these measures were linked to a structural weakness in the Turkish economy. As most of its domestic production has to feed the export sector, the country is not self-sufficient in several sectors, including cereals and other agricultural products. Furthermore, intensive production for exportation is based on the use of inputs such as chemical fertilisers and pesticides, the prices of which are strongly influenced by the global supply chain. High management costs have contributed to the indebtedness of a large proportion of agricultural operators (Altaytas, 2024). Finally, this type of production, combined with the increasingly intense phenomena of climate change, has a strong impact on water resources, which have become problematic in recent years for large urban centres such as Istanbul and Ankara and for small-scale agricultural production, which suffers greatly from water scarcity (Ahsan et al., 2023).

The COVID-19 pandemic imposed significant stress on the Turkish food supply chain, exposing vulnerabilities related to its neoliberal transformations. The associations considered in this study describe their practices as attempts to respond to those problems and to outline alternative uses of urban land and resources to replace those of the last decades. In this framework, urban cooperatives and grassroots networks of food exchange simultaneously represent an adaptation to the harsher social consequences of neoliberal policies, an effort to produce alternative networks of exchange, and a tool of contestation (Dacheux and Goujon, 2011; Oba and Özsoy, 2023). In Ankara, these networks have generally managed to mobilise a few thousand people in the city centre to support relatively small groups of smallholders in the agricultural areas close to the city or on its periphery. Their main aims are to create cohesion among people sharing similar worldviews, and to influence public opinion by proposing and implementing different practices. This is consistent with a broader shift towards a focus on local production partially embraced in the last few years by the Metropolitan Municipality of Ankara and other big cities. Some local governments have been diverging from national policies and testing new policies for urban food production and support for organic methods and short supply chains (Ay et al., 2023).

We noticed how the practices previously developed by these associations before the COVID-19 pandemic were in some ways more resilient during the pandemic than those of traditional food chains and sometimes even allowed the associations to enlarge their bases. In this sense, one outcome of the COVID-19 crisis might be an increased awareness of the socio-economic issues related to agri-business and of the ways in which alternative models might be more resilient to supply chain shocks. It is important to note that the food price crisis triggered by COVID-19 did not stop in Turkey as the pandemic began to abate; the impact of the government's unorthodox monetary policies led to the continuation of skyrocketing inflation, which is still significant at the time of writing (June 2024). Hence, the socio-economic issues related to the food price crisis are still very much present on local political agendas and remained under debate while our research was ongoing.

Transformations and continuities in Ankara during the COVID-19 crisis

[1] https://data.tuik.gov.tr/Kategori/GetKategori?p=enflasyon-ve-fiyat-106&dil=2, last accessed 02 July 2024.

COVID-19 was a unique public health crisis on the global level that heavily impacted food consumption. The pandemic further highlighted issues related to food chain transformations that were already being tackled by Turkish civil society and contributed to an increase in the general awareness of the quality and prices of food supplies. The connection between the crisis triggered by the COVID-19 pandemic and the longstanding problems existing within Turkish food chains was clear to the participants of this study, as was the potential importance of the practices that these associations were using to deal with it. In this section, we summarise the main dynamics of the selected associations in dealing with the COVID-19 pandemic, with a specific focus on 'resilience'. This term defines the capacity to resist or react to shocks. Katrina Brown (2015) identifies resistance, rootedness, and resourcefulness as the key elements of resilience in situations of distress, emphasising the transformative power that resilience can have as a unique form of resistance. We assess how this definition of resilience is fitting for the ways in which Ankara-based associations reacted to and emerged from the COVID-19 crisis and attendant food price inflation.

We began our analysis with four main established associations: the Natural Food and Conscious Nutrition Network (DBB: Doğal Besin Bilinçli Beslenme Ağı), the Güneşköy Cooperative, the Tahtacıörencik Village Ecological Living Collective (TADYA: Tahtacıörencik Doğal Yaşam Kolektifi), and the Yüzüncü Yıl Food Cooperative (YYGT: Yüzüncü Yıl Gıda Topluluğu). These associations were created between 2000 and 2013, while smaller associations mentioned later in this article are often offshoots of these initiatives. The DBB is a network that aims to connect different types of cooperatives nationwide according to a common agroecological and socially sustainable approach to production. Güneşköy is a cooperative that manages a plot of land of about 7.5 hectares at the boundary between the provinces of Ankara and Kırıkkale. Their aim is to train farmers in agroecological and organic farming. On an annual basis, they also supply weekly packages of fresh produces to activists who financially support their farming activities in advance for the duration of the season, i.e. May to October. TADYA is a cooperative involving different smallholder farmers working on about 5 hectares in the rural area of Güdül, a small municipality in Ankara province. Its core comprises a few dozen producers and committed activists, while its outer network of less involved activists supporting the association's activities is estimated to be as large as 1,500 people.[2] TADYA has been distributing fresh products since 2011 through an online system where people can order weekly deliveries. The YYGT is a food collective that began as a resistance movement during the Gezi Park protests. The group now cultivates a small garden, or bostan in Turkish, and arranges the regular purchase of food from small cooperatives outside Ankara. There are currently about 35 households ordering regularly from ten different producers, although these numbers tend to vary.

Although united by a focus on food, the practices of these groups are diverse. Some try to make the most of existing green spaces, focusing on local production, seed exchanges, and processing techniques such as pickling, drying, or making pastes and molasses. Others actively obtain products from producers who follow the same principles in other provinces, with the aim of consolidating long-standing relationships with them. We anticipated that this diversity could yield different ideas on potential strategies in this sector while also outlining common elements. We first analysed two important factors for resilience: the implementation of agroecology strategies to reduce dependence on external factors, and the creation of cohesive networks of solidarity to react to changes. We then analysed the limits of the 'resilience' of these associations' practices, particularly focusing on their capacity to work effectively with different social classes in a complex urban area.

Solidarity as a factor of resilience? The importance of social networks in dealing with the COVID-19 crisis

Agroecology emerged as a common productive strategy among all the associations analysed. They put forward various reasons for choosing this strategy: agroecological techniques have less environmental impact, enable the revival of traditional local practices, require less credit at the beginning, and make products more palatable for people seeking 'organic' or 'healthy' food. In addition to these points, we noticed an important element in

[2] https://tahtaciorencik.org/tadya-hakkinda/, accessed on 2 July 2024.

relation to COVID-19 and the subsequent crises: agroecological techniques made the producers using them less vulnerable to external shocks, as most of their inputs were self-produced, while also empowering the activists by improving their capacity for storing and managing food products.

The associations developed these techniques in different contexts through different means. In the case of TADYA, we observed a strong emphasis on the importance of seeds; every year this association tries to renew its stocks of seeds to reduce dependence on markets. It also studies neglected local seeds to facilitate the use of specific locally suitable crops. Similarly, Güneşköy and MoniBostan, two of the other associations analysed, act as collectors of various local seeds that they store and exchange freely among members. These associations follow the same rationale in focusing on seeds; they seek to reproduce seeds as much as possible with special attention to local crops that are more appropriate for the local climate and soil quality. Additionally, the community garden of Middle East Technical University, ODTÜ Bostan, has developed practices aimed at valuing the wild products of forests as a result of its connection to the university's forests, which are some of the larger remaining forested areas in Ankara. Sharing seeds prevents the need to buy new ones every year, thus reducing dependence on the market and emphasising a non-commodified approach to these goods. Valorising wild fruits and herbs from forested areas in an urban setting reinforces awareness of the importance of these areas in the city and guarantees products independent of market fluctuations, albeit within a limited range.

According to our participants, although agroecology production is more expensive than traditional methods, producers who embraced this approach suffered less from the wave of inflation as most traditional agricultural inputs were self-produced or not used at all. However, when we tried to triangulate this information with direct observations of prices, our findings became more complicated. In systems with strong social control, price increases tended to be slower and there was often negotiation about prices between the producers and the activists. In the case of Güneşköy, the amount to be paid is decided in advance as activists and producers share the risk. TADYA's prices do not automatically follow market fluctuations; rather, they are established collectively by the producers, who decide together which products to prepare for sale (e.g. fresh fruits and vegetables, dried or processed fruits and vegetables, or dairy and meat products) and at what price. In some cases we noticed that the difference between the prices of these producers and those of wholesale markets had decreased since the beginning of the pandemic, others had remained stable, and a few had slightly increased as very local factors of production impacted these decisions. Hence, in spite of our participants' statements, we could not quantitatively identify a specific trend. Three important points may explain the perceptions of the participants in this regard. First, changes in prices within these networks were always announced and discussed in advance and gradually implemented, in contrast to the market, where they might occur abruptly. Second, most of the participants were likely to purchase food from supermarkets or weekly open-air markets in the central parts of the city, where the increase from wholesale prices was higher due to the higher transportation costs of the products and the rent paid by retailers in those areas. Finally, the considered networks only offer seasonal products and have fixed 'transaction' costs for their weekly deliveries, which might have facilitated a better absorption of any price increases, especially if activists maximised their groceries with weekly deliveries. Overall, these dynamics and the trust among the members of the networks contributed to the strengthening and consolidation of the networks, challenging the general perception of alternative food products necessarily being much more expensive than conventional products:

> *I think there is not much difference in price between TADYA's products and those in the market. Not a lot when we look at it. But most people have a perception that organic equals more expensive.*[3]

> *…there is still a perception of things, they say organic, organic products are expensive and so on… I could also say that before, but now I can't. So, when I really look at the prices, it looks almost the same… But it seems to me that it will take some time for us to break that perception.*[4]

[3] Participant from TADYA, Ankara, March 2023.
[4] Participant from Güneşköy, Ankara, April 2023.

These practices contribute to the strengthening of the skills and competencies of the activists involved in the networks for promoting local resources, seeking seasonal products, and managing their own simple 'production processes' by making pickles, molasses, or pastes at home, thus becoming 'prosumers', rather than simply 'consumers'. These are strategies that helped guide better individual choices during the crisis and offered opportunities to small producers. As these techniques do not require expensive inputs or credits and the associations are available to help with start-up, the networks tend to involve small farmers who are interested in developing all or part of their production in a solidarity-based and environmentally friendly way. We observed a relevant network of bostan gardens around the city that developed in collaboration with these larger groups, sometimes, as in the case of MoniBostan in Gölbaşı, creating their own local networks.

The valorisation of local seeds and techniques for storing agricultural products initially began as a reaction to the reduction of biodiversity and a desire to revive forms of 'local knowledge', from local seeds and edible wild vegetables to the ability to farm, process, and cook those products. During our research, most of the participating activists explained that agroecology is not simply a farming technique; rather, it is part of a holistic approach to create alternative patterns of farming and distribution. Together with their agroecological techniques, the associations made efforts to take control of plots of land and manage them with more democratic and inclusive practices. They proposed an alternative system in this regard, in line with the experiences described by Gajack and Pelek (2019) and with their aim of facilitating a transition towards a different global system of food production and distribution. The pandemic seems to have heightened this awareness. A member of the YYGT stated that it was thanks to COVID-19 that he came to understand the fragility of global food chains:

> *The system we trust so much is not so logical… [it's not logical] that the lentils come from Canada, here they come from here, from there, that is, with the risk of [limited] access to food in a global crisis, and at the same time, it brings food inflation. That's why I realised how important a short food chain location is, at least for myself. That's why I think it's very valuable to obtain a product directly from a producer, directly from the person who produces it, that is, economically, because the producer can actually access what he produces there.*[5]

Another common feature described by the associations was their bottom-up origins as social networks of people linked by common interests who started acting together and gradually involved more people sharing similar approaches and needs. Since participation in their various activities is entirely voluntary, and has grown through word of mouth, the bonds between the members of these groups are quite strong. As regards the main practices developed by these groups, food is largely a medium of exchange for developing non-market-oriented social ties, common decision-making processes, and the sharing of risks and benefits related to agriculture through alternative forms of governance. These practices strengthen individuals' capabilities through shared experiences and mutual control and support. This was of particular importance during the difficulties that arose with the pandemic, as despite the restrictions imposed on travel and the consequent obstacles to carrying out the cultivation and distribution of agricultural products, the networks managed to guarantee the continuity of their distribution through mutual support. We believe that the strength of their relationships and the flexibility of the tools used had a decisive impact in making these groups 'resilient' during the pandemic, and these are among the major advantages of their approach:

> *Covid somehow reinforced our activities: we were allowed to travel and bring food home to people. Moreover, many people moved back to the village, so there was more manpower and more activities in the village.*[6]

The testimony above comes from TADYA, a group that also aims to create connections between different areas of the city and to enhance livelihoods in the village where most of the producers are based – Tahtacıörencik, in the district of Güdül, around 80 km north-west of the central district of Ankara – as the lack of local work has led many of the village's inhabitants to migrate to other areas. The restrictions imposed in response to COVID-19 and the introduction of remote work encouraged some of those people to return to the village, allowing TADYA to involve more people in its processes of land management. At the same time,

[5] Participant from TADYA who was also a member of the YYGT, Ankara, March 2023.
[6] Participant from TADYA, Ankara, October 2022.

travel restrictions significantly promoted online shopping, even among those who preferred to buy their food products directly from producers, and this offered new expansion opportunities not only in terms of the people to be involved in production but also among prosumers who regularly ordered products online. It is also worth noting that most of the COVID-19 restrictions were not applied in the same way to those engaged in agricultural work, which further fostered interest in actively engaging in farming. This facilitated the activities of groups such as TADYA, as well as those of most of the bostan gardens in Ankara, contributing to strengthening solidarity and cohesion during the pandemic:

> *During Covid, the bostan has actually been a good benefit. Since we have an open-air venue, we were able to continue meeting there. We didn't have to be confined to our homes.*[7]

> *These agricultural activities offered us an opportunity; we could go out together with the appropriate document and they couldn't keep you inside when you said you would be working in the field. It had such an effect on us.*[8]

These practices fostered a sense of belonging related to the previously mentioned 'quiet activism', in contrast to being a mere 'ethical consumer'. This is why we define the participants of these networks as 'activists' or 'prosumers': they engaged with these associations to actively contribute to an alternative model, without viewing the associations as simply abstract 'ethical producers' or labelling institutions that certify products. The practice of community control thus performed the dual function of reducing producers' operational costs and strengthening ties with their members, both of which contributed to the resilience of networks during COVID-19. The DBB states this openly as a principle of the association:

> *An 'organic product certificate' is not compulsory to be a DBB producer. The underlying aim of this is to get rid of the intermediary role of certification firms and promote natural agricultural methods beyond organic production methods. The basic criterion concerning the products and production methods is mutual trust. The group participants are encouraged to pay individual or group visits to production sites.*[9]

Although this approach is now shared by all the associations, we did hear concerns about the possibility of people misusing this system, especially if the networks expand and community control becomes more difficult. Furthermore, while for TADYA the mix of farmers engaged in production and volunteers supporting their methodologies has made community control effective, for other associations in which volunteers are the main element, keeping the group cohesive and active is more challenging. Personal motivation and decision-making by consensus are strengths in moments of difficulty, but they are also challenges for the long-term sustainability of these associations. Although the networks are resilient and managed to expand during the COVID-19 pandemic, most of their activities are based on voluntary engagement and require a strong and constant commitment. The possibility of and capacity for maintaining such engagement depends on a variety of factors including time availability, social capital, and financial resources, which are not accessible for everyone and do not always transcend the divide between rural and urban areas or the class divide in a city such as Ankara. The 'everyday life' engagement demanded by these associations can indeed be achieved only under specific conditions, therefore constituting a limit on how much they can expand in the post-COVID-19 future.

Changing our 'everyday life'? The quest for a new urban-rural balance

The French sociologist Henri Lefebvre (1991) introduced the concept of 'everyday life' in social science as a crucial and understudied site of exploitation in the capitalist system. The COVID-19 pandemic, by forcing people to radically reorganise their everyday lives due to the limitations imposed by health authorities, has contributed in some ways to strengthening networks of solidarity and collaboration. This has demonstrated how a radical reorganisation of the management of everyday life is important for the effective implementation of alternative food supply chain management practices. The requirements in terms of the time needed for activities such as visiting farming sites, ordering food, or processing larger volumes of vegetables during the

[7] Participant from the Berkin Elvan Bostan, Ankara, April 2023.
[8] Participant from TADYA who was also a member of the YYGT, Ankara, March 2023.
[9] https://dogalbilinclibeslenme.wordpress.com/dbb-ureticileri/, accessed January 2022.

harvest season are challenging for people with limited amounts of time. This is particularly true for groups that distribute food regularly, such as Güneşköy which delivers parcels of fresh vegetables every week. As these associations are small, it is necessary for their members to make significant commitments, and the absence of a few key members may have a huge impact on the whole group. During our research, we observed some periods of minor disruptions for that reason. The only significant issue that has emerged in the post-COVID period is the cancelling of the vegetable package programme in Güneşköy in 2024, due to ongoing issues since the construction of the high-speed railway divided their land. For bostan gardens, having enough regularly committed people working in the gardens is similarly a crucial issue. The COVID-19 pandemic had no impact on this type of fragility, but the difficulty people face in finding time to regularly dedicate to the associations' activities makes this a structural issue. It is important to note that these problems all emerged in the post-COVID period, when the 'everyday life' of most participants returned to the pre-pandemic routine.

Apart from changes in daily routines during COVID-19, in a province like Ankara comprising different kinds of urban neighbourhoods and villages, it is crucial to consider the class divide, which has a heavy structural impact on access to food. In most of the relevant urban cases we found in the literature, there is a core of urban activists who have the time and resources to create ties to committed rural producers, hence fostering solidarity at the urban-rural nexus and promoting alternative, transformative agroecological practices. However, it is difficult to achieve an extensive expansion of these networks. Based on the experiences of food cooperatives in Seferihisar, in Izmir province, Derya Nizam and Zafer Yenal (2020) identified a limitation in the relatively low number of activists who could be involved and the related dependence on seasonal tourists to keep the system working. Furthermore, in Ankara, we observed the difficulty of extending the model to poorer neighbourhoods of the city. We found that most of the participants in these networks are from central upper middle-class areas, while the lower classes tend to rely on cheaper brands from large retailers or subsidised shops run by state entities. The associations could not overcome the dichotomy of wealthy central areas purchasing from poorer peripheral areas.

Although the imbalance between participants in peripheral rural areas, who produce food, and residents in the city centre, who purchase it, seems to be a limitation, the fostering of strong ties between the two is important for spreading and keeping alive the practices and knowledge of the peripheries. We noticed that the disruptions created by COVID-19 partially alleviated this imbalance by facilitating the return of some citizens to their villages. Güneşköy and TADYA organise regular visits to their production sites and have managed to secure funding from international donors to develop specific programs for training and awareness, thus fostering skills and interest in developing alternative production practices on the outskirts of Ankara. However, these dynamics also present a risk for the objectives of the associations, namely a risk of gentrification of certain peri-urban areas. The growing interest in peri-urban areas that arose during the COVID-19 pandemic immediately impacted prices and the potential use of lands in green areas not far from more urbanised areas, such as Gölbaşı, a farmed area located about 20 km south of the centre of Ankara:

> *While the prices for [property in a district] in Çorum province were the same, Gölbaşı was around 4 times and 5 times as much. Now Gölbaşı has increased to 20 times and 30 times the [previous] price. Prices did not rise simply because inflation rose. The rent value here has also increased. The fact that people turned their eyes this way after the pandemic, and the fact that they turned away [from other areas] after the earthquakes [of February 2023], made this place much more valuable.*[10]

The bostan of MoniBostan aims to protect its land from the expansion of the city, but increased property values due to the interest in peri-urban areas triggered by the COVID-19 pandemic constitute a threat to its survival. At present, the whole area is used for farming and there is easy access to water, which has enabled the association to expand. However, new construction projects may quickly and heavily impact it. Hence, its post-Covid future will probably depend on the outcome of social struggles over property in Gölbaşı.

This is a very important topic that we discussed with most of the organisers and it remains the major

[10] Participant from MoniBostan, Ankara, April 2023.

structural limitation of their approach. The effort to engage potentially vulnerable small-holder producers who use agroecological techniques, and the implications for networks of food activists prepared to invest time and energy supporting alternative types of production, facilitate connections between urban and rural areas. However, the urban networks were quite localised within residential upper middle-class areas of the city. While these networks were able to engage with specific peri-urban or rural areas connected to them, they struggled to expand beyond those areas to involve more vulnerable urban dwellers. The difficulty of applying political strategies to overcome the class divide, which was further increased by neoliberal policies and economic crises, remains the main limitation of these associations and is still a controversial political topic among the activists. Moreover, the increased interest in peri-urban areas among urban dwellers comes with the risk of gentrifying those areas and thus further marginalising the vulnerable and exacerbating the class divide. While considering these issues, it is important to remember that the main purpose of these networks is not to diffuse alternative practices by competing with and replacing traditional models, but rather to develop advocacy efforts and networks capable of impacting broader policies, thus supporting a 'transition' toward more socially and ecologically friendly models. Associations can serve as inspiration for such transitions, but those efforts need to be supported by politically driven processes.

Solidarity networks during the food price crisis

Our findings on the resilience of grassroots associations in Ankara were mixed. The associations and their practices largely proved to be resilient to the challenges of COVID-19 and, in some cases, managed to expand their bases of support even as the pandemic was exacerbating many problems. Crises constitute fine opportunities to discuss contradictions that otherwise often go unnoticed. We previously mentioned the role of the Gezi Park protests in launching the YYGT collective, which followed a common trend in relation to the 2008 global financial crisis whereby protests animated by various collectives of activists survived and have continued to draw attention to the issues of green spaces and land consumption (Rakopoulos, 2014; Bettinelli, 2017; Cappuccini, 2017). These movements constitute the basis of the urban 'quiet activism' through which such ideas have circulated in Turkey in the last decade. In all of these cases, economic crises or other events that highlighted the social instability of the city have been catalysts of movements capable not only of expressing discomfort and protest but also of initiating solidarity practices that are themselves capable of strengthening the resilience of specific social groups. The COVID-19 pandemic foregrounded problems that were already identified, and has demonstrated the ability of these associations to offer alternatives via their policies, following a trend across Turkey of trying to value local crops and traditional ways of processing and conserving food (Oba and Özsoy, 2023). In a city like Ankara, this strategy overlaps with efforts to protect existing belts of farmland and integrate them into networks of exchange that unite urban and rural areas. This practice has the dual aim of reducing the need for imported food and protecting green areas as common goods, and it has the potential to partially emancipate small peri-urban farmers from market instability and credit risks, thanks to the reduced need for external inputs. Hence, we can describe these associations and their practices as 'resilient', emphasising the transformative dimension of resilience through resistance, rootedness, and resourcefulness (Brown 2015).

Overall, Turkish solidarity economy associations have been gaining importance in the last decade (Gürel, 2018; Gajack and Pelek, 2019) in light of the social setbacks of neoliberal reforms that have impacted various strata of society (Öztürk et al., 2020). Following the repression of the Gezi Park movement, these associations had to focus on specific local issues, creating networks and developing locally resilient practices. In Ankara, they have been working on and interacting with alternative strategies for food production and distribution, sharing similar goals, practices, and strategies. They are acting to transform specific urban spaces and use those spaces as models to influence the governance of the city, following a global trend in urban food policies (Sonnino and Coulson, 2020). This type of practice is spreading within the official governance documents of various provinces, including Ankara, where the municipality is gradually beginning to consider certain small changes to the urban planning approaches that have been applied for the last 30 years (Ay et al., 2023). This is taking place against a background of municipalities emerging as crucial actors within the framework of policies

aimed at boosting 'food democracy' (Resler and Hagolani-Albov, 2021). However, there are relevant structural limitations to be considered.

The actions of these associations and their agendas cannot be defined simply as the protection of rural areas against urban expansion, but rather as a quest for a radical revision of the relationship between the two realms, which is necessary for agroecological practices to be widely impactful. The emphasis on the transformation of both production and distribution led us to a critique of the 'everyday' forms of exploitation in the capitalist system that reduce individuals' available time for taking care of common goods. This confirmed the importance of voluntary engagement, time availability, and social capital for these practices to be effective, which led us to recognise their main limitations. As similar cases in the literature have also shown, it is indeed difficult for the associations to promote broader structural changes through these practices. Alison Alkon and Julie Gutman (2017) describe the limitations of alternative food chains in effectively addressing the structural problems of large-scale distribution at accessible prices. Their work built on Patricia Allen's (2008) observation about difficulties in going beyond the inclusion of more privileged classes which have time and resources to engage with alternative food chains. These observations align with both our experiences in Ankara and the observations of Derya Nizam and Zafer Yenal (2020) regarding food cooperatives in Seferihisar, and this is still a widely debated issue among activists today. Moving from these reflections, we finally identified three main limitations in the practices developed by the associations: the difficulties in maintaining a shared system of values and cohesion while expanding their range of action; the difficulties to overcome the class divide and include vulnerable urban actors; and finally, the risk of their practices being 'tokenised', or adopted only for political purposes after being purged of all transformative potential. A political initiative is indeed necessary to move the practices of these associations from a role of sensitisation and advocacy to a 'transformative' dimension. The evolution of the food supply chain in the vast urban areas of Ankara in the coming years will allow us to evaluate these ongoing trends.

Conclusions

This study has examined the responses of grassroots solidarity economy associations in Ankara to the food price crisis resulting from the COVID-19 pandemic, further compounded by the war in Ukraine and the unorthodox economic policies of the Turkish government. These factors contributed to a significant increase in food price inflation, which has had a severe impact on Turkey's socio-economic well-being and has highlighted the vulnerability of its food systems. We set out to explore whether the solidarity economy model implemented by grassroots associations in Ankara proved to be resilient to the problems raised by the COVID-19 pandemic or offered alternative approaches to addressing those problems. The networks of associations with which we worked were found to have been resilient. The main factors that allowed these associations to survive and, in some cases, expand their activities during the pandemic were strong social cohesion among group members, reduced dependence on external inputs and the credit market, and growing interest in environmental protection and high-quality food. Even at the level of municipal institutions, we noticed an interest in the agroecological and short supply chain practices proposed by these associations. In this sense, some elements of the practices proposed by these associations are attracting broader post-COVID-19 public opinion and might therefore find room for expansion in the future.

We have also highlighted important risks and limitations in the post-COVID-19 period for these associations. First, the consolidation and expansion of such experiences necessarily requires a broader review of the production system. Practices such as community control or the strong engagement of members in following agricultural seasonality and guaranteeing the self-production of inputs require a level of commitment that is difficult to combine with current styles of 'everyday life'. The changes that occurred during the pandemic paradoxically facilitated advantageous dynamics for these associations, which will be difficult for them to reproduce with the return to standard rhythms and workloads. While resilience against the effects of the pandemic generated alternative possibilities and strategies, the sustainable implementation of those strategies requires deeper economic and political transformations. On this point, the ideals of the peasant movements

coincide with the aim of these associations to change the current economic model, promote old practices, and prevent the social marginalisation of rural workers. The associations emphasised the need for a stronger connection between urban and rural areas and, therefore, the need to create networks of solidarity that transcend the division of peasants and urban dwellers. The dynamics of real estate prices already affecting some peri-urban areas reflect the difficulties in putting this ideal into practice and, more generally, the limits of the 'quiet activism' often associated with urban movements of food democracy. This is a limitation already described for most urban initiatives for 'food democracy', which aim to bring environmental protection and alternative production practices into urban political arenas, but can be tokenised, greenwashed or reduced to 'ethical consumption'. Municipalities and other actors may thus adopt specific practices to address weaknesses in food chains rather than aiming to radically transform them. Connecting urban and rural activists and engaging with municipal authorities to implement alternative policies are actions that have the potential to bring about political changes. However, there are major structural obstacles that still prevent the establishment of an alternative post-COVID food chain. Stronger political initiatives are needed to build on these experiences and achieve more ambitious goals.

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