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The Food System in the (Post-)Pandemic World: Disruptions, Vulnerability, Resilience, and Alternatives - I

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Abstract

COVID-19 sharply exposed the vulnerabilities of capitalist-industrial agri-food relations and significantly intensified them. At the same time, we have also seen that agri-food relations can be resilient, that some systems prospered when changes were needed, and that many people experienced new forms of solidarity. This is the first of the two special sections to be published successively in the International Journal of Sociology of Agriculture and Food (IJSAF). We aim to revisit the major themes of the sociology of agriculture and food, specifically focusing on what the COVID-19 pandemic has revealed about them: the globalisation of agri-food, the reconfiguration of socio-ecological linkages between agri-food and nature, the politics of agriculture and food, and the methodological and theoretical ways we make sense of these within agri-food scholarship. This introduction presents the background of the special section and the underlying motives for bringing together the empirical articles.

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Introduction

The COVID-19 pandemic has once again illuminated multiple flaws in our food system. Food supplies largely rely on long-distance food chains, many of which have been disrupted due to lockdowns and trade restrictions. The pandemic left millions of people temporarily or permanently more food insecure, as they lost income sources or are suffering from the pandemic-induced global recession. COVID-19 sharply exposed the vulnerabilities of capitalist-industrial agri-food relations and significantly intensified them. At the same time, we have also seen that agri-food relations can be resilient, that some systems prospered when changes were needed, and that many people experienced new forms of solidarity. This special section treats COVID-19, in 2023, as both an ongoing and (post-) global pandemic. The papers included in this special section analyse what happened during the height of the pandemic, but also the reactions, responses, and alternatives in a (post-)pandemic perspective when global trade and migration are no longer restricted by protection. This introduction presents the background of the special section and the underlying motives for bringing together the empirical articles.

The Food System in the (Post-)Pandemic World: Disruptions, Vulnerability, Resilience, and Alternatives - I is the first of the two special sections to be published successively in the International Journal of Sociology of Agriculture and Food (IJSAF). The two special sections aim to revisit the major themes of the sociology of agriculture and food, specifically focusing on what the COVID-19 pandemic has revealed about them: the globalisation of agri-food, the reconfiguration of socio-ecological linkages between agri-food and nature, the politics of agriculture and food, and the methodological and theoretical ways we make sense of these within agri-food scholarship. While this first introduction gives an overview of the main topics identified in the call for papers, the introduction to the second section will provide a detailed framework paper, a review of the literature, and an analysis of the special sections' contribution to the sociology of food and agriculture.

The papers have been a product of the Research Committee on Sociology of Agriculture and Food (RC40) of the International Sociological Association (ISA)'s "mini-conference" that took place at the Leipzig University Research Centre Global Dynamics on October 19-21, 2022.¹ A total of 46 researchers from 37 different universities, research institutions, and social movements from all over the world participated in the mini-conference and engaged in scholarly debate. The following themes and issues emerged through the discussions: 1) the pandemic and food (in-)security, 2) the pandemic and migrant labour, 3) supply chains during the pandemic, 4) state responses to COVID-19, 5) COVID-19 and alternative food networks; 6) the pandemic and social, local and indigenous movements; and 7) possible trajectories for transforming food systems. The presentations provoked intellectually stimulating debates on both empirical, methodological, and theoretical challenges and solutions, particularly concerning three broad inquiries that the special section also aims to explore.

The first inquiry concerns the negative impacts of COVID-19. Early in the pandemic, we received reports of major disruption in the food chain, globally, but also locally. There were panic-like conditions in many countries with hoarding where possible, while others were prevented from accessing markets due to imposed curfews. Questions were quickly raised about food (in-)security in the longer term when access to transport, inputs, and labour was impeded. In retrospect, we seek to understand how invasive these disruptions were on the food system, how lasting they were, and how power in the form of resources and control over discourses enabled or reinforced existing structures, exacerbated pre-existing agri-food problems, and exposed the frauds and failures or contributed to more sustainable transformations. In short, one of the questions that this special section series wants to tackle is: what kinds of disruptions have the pandemic led to, and with what implications for the already existing power dynamics and agri-food problems?

The second inquiry is about the positive dynamics that the pandemic has created in agri-food relations at

¹ For more information on RC40 and its activities please see: <https://www.isa-agrifood.com>



the global, regional, national, and local levels. For instance, during this period we have witnessed an increasing awareness regarding the importance of local food systems and the need for greater resilience in the face of disruptions to global supply chains. Furthermore, while communities and people were trying to cope with COVID-19-induced vulnerabilities that are closely related to the existing systemic inequalities, they came up with and developed creative solutions. The agency of alternative food movements and rural/indigenous social movements have fostered new forms of resistance and resilience. Given this background, the other question that this special section wants to foreground is: what can we learn from these experiences for working towards alternative food systems, and the imagination of different agri-food relationships in a (post-)pandemic world?

The third inquiry is related to the sociology of agriculture and food itself – as a sub-discipline and as an academic community. The pandemic has also been a challenge for agri-food scholarship in various ways. To say the least, universities went online, conferences were postponed, fieldwork was adjourned, scholarly communities and organisations were devoid of face-to-face interactions, etc. New methodological and theoretical challenges emerged, starting from the basic question of how we can make sense of the complexity of agri-food relations during the pandemic. With the help of the discussions on the two broader inquiries mentioned above, this special section also aims to foster a dialogue on how we can address and integrate those theoretical and methodological challenges as well as emerging concepts and methods within the sociology of agriculture and food and critical agri-food studies.

Last but not least, one of the striking questions that emerged during the mini-conference was whether the hegemonic capitalist-industrial food system has proven to be ‘resilient’ in the face of the pandemic. So, in addition to the abovementioned inquiries, authors publishing as part of this special section have been challenged to also respond to this intellectually provocative question.

Reflections on the RC40 mini-conference tradition

Since 1978, RC40 has been working towards generating and invigorating scientific and public debate on the social organisation of agriculture and food. As a scholarly collective informed by diverse critical schools of thought and theoretical frameworks, RC40 tries to create spaces of sustained dialogue and critical engagement in relation to the intensifying social and ecological problems and challenges shaping the field of agriculture and food. The RC40 “mini-conference” and “RC-40 sponsored sessions” tradition is among the most important of those collaborative spaces of intellectual and scholarly engagement, which has made significant contributions to the sociology of agriculture and food. This is reflected in the edited books as well as special issues and journal articles that came out of the previous mini-conferences. Many special issues in *IJSAF* originate in such initiatives co-located with conferences such as the International Rural Sociology Association (IRSA), the European Society for Rural Sociology (ESRS), and the Rural Sociological Society (RSS). We hope this special section series will also contribute to this tradition.