



Rethinking Agrifood Systems in (Post-)Pandemic Times: Moving Beyond Crisis and Recovery Narratives

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Abstract

The COVID-19 pandemic brought about significant changes in the global agri-food system. It disrupted food supply chains, created labour shortages, instilled fears of food insecurity, and altered market dynamics. The pandemic also highlighted the resilience of alternative food systems through the shortening of food supply chains, a greater appreciation for local agricultural production, increased focus on sustainable practices, the use of technological platforms for direct farmer-to-consumer sales, and policy interventions providing financial and regulatory support to ensure food security. The two special sections of IJSAF titled “The Food System in the (Post-)Pandemic World: Disruptions, Vulnerability, Resilience, and Alternatives” offer an in-depth exploration of the challenges faced by food systems and how various actors - populations, policymakers, and food producers - responded to the disruptions caused by COVID-19. The nine articles included in these sections present ethnographic and qualitative research from different parts of the world and engage critically in discussions regarding disruptions and resilience within agrifood systems during the pandemic. The authors explore how COVID-19 influenced power dynamics among various actors in the food system. These articles are selected from papers presented at the mini-conference of the ISA Research Committee on Sociology of Agriculture and Food (RC40), which took place in October 2022 at Leipzig University. Drawing from the conference and the published articles, this editorial introduction discusses the methodological and theoretical strengths and challenges faced by critical agrifood studies in times of crisis.

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DEDICATION

This work is dedicated to Dr. Sheila Ngoh Manka (1985-2024) in appreciation of her inspiring nature and commitment to our shared field of research, as well as her efforts in developing the academic community in Southern Africa. We are grateful for the opportunity to have collaborated with her.



Introduction

Two special sections of the IJSAF titled “The Food System in the (Post-)Pandemic World: Disruptions, Vulnerability, Resilience, and Alternatives 1 & 2” feature scholarly contributions that critically explore the complex relationship between the COVID-19 pandemic and the food system. Rather than treating COVID-19 as an isolated event, these sections situate it within a broader historical context of agrifood transformations shaped by intersecting crises related to the capitalist-industrial food system, ecology, and governance (cf. Altieri and Nicholls, 2020; Clapp and Moseley, 2020; van der Ploeg, 2020). The articles investigate how the disruptions triggered by the pandemic have intensified structural inequalities while simultaneously creating opportunities for alternative models of food production, distribution, consumption, and governance.

The contributions to these special sections were gathered from the ISA Research Committee on Sociology of Agriculture and Food (RC40) mini-conference, which took place at Leipzig University’s Research Centre Global Dynamics in October 2022. Forty-six scholars from 37 different universities, research institutions, and social movements worldwide participated in the conference. They engaged in scholarly discussions regarding the sustainability of agrifood systems and the role of agrifood scholars in advancing food systems research and critical theory development in agrifood studies (see Bjørkhaug et al., 2023 for more details about the event). Drawing from the conference and the published articles, in this introduction, we examine what changes and alternative models emerged and how the existing model responded during the pandemic. We believe these discussions are crucial for understanding how COVID-19 has reshaped power relations within the agrifood system. Additionally, we explore how critical agrifood studies can contribute theoretically and methodologically to address the challenges posed by a crisis like COVID-19.

Disruptions, Vulnerabilities, and Adaptations: COVID-19 and Agrifood Systems

The COVID-19 pandemic exposed and exacerbated the vulnerabilities within global agrifood systems. It disrupted food production and supply chains, highlighted the precarious conditions faced by agricultural and food workers, and reinforced existing social inequalities (cf. FIAN, 2020; HLPE, 2021; IPES, 2020). As lockdowns and mobility restrictions were enforced, the fragility of industrial food networks became apparent, resulting in significant repercussions for food security, labour markets, and alternative food systems (FAO, 2020a, 2020b).

In the initial weeks of the pandemic, authorities worldwide opted to shut down communities and prevent opportunities for social gatherings. Borders were closed, and questions were raised about food deliveries due to both border crossings and also access to labour necessary to produce food or transport it to stores. Reports emerged from various countries highlighting slaughterhouses as clusters of infection and instances of facilities having to close down. As with agricultural labour, similar risks were associated with temporary and migrant workers.

The consumption sphere was not an exception to the concerns raised. One primary response of consumers was engaging in panic buying (Islam et al., 2021). For instance, a study in the Netherlands demonstrated significant growth in retail food shopping during the pandemic and predicted a general shift towards more home cooking and baking post-COVID (Zuokas et al., 2022).

In addition to the immediate panic, supply chain disruptions led to reduced imports and exports, affecting different regions in various ways (Massoud and Zoghi, 2024). Increased unemployment and economic instability impacted health and food security, particularly among vulnerable populations. A meta-study of publications related to COVID-19 highlighted weaknesses in the food system (Kafi et al., 2023). While Kafi et al. called for optimising conventional systems to enhance competitiveness, an important lesson learned was the shift towards shorter value chains and more sustainable, robust production and supply chains.

The relationship between COVID-19 and the capitalist-industrial food system is far more intricate than it



may initially appear. While agrifood relations have proved particularly vulnerable during the pandemic, the capital-driven, productivist food system is also among the primary contributors to the emergence and spread of pathogens that can lead to epidemics and pandemics. Therefore, it is also crucial to consider the debate surrounding the relationship between COVID-19 and zoonotic diseases. Wallace et al. (2020: 7) provide an extensive list of “recent emergent and reemergent farm and foodborne pathogens, originating from across the anthropogenic domain.”

Several traits of the agrifood system contribute to this growing list, accelerating both “the evolution of pathogen virulence and their transmission” while also “removing natural constraints on their deadliness” (Wallace et al., 2020: 8). For example, the increasing standardisation of food production has led to “genetic monocultures,” where “food animals and plants with nearly identical genomes” eliminate the natural disease barriers that genetic diversity typically provides (Wallace et al., 2020: 8). Another contributing factor is the constant drive to reduce slaughter ages – such as bringing the slaughter age of chickens down to just six weeks – favouring the selection of pathogens capable of surviving more robust immune systems. Additionally, the geographic expansion of live animal trade and export has increased the “diversity of genomic segments that their associated pathogens exchange,” accelerating the rate at which disease agents evolve (Wallace et al., 2020: 8).

Furthermore, Molyneux et al. (2011: 1) state that at least 60% of human infectious diseases are caused by zoonotic pathogens. In FAO’s (2017: 59) words, “more than 70% of the infectious diseases that have emerged in humans since the 1940s can be traced back to animals, including wildlife.” Put differently, many novel human pathogens spill over from wild animals to local human communities before spreading globally. This includes SARS-CoV-2, the virus responsible for COVID-19 (Wallace et al., 2020: 6). Many scientists have pointed out that the emergence of SARS-CoV-2 was likely caused by multiple zoonotic transmissions linked to wildlife trading at the Huanan Market (Jiang and Wang, 2022). Particularly relevant to our discussion is that the agrifood system plays a central role in zoonotic spillover, mainly through agribusiness-led deforestation, the contraction and disruption of wildlife habitats, long supply chains, and the commercialisation of the wild/exotic food sector. COVID-19 seems to be not an exception.

Paradoxically, the very characteristics of the food system that contribute to the emergence and spread of such diseases also make agrifood relations among the most vulnerable during pandemics. As reflected in various reports that flourished from the early days of the pandemic onwards, COVID-19 brought unprecedented attention to its effects on food systems (e.g., FIAN, 2020; FSIN and Global Network Against Food Crises, 2020; HLPE, 2021; IPES, 2020; OECD, 2020a, 2020b). These studies, though from various and, at some points, contradictory standpoints, consistently highlighted the profound challenges affecting production, distribution, and consumption.

For instance, the HLPE (2021) detailed how COVID-19 strained food supply chains, leading to rising food insecurity and malnutrition. Meanwhile, the OECD (2020a, 2020b) emphasised how disruptions in production and distribution drove up food prices and reduced accessibility. The FIAN International (2020) report highlighted how COVID-19 intensified human rights violations, disproportionately affecting marginalised communities’ access to adequate food. Similarly, the FSIN and Global Network Against Food Crises (2020) underscored how the pandemic has worsened food insecurity in already vulnerable regions, stressing the need for urgent international intervention.

A recurring theme across the reports was how the pandemic exacerbated existing inequalities and vulnerabilities within food systems, stimulating discussions on food policies and politics. In this regard, the IPES-Food (2020) report advocated for transformative solutions to build more sustainable and equitable food systems, addressing both the immediate crisis and its root causes. The HLPE (2021) echoed this call, arguing for policy interventions that enhance food system resilience to future disruptions. The OECD (2020a) further

recommended targeted measures to support farmers, stabilise food markets and ensure food security for all populations.

Despite these challenges, the crisis also highlighted the resilience present within agrifood networks. Actors and communities adapted to changing conditions through alternative provisioning models, strengthening community connections, and digital mobilisation. Scholars suggested that a crisis like the COVID-19 pandemic can create a window of opportunity for transformative changes in production systems, paving the way for more sustainable agricultural products, shorter food chains, and direct sales (Darnhofer, 2021). The emphasis on local and regional food systems helped mitigate some disruptions by shortening supply chains and enhancing community resilience. Given these conditions, the importance of integrating sustainability and resilience concepts within the food system to bolster supply chain resilience has been further highlighted (Haji and Himpel, 2024).

Furthermore, COVID-19 has not only highlighted the weaknesses and vulnerabilities of our agrifood system but has also acted as a catalyst for its digital transformation (Alam et al., 2023; Haji and Himpel, 2024; Massoud and Zoghi, 2024). As communities faced lockdowns, the reliance on digital platforms for various uses surged, including marketing and distribution. While this has raised concerns regarding the growing power of agrifood and tech corporations, grassroots movements and small-scale producers have also leveraged digital technologies to develop localised and community-driven food distribution models, challenging dominant agribusiness structures and promoting resilience.

Given these intricate relations between COVID-19 and agrifood relations, the two special sections, through nine articles, explore how the pandemic intensified systemic weaknesses while revealing possibilities for resilience and alternative approaches.

Rethinking Food Systems in Crisis: Key Themes and Insights from the Special Section Articles

The first special section (Bjørkhaug, et al., 2023) consists of four articles, and the second includes five. Together, these contributions revisit key themes in sociology of agriculture and food, emphasising the globalisation of agri-food systems, the reconfiguration of socio-ecological relationships, and the politics of agriculture and food. Additionally, they address the methodological and theoretical challenges posed by the pandemic, highlighting how these have influenced agri-food scholarship.

In the first paper of the first special section, Johannes Bhanye (2023) examines how the COVID-19 pandemic and restrictions on associational life impacted food security among Malawian migrants in the Lydiate informal settlement, Zimbabwe. Through ethnographic fieldwork, the study revealed that COVID-19 lockdown measures disrupted vital social support networks and exacerbated food insecurity among migrants already facing legal uncertainty, discrimination, and exclusion from formal aid systems. The pandemic led to job losses, food supply chain disruptions, limited access to essential services, and worsening mental health. Additionally, restrictions on social gatherings weakened communal ties, including religious groups and cultural associations like the Nyau cult, which traditionally provided emotional and material support. Bhanye discusses how migrants develop “nimble ways of belonging”, such as virtual support networks, to maintain resilience in crises. The study calls for policy interventions to support migrants, such as financial aid, strengthened social protection, and improved essential services.

Sohini Bhattacharjee (2023) examines how organic farmers in Delhi NCR, India, navigated the disruptions caused by the COVID-19 pandemic by turning to short food supply chains and direct selling initiatives. The study highlights how reliance on conventional agrifood networks became a liability during the crisis, pushing farmers to establish closer ties with consumers through alternative food networks (AFNs). By emphasising the role of geographical and relational proximity, the article explores how farmers adapted to shifting market



dynamics, leveraging flexibility and community trust to sustain their livelihoods and increase farmers' resilience to systemic shocks such as pandemics. While these initiatives demonstrated resilience, the study also reveals the challenges of scaling up such models in the face of structural barriers. Bhattacharjee's work contributes to debates on food system transformations, showcasing how crises can accelerate shifts toward localised and decentralised food networks.

Atakan Büke and his colleagues (2023) examine the resilience of Istanbul's fresh fruit and vegetable wholesale markets during the COVID-19 pandemic, highlighting how food provisioning continued despite initial expectations of disruption. The study attributes this resilience not to systemic robustness but to weak regulatory enforcement and the agility of market actors who swiftly adapted by redirecting supplies through alternative channels. The authors critique the neoliberal resilience framing by discussing the structural problems faced by the wholesale markets, such as inadequate cold storage and traffic issues, which were exacerbated but not caused by the pandemic. They argue that it often reinforces existing power structures rather than fostering equitable food systems. The study raises critical questions about the long-term implications of unregulated resilience in urban food systems by exposing how crisis responses in food provisioning rely on informal market adaptations rather than structured policy interventions.

In the final article in the first special section, Lea Loretta Zentgraf and Thalita Kalix Garcia (2023) investigate how food movements in Germany adapted to the COVID-19 crisis by leveraging digital tools for mobilisation and collective action. The study highlights how digital communication facilitated new forms of activism, enabling food movements to sustain engagement despite physical restrictions by focusing on the *Wir haben es satt!* Campaign and Slow Food Germany. Analysing these movements at three levels (actor, action, and transformation), the authors show how digital and hybrid repertoires of protest helped strengthen networks advocating for socio-ecological food system change. While the new digital repertoires enabled these movements to broaden their reach, increase visibility, and strengthen their political influence, contributing to the ongoing transformation of the food system in Germany, the study also raises questions about the long-term effectiveness of online activism. With this, Zentgraf and Garcia contribute to broader discussions on the intersection of food politics, digital activism, and collective resistance in times of crisis.

In the first article of the second section, Yıldız Atasoy (2024) focuses on Turkey's state-led agro-industrial expansion. Atasoy illustrates how pandemic-related supply-chain disruptions worsened existing inequalities, particularly affecting small-scale farmers and racialised migrant labourers. The state-planned agro-industrialisation prioritising export-oriented monocultures and supermarket-driven standardisation increased dependence on precarious labour and imported inputs, exposing the system to shocks. The article underscores how industrial agriculture's structural inequalities – land commodification, labour exploitation, and environmental degradation – create ongoing crises despite being framed as a solution to food insecurity. Hilde Bjørkhaug and Jostein Brobakk (2024) examine Norway's reliance on migrant seasonal workers during the pandemic. Despite assurances of food security, the government's decision to exempt agricultural labour from border closures highlighted the industry's dependence on an underpaid, racialised workforce. The paper critiques how policies framed as temporary responses concealed the structural precarity of neoliberal agrifood systems. By treating migrant labour as both essential and disposable, Norway's pandemic response reflects contradictions in a system that sustains vulnerabilities while claiming resilience.

In the third article of the second special section, Sheila Ngoh Manka and Mokong Simon Mapadimeng (2024) analyse the socio-cultural and nutritional resilience of indigenous food systems in Cameroon. The study reveals that the Mankon people hold indigenous foods in high regard for their health benefits and cultural meanings. Manka and Mapadimeng argue that indigenous foods offer an alternative to industrial models, however, a generational knowledge gap threatens long-term sustainability. This study critiques colonial and industrial agriculture's encroachment on traditional practices, weakening ecological and cultural diversity while undermining food sovereignty.

Esra Demirkol Colosio and Valerio Colosio (2024) investigate in their article how grassroots solidarity economy associations in Ankara responded to the food price crisis triggered by COVID-19 and compounded by economic instability. The article situates these associations within broader struggles for food sovereignty and democracy, emphasising their role in resisting the commodification of food and mitigating the weaknesses of neoliberal agri-business. By fostering direct producer-consumer relationships and adopting agroecological practices, these associations not only provided alternative food sources but also emerged as sites of political resistance against an increasingly fragile food regime. The study underscores the potential of these associations to influence urban food policies and promote food democracy. However, the authors also point to structural constraints that limit the expansion of these grassroots initiatives, raising questions about their long-term viability in a system shaped by neoliberal policies.

In the final article of the two sections, Larissa da Silva Araujo (2024) presents an alternative to the industrial model by examining the resilience of agroecological producers in Ecuador's Kayambi communities. The study highlights how principles of solidarity and reciprocity emerge as crucial safety nets when capitalist structures fail to secure food access. Confronted with disruptions in conventional distribution networks, Kayambi farmers decentralised their markets, diversified their crops, and strengthened community-based food systems, demonstrating agroecology's potential for agricultural reconstruction and post-pandemic recovery. The article also explores how crisis-driven transformations reinforced political agroecology both as a practical and ideological response to industrial food system failures.

Discussion

As the contributions in these special sections demonstrate once again, the COVID-19 lockdowns resulted in market closures, mobility restrictions, and job losses in the informal economy, significantly impacting food access (Bhanye, 2023). Conventional agrifood supply chains were disrupted (Bhattacharjee, 2023), especially those with extended ones reliant on transportation and intermediaries (Büke et al., 2023), as well as on migrant labour (Bhanye, 2023; Bjørkhaug and Brobakk, 2024). This disruption led to unprecedented increases in agro-industrial input and food prices (Atasoy, 2024). Government-imposed lockdowns caused logistical breakdowns and limited market access (Bhattacharjee, 2023; Araujo, 2024). Fears of food shortages were anticipated to worsen existing food insecurities and vulnerabilities, prompting public concerns about food availability and prices (Demirkol Colosio and Colosio, 2024; Manka and Mapadimeng, 2024; Zentgraf and Garcia, 2024). These issues underscored inequalities and injustices in food production and access (Büke, 2024). The disruptions caused by COVID-19 revealed the fragility of the global agri-food system and highlighted underlying structural problems (Atasoy, 2024). These problems are partly attributed to government interventions in favour of industrial and commercial agriculture (Atasoy, 2024) and the prioritisation of food security over worker protections (Bjørkhaug and Brobakk, 2024).

Contributions to the special sections highlight how the industrial food regime's dependence on exploitation, standardisation, and marginalisation deepens instability, even as communities and smaller-scale systems demonstrate adaptability, exposing the contradictions within the industrial food system around the globe. For instance, and considering particularly this second special section, while the Cameroonian and Ecuadorian cases provide examples of food systems that emphasise sustainability and cultural continuity but remain vulnerable to industrial encroachment, Türkiye and Norway, despite their different economic and geographic contexts, illustrate how industrial models rely on labour exploitation and environmental depletion, making them susceptible to crises. Although presenting unfolding different dynamics contingent on local contexts, articles from both issues engage with the tension between resilience and fragility. Indigenous and agroecological practices demonstrate the potential of decentralised, community-driven food systems, while industrial agriculture's reliance on precarious labour and global supply chains amplifies risk. In this context, the pandemic serves as a lens for understanding both the weaknesses of capitalist-industrial frameworks and the possibilities for alternative approaches that prioritise equity, sustainability, and local agency.



In sum, these contributions collectively highlight the long-standing weaknesses in the food system amid the new ones that the COVID-19 pandemic created. The industrial model's pursuit of efficiency and profit – through standardisation, labour exploitation, and ecological simplification – has made it vulnerable to shocks while contributing to systemic instability. However, the different cases from different parts of the world suggest that alternatives based on tradition, solidarity, and autonomy offer promising pathways toward more stable and just food systems. By centring these dynamics, these special sections invite scholars and policymakers to rethink food systems that are not only resilient in crises but also equitable and regenerative in daily practice.

Concluding Remarks: Moving Beyond the Crisis and Recovery Narratives

The contributions in these special sections highlight the complexities of how agrifood systems responded to the pandemic, moving beyond simplistic narratives of crisis or recovery. They challenge the idea of an all-powerful capitalist food system while avoiding overly optimistic portrayals of alternative food networks. By focusing on tangible struggles and adaptations, these studies underscore the need to analyse how structural vulnerabilities impact the capacities of different actors to respond to crises. The pandemic did not merely expose weaknesses in agrifood systems; it also revealed how these systems were actively reconfigured in ways that reinforced existing inequalities while simultaneously enabling new forms of resistance and adaptation.

In this regard, a significant strength of this collection lies in its diverse methodological and theoretical approaches, mainly through ethnographic and qualitative research. Unlike much research that has focused on the quantifiable effects of COVID-19 on the food system – such as production and distribution volumes or geographical changes – this collection emphasises the lived experiences of small farmers, migrant workers, and grassroots food movements. Doing so provides a grounded understanding of the multiple and intersecting crises at play. Additionally, it offers a counterpoint to dominant agrifood policy discourses, which often rely on macro-level analyses while overlooking the everyday realities faced by those most affected by disruptions in the food system.

The studies in the special sections suggest a number of theoretically stimulating concepts that can be further developed in future studies. “Nimble ways of belonging” (Bhanye, 2023) is one such example, explaining migrants' adaptation strategies in times of intensified crisis and can be extended to agrifood studies in informal economies. Another is ‘Afro-sensed-’ (Manka and Mapadimeng, 2024), which emphasises the importance of Africans' appreciation and understanding of their pre-colonial modes of production and systems of livelihoods. Combined with Araujo's (2024) suggestion to integrate decolonial and abolitionist approaches to agroecology, these contributions link critical agrifood studies to decolonial knowledge production.

Furthermore, several contributions in these two special sections link economic and moral perspectives in specific production methods, such as agroecology, and natural science-based concepts, such as resilience. They advocate going beyond a neutral understanding of resilience. Instead of treating resilience as an inherently positive attribute of agrifood systems, these studies scrutinise the power dynamics determining whose resilience is prioritised and at what cost. As several contributions illustrate, resilience can justify the maintenance of exploitative labour relations while reinforcing precarious food security arrangements and legitimising neoliberal governance strategies that externalise the burden of adaptation solely on already structurally affected communities. Büke et al.'s (2023) critical discussion on the concept of neoliberal resilience in the context of Istanbul's fresh fruit and vegetable provision systems is a case in point. These discussions extend and strengthen our interdisciplinary research tradition while enabling us to refine critical interrogations of agrifood relations.

It is essential to recognise that there is an ideological intent in stressing the quality of resilience amid socio-economic disruptions. Especially when those being constantly called resilient are often sustaining a life marked by coerced exploitation. In other words, resilience could thus be used to divert attention from exploitative

practices. As Fisher & Jones (2023, 186) poignantly point out, resilience has become a buzzword before and after the pandemic: “By empathising personal strengths and internal resources, the dominant discourse around resilience places the responsibility of ‘recovery’ (another weasel word) with the individual. This aligns with neoliberal ideologies, which promotes individualism and self-reliance.” Looking ahead, agrifood scholarship must be vigilant about the long-term consequences of these transformations, ensuring that resilience is not framed as a depoliticised concept but rather as a site of contestation and power struggle within the global food system.

Finally, the contributions in these two special sections stress the importance of perspectives that connect food studies with literature on, yet not exclusively, labour, social movements, migration, indigenous communities, everyday life, digitalisation, decoloniality, and environmental justice. By integrating these fields, they highlight the interconnected nature of agrifood struggles and the need to understand food systems not merely as economic networks but as sites of social, political, and ecological contestation. Future research in agrifood scholarship should continue to develop these intersections, ensuring that analyses of food systems remain attuned to broader questions of power, justice, and sustainability.



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