

Extended abstract

Exploring the feasibility for transitions towards a sustainable food system in the Argentinean foodscape

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Introduction

During the last decades, the Southern Cone of the Americas has witnessed the expansion of flex crops devoted to food and biofuel production that are the basis of accumulation processes on a global scale. On the other hand, alternative agricultures based on small-scale producers combined with agroecology or organic production have acquired new momentum thanks to the emergence of segments of consumers, both in the international and the domestic market, which demand food products with different qualities. Their development can be considered as “seeds of change” towards a more sustainable food system.

In this context, one of the issues analyzed by this paper is the challenges that an alternative system of food production poses for Latin American countries, particularly Argentina: a medium-developed country with systematic accumulation crises. Another issue is to discuss the key social groups for making changes in the current food system. The Argentina’s case is of extreme relevance given that the country is seen as one of the early strongholds of neoliberal globalization of food and agriculture, and because of the importance of certain crops in the country’s economy (Gurcan, 2018)

Methods

This study is based on the combination of quantitative and qualitative research techniques, mainly the analysis of available quantitative data and documents. In the first case, statistics of harvested areas of main crops, agri-food trade, local consumption of food items, commercial balances of agricultural products, generation of foreign currency incomes, and contribution of different types of family farmers to food production in Latin America are considered. On the other hand, several documents that analyze initiatives and policies towards a change in the Argentinean food production system are considered.

Results

The study shows the structural and conjunctural vulnerabilities of Latin American countries that narrow the possibilities for adopting policies towards a more sustainable food system. Among them, it highlights that the need to reach a balance in the Argentina’s fiscal account places severe restrictions on the implementation of this kind of policies. On the other hand, an internally differentiated family farming sector raises another set of problems when thinking about possible changes in the food system. Considering its numerical weight, family farming is the most important category among agricultural producers; however, there are huge differences regarding the size of family farmers’ units, their contribution to employment and production. In the case of Argentina, the more capitalized family farmers account for half of the sector’s production, and a good deal of it goes to the global market. Only in field vegetables, which are mainly sold in the domestic market, less capitalized farms produce almost 44% of the total.

Discussion and conclusions

The role of part of the family farming sector in sustaining export production strengthens the argument suggested by Murphy and Burnett (2014) that these producers do not necessarily want to change their form of production, and the need to consider the effects of agrarian class differentiation on the alliances towards a change in the food system (Gurcan, 2018). However, it also highlights that capitalized family farmers tied to the expansion of industrial agriculture experience contradictory outcomes.

Considering these insights, the paper sustains the need of exerting an influence on these farmers who are prone to adopting technologies that increase yields (Craviotti, 2002) but have not been sensitized on alternative ways of food production. The challenge is to avoid an excessive decline in their returns and productivity due to the reduction or abandonment of synthetic inputs through a transition period and more participatory research on the subject (Peano and Sottile, 2017). The paper also highlights issues that hinder a change in the macro level (and usually neglected by agrarian studies), particularly the type of insertion in the international division of labor of developing and medium-developed countries and their reliance on the incomes generated by export to obtain foreign currency and finance their state spending.

Food movements can play an important role in searching strategies that bridge the interests of different rural and urban groups towards a more sustainable food system. Up to present, there have been a small number of public policies towards food sovereignty in Argentina and they involve tensions with the simultaneous promotion of activities considered as the central axes of development (Arzeno et al., 2015). Although elements of resistance to the hegemonic production model and discourses promoting alternative ways of production and consumption have emerged (Carballo, 2017) more evidence is needed on their capacity to affect national policies.

Main references

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