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From farm to table: An exploratory study of the perception of family farmers on the impacts of cultivation, marketing, and practices of consumption of agroecological foods

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Abstract
This study aims to investigate the meanings attributed by family farmers at the Feira Popular da Agricultura Familiar (FPAF) in Duque de Caxias to agroecological and organic food, as well as the importance of their activity and the expectation of stimulating consumption by the local population, contributing to its food security. Information was

compiled on family farming at the national and state levels; public policies for the group; production and distribution of agroecological foods in Brazil. Participant observations were made at a popular street market and, subsequently, interviews were conducted with these farmers, containing questions about their work and marketing routine. Data were underwent content analysis, which resulted in four categories of meaning. They disclosed the perspective of farmers that consumption of agroecological food is still modest, compared to that of conventional food, given their higher price, logistical difficulties, and the insufficient scale of dissemination among local consumers. The study shows that family farmers attribute great value to their work and to the FPAF space, owing to the way they communicate their social identity. In addition, they recognize the importance of natural food in their own lives and in the lives of consumers. This fact suggests that marginalization of the class originates from the lack of government support and visibility to the public, given that producers have an advanced perception of their role as a potential agent for transforming eating habits and bringing consumers closer to the food chain.
Keywords: Food security and sovereignty. Agroecology. Sustainable rural development. Production and marketing of agricultural products. Social Identity.

Do campo à mesa: Um estudo exploratório da percepção do agricultor familiar sobre os impactos do cultivo, comércio e das práticas de consumo de alimentos agroecológicos

Resumo

O presente estudo tem como objetivo investigar os significados atribuídos pelos agricultores familiares da Feira Popular da Agricultura Familiar (FPAF) de Duque de Caxias aos alimentos agroecológicos e orgânicos cultivados, bem como à importância de sua atividade e a expectativa de estimular o consumo da populaçãodo município, contribuindo para sua segurança alimentar. Foram compiladas informações sobre a agricultura familiar em âmbito nacional e estadual; as políticas públicas voltadas ao grupo; a produção e distribuição de alimentos agroecológicos no Brasil. Foram realizadas observações participantes na feira popular e, posteriormente, conduzidas entrevistas com estes agricultores contendo perguntas sobre a rotina de trabalho e comercialização. Após a análise de conteúdo dos dados obtidos, emergiram quatro categorias de significação. Elas trazem a perspectiva dos agricultores de que o consumo de alimentos agroecológicos ainda é discreto, comparado aos convencionais, dado o preço mais elevado, as dificuldades logísticas e a insuficiente escala de disseminação entre consumidores locais. O estudo mostra que os agricultores familiares atribuem grande valor a seu trabalho e ao espaço da FPAF devido à forma como comunicam sua identidade social. Além, reconhecem a importância da alimentação natural em suas vidas e na dos consumidores. Tal fato sugere que a marginalização da classe seja resultado da falta de suporte do governo e de visibilidade para o público, já que os produtores apresentam percepção avançada do seu papel como potencial agente transformador dos hábitos alimentares e de aproximação do consumidor com a cadeia de alimentos.
Palavras-chave: Segurança e soberania alimentar. Agroecologia.Desenvolvimento rural sustentável. Produção e comercialização de produtos agrícolas.Identidade Social.

Del campo a la mesa: Un estudio exploratorio sobre la percepción de los agricultores familiares acerca de los impactos del cultivo, de la comercialización y del consumo de alimentos agroecológicos

Resumen

Este estudio tiene como objetivo investigar los significados atribuidos por los agricultores familiares de la *Feira Popular da Agricultura Familiar* (FPAF) de la ciudad de Duque de Caxias a los alimentos agroecológicos y orgánicos cultivados, así como también a la importancia de su actividad y a la expectativa de estimular el consumo

de la población de esa ciudad, contribuyendo a su seguridad alimentaria. Por ende, se recopiló información sobre la agricultura familiar a nivel nacional y estatal; sobre las políticas públicas direccionadas al colectivo; y sobre la producción y distribución de alimentos agroecológicos en Brasil. Se realizaron observaciones participantes en la feria popular y, posteriormente, entrevistas a esos agricultores, con preguntas sobre su rutina de trabajo y la comercialización. Luego del análisis de contenido de los datos obtenidos, se identificaron cuatro categorías de significado. Ellas traen la perspectiva de los agricultores de que el consumo de alimentos agroecológicos aún es discreto en comparación con los convencionales, debido al mayor precio, a las dificultades logísticas y a la insuficiente escala de difusión entre los consumidores locales. El estudio muestra que los agricultores familiares asignan un gran valor a su trabajo y al espacio de la FPAF por la forma en que comunican su identidad social. Reconocen, además, la importancia de la alimentación natural en su vida y en la de los consumidores. Tal hecho sugiere que la marginación de la clase es resultado de la falta de apoyo del Gobierno y de visibilidad al público, ya que los productores tienen una avanzada percepción de su papel como potenciales agentes de transformación de los hábitos alimentarios y de acercamiento de la cadena alimentaria a los consumidores.
Palabras clave: Seguridad y soberanía alimentaria. Agroecología. Desarrollo rural sostenible. Producción y comercialización de productos agrícolas. Identidad social.

1 Introduction

The concept of family farming is associated with agricultural practices of workers who predominantly use the labor of their own family. It differs from industrial agriculture in terms of availability of resources, training, environmental and socioeconomic insertion (BUAINAIN, 2006). The data from the latest agricultural census shows that family farms account for 77% of the total farms, but they occupy 23% of the entire area destined for agricultural activity, while the rest of the land is destined for agribusiness (IBGE, 2017; MARCHETTI *et al.*, 2020; SAMPAIO; GIRARDI; ROSSINI, 2020). The data indicate that agribusiness generates only 33% of jobs, although it accounts for 77% of the total value of Brazilian production, around R$ 360 billion (IBGE,2017 ; MARCHETTI *et al.*, 2020).

Family farming is related to agroecology, a science that draws on knowledge acquired in traditional agriculture, including attitudes of coexistence and non-exploitation of nature (ALTIERI, 1989). Agroecology advocates more sustainable food systems from a pluralistic, holistic, and integrative epistemological perspective (CUENIN et *al.*, 2019). Owing to its specificities, do Carmo (1998) considers it a key point in the pursuit of sustainability. Brauner and Oliveira Gomes (2020) reported that the measures used in agroecology direct agricultural systems differently from the model currently used in agribusiness, by appreciating values related to environmental defense, farmers' social and economic engagement, and food and nutrition sovereignty and security. The reason lies in the fact that agroecology has diversified, smaller-scale production with direct marketing to end consumers (ASSIS; ROMEIRO, 2005).

The agricultural census of 2017 provided up-to-date information about family farms and increased knowledge about the contribution of small farmers to the

Brazilian agricultural scenario. It also revealed that they play an important role in the production of foods that make up Brazil's basic-needs grocery package, especially cereals and legumes, as well as food produced by olericulture (CARES BUSTAMANTE; ESDRAS LEITE; DE FATIMA BARBOSA, 2021). According to FENATA (National Federation of Agricultural Technicians) (2019), family farmers produce 70% of beans, 34% of rice, 87% of cassava, 46% of maize, 38% of coffee and 21% of wheat grown in Brazil. They also produce 60% of milk and 59% of swine, 50% of poultry and 30% of cattle, with annual revenues of 55.2 billion in 2019.Recently published papers indicated variations in such percentages, and highlighted the importance of family farming in the production of beans (55%), cassava (80%), Arabica coffee (55%), and animal products, especially the production of bovine milk (63 - 64%) (CARES BUSTAMANTE; ESDRAS LEITE; DE FÁTIMA BARBOSA, 2021, p. 136; SILVA; NUNES, 2023, p. 13-14). However, Hoffman (2014) argued that it cannot be categorically claimed that family farmers account for 70% of the food produced in Brazil because one cannot offer a reliable count of the quantities of all food crops grown in the country.

In the context of horticulture, the temporary crops grown by family farmers represent their struggle to remain in agricultural activity and small farmers' resistance to the process of land concentration. In addition, family-farmed olericultural produce is related to the cultivation of a wide range of foodstuffs and the use of agroecological cultivation practices (NETTO; DENARDIN; SCHAFFRATH, 2021). Pedroso, Corcioli and Foguesatto (2020) argued that the cultivation of leafy and non-leafy vegetables is more sensitive to fluctuations in demand and dependent on the structure of distribution of produce and marketing, as such products are more perishable. The possibility of maintaining temporary and permanent crops, together with varied geographic, climatic, structural, and socioeconomic characteristics, implies conditions for growing a large number of plant species. Thus, although olericultural family farming is potentially profitable, it is highly diversified and subject to competition with industrial agriculture.

At the national level, family farmers are noteworthy for being the largest producers of particular fruits, leafy vegetables, and legumes, for example, pineapple (67.1%), açaí (78.7%), lettuce (64.4%), bell pepper (70.8%) (EMBRAPA, 2020). Family farming is also relevant for the cultivation of bananas (48.8%), cacao (56.9%), onion (52.5%) and tomatoes (18.8%) (CARES BUSTAMANTE; ESDRAS LEITE; DE FÁTIMA BARBOSA, 2021; SILVA; NUNES, 2023). In a study of the Brazilian regions, *Silva et al.* (2020) described productive characteristics of family farms in the Brazilian semiarid region, where family farmers produce most of the pumpkin (53.7%), sweet potatoes (69.2%), cassava (80.9%), cashew nuts (61.6%), Brazil plum (81.8%), and watermelon (55.6%) at the regional level.

In the South region, the agricultural census of 2017 shows that 75.6% of all garlic crops in Brazil are family-farmed, while it also highlights the production of grapes (38.7%), bananas (21.3%), orange (21.3%) and onion (75.9%). The largest share of the South region to horticulture is apple production (99.8% of the national total is family-farmed) (CARES BUSTAMANTE; ESDRAS LEITE; DE FÁTIMA BARBOSA, 2021). The authors also pointed out that horticultural family farming in the Southeast region accounts for the following percentage rates of Brazil's production of these

crops, respectively: 52.6% of oranges; 43.34% of grapes; 94.7% of Arabica coffee beans; 25.5% of bananas; 50.9% of sugarcane crops.

Family farmers have a diverse socioeconomic profile, e.g., extremely poor families, high-income farmers, different levels of access to information and education (from elementary school to higher education), even though most farmers are socioeconomically vulnerable (BUAINAIN, 2006; FREITAS; WANDER, 2017; LOURENÇO; SCHNEIDER; GAZOLLA, 2017; MARTINS FILHO *et al.* 2019; FRANZESE; PILATTI, 2019; VALE; AMARAL; RAIMUNDO, 2020).

The present study aims to investigate the meaning attributed to family farming activities, especially the cultivation of organic and agroecological foods, and farmers' expectations of exerting an influence on the population's food consumption. The study takes into account the perspective of family farmers participating in the Feira Popular da Agricultura Familiar (FPAF), a fruit and vegetable street market in Duque de Caxias, state of Rio de Janeiro, and it seeks to identify the meanings attributed by farmers, based on their life narratives. Another objective of this study was to understand how family farmers perceive the evolution of forms of cultivation and the cultivation practices employed in food production and sale, thus encouraging debate on how they construct meaning of such practices based on their experiences in the field and in the marketing of the products at the fair.

According to Severo and Calvero (2020), research on family farming in Brazil is largely concentrated in the fields of human sciences, agricultural sciences, and applied social sciences. In one of the most accessed bibliographic databases in Brazil, the SciELO platform, the above-mentioned fields account for 86% of the papers published on the subject. (SEVERO; CALVERO, 2020, p.783). The authors noted that the publications are geared towards a socio-economic perspective of the theme, especially regarding the participation of family farmers in public policies. In addition, the papers contain an objective description, with statistical data and demographic surveys about small farmers. The present study, however, is exploratory in nature and based on the workers' identity construction process, which is subject to analysis by the researchers. Moreover, the study also discussed issues relative to the marketing and consumption of family-farmed agroecological products. Research on the subject is relevant, but one needs to bring to light family farmers' own perception of their role as agents of transformation of the economy and society, as well as to point out how they recognize the difficulties they face when doing their job, since they are still marginalized in some places of the country (AQUINO; GAZOLLA; SCHNEIDER, 2018).

First, however, a theoretical framework was developed to support the discussion proposed in this work. For this purpose, information was collected on the panorama of family farming in Brazil and in the State of Rio de Janeiro; about the history of public policies aimed at family farmers and agricultural activity; and finally, on the concepts of agroecology and their relation to organic food production and certification criteria.

2 Theoretical background

Family Agriculture in Brazil and in the State of Rio de Janeiro

Family agriculture is a category that went through a milestone of recognition as being a social actor and having economic potential in the 1990s, owing to the contribution of academic research, which has promoted debate on the dynamics of the Brazilian rural area, and the performance of the Federal Government, which created the National Program for Strengthening Family Agriculture (PRONAF) in 1996 (BARROS, 1988; ABRAMOVAY, 1998; SCHNEIDER; CASSOL, 2013; QUIJADA; CAVICHIOLI; SOARES,2020). By then, family farmers were seen, in general, as subsistence workers or small local food sellers, an example of poverty and rural vulnerability in contrast to the landowning, technological agriculture that is dominant in Brazil (WANDERLEY, 2000; GUANZIROLI; BUAINAIN; DI SABBATO, 2012; QUIJADA; CAVICHIOLI; SOARES,2020).

In Brazil, family farming represents a growing economic and social power, structured at various levels and subject to changes in the composition of the class over the last decades. According to Law No 11,326 of July 24, 2006 (Brazil, 2006), which establishes the guidelines for the formulation of the National Policy on Family Agriculture and Family Farming Enterprises (PNAF), family farmers are the ones who practice activities in the rural environment, while meeting a series of established requirements, namely: they do not own, at any rate, an area greater than 4 fiscal modules expressed in hectares; they predominantly use the family's own workforce; and a minimum percentage of the family income is originated from the economic activities of their farm, which they run together with the members of their family. The beneficiaries listed in this law have the right to obtain the Declaration of Aptitude to the National Program for Strengthening Family Agriculture (DAP), which grants access to several public policies, such as the Food Acquisition Program (PAA), Brazil's National School Meal Program (PNAE), the Minimum Price Guarantee Policy (PGM), and others. This legislation also lists other beneficiaries of these policies: families involved in aquaculture activities; people working with agroforestry and extractivism (excluding prospectors), and fishermen, provided they meet all the requirements expressed in the law.

Preliminary data from the Agricultural Census of 2017 (IBGE, 2018) pointed out that about 353.6 million hectares of land are destined for agricultural production, which accounts for 41.13% of Brazil's territorial extension. The average area of family farms is 26 ha, and the average size varies by region. Farms in the Northeast region have the lowest average area (17ha) while those in the Midwest region have the largest (84 ha). Among the 5.07 million registered farms, about 3.2 million do not use pesticides in their production. Most farmers are male, literate, aged 30 years or older.

According to Buainain (2006), the diverse social and demographic characteristics of Brazilian family farmers is associated with the formation of groups throughout history, varied cultural heritage, specific professional and life experiences, as well as the potentialities and constraints of resources, training, environmental and socio-economic integration, and geographic location. Family farming accounts for more than 80% of Brazil's agricultural establishments and approximately 35% of the income in the agricultural sector.

In the State of Rio de Janeiro, according to Carneiro and Teixeira (2012), the share of agricultural activity at the national level was not significant, compared to the other Brazilian states. In line with these authors, Souza (2019) pointed out that agriculture is less economically important than other activities in the state of Rio de Janeiro. The demographic dynamics of the State, i.e., population concentrated in urban centers, and the changes in the rural environment of Rio de Janeiro, especially the valorization of non-agricultural activities, such as tourism, oil and gas, industry, and services, are characteristics that help explain this lesser contribution in territories previously known for agricultural activities (MARAFON, 2017). However, there is a growing increase in support of trade and cultivation of crops produced mainly in the regions of Serrana, Norte-Fluminense and some points in the Metropolitan Region (EMATER-RIO, 2018; MATTOS; AZEVEDO IRVING; SEABRA, 2021).

Souza (2019) made a multidimensional analysis of rural development in Rio de Janeiro and showed that there are heterogeneous indicators in several regions of the State. The author explained that the municipalities of the northwest region of Rio de Janeiro have the worst rates of development, with positive indicators expressed only in those related to the presence of family agriculture. The study by Guanziroli and Vinchon (2019) reported quantitative results that corroborate the idea that strengthening family agriculture in the region drives the generation of gross income of local inhabitants and has the potential to reduce the inequalities arising from the collapse of coffee and sugarcane cycles whose consequences remain to date. In the northern region of the state, the agrarian space of municipalities also developed around the monoculture of sugarcane, but it was later taken over by the oil activity (EMERICK; PESSÔA, 2017; FREITAS; SANTOS, 2018). Until 2013, sugarcane was still the main crop grown in the region, although fruit and vegetables were produced on family farms (EMERICK; PESSÔA, 2017; FREITAS; SANTOS, 2018). In the 2000s, the project Frutificar was created to boost the development of family farmers who suffered from the stagnation of land activity in the region and the exploitation of temporary work on large farms. The project strengthened and increased the representativeness of small farmers in the local economy by means of the fruit growing activity (BAHIENSE; SOUZA; PONCIANO, 2015; FREITAS; SANTOS, 2018; SOUZA, 2019). However, the sociodemographic indicators of the workers show that there is still class vulnerability and difficulty in access to technology; thus, traditional management continues, as shown in the study by Paes and Zappes (2016).

The Serrana region of Rio de Janeiro developed around the growth of coffee crops in the 19th century and the supply of food to the metropolitan region (ALENTEJANO, 2005). Souza (2019) pointed out that family farming prospered in rural municipalities because of the topographic characteristics that favored small and medium-sized properties rather than large landed estates. Aun and Assis (2021) explained that most family farms in the mountainous region grows organic and agroecological crops not only because of the geographical conditions that facilitate planting but also owing to partnerships between producers and agronomists in favor of an alternative agricultural model, with lower environmental impacts, which was implemented in the 1980s. Currently, organic agriculture does not occur only on family farms, and it drives the economy of the region parallel to industry; in some

cases, it is associated with tourism (MARAFON, 2017). The work of Guanziroli and Vinchon (2019) corroborates the previous ones, highlighting the Serrana region as a locality where family farming has great economic potential, especially in the production of vegetables and flowers. Previously, Carneiro and Rocha (2009) had already fostered debate on the importance of family farming in the Serrana region for the supply of food to several cities in the state of Rio de Janeiro, accounting for about 90% of the State's olericulture.

The metropolitan region of Rio de Janeiro went through the process of industrialization and rural-to-urban transition, which increased mainly between the 1940s and the 1960s, when there were the first movements of resistance by family farm workers (ALENTEJANO, 2005). Machado (2019) argued that the urbanization of rural areas in the state of Rio de Janeiro required that crop growers should adapt to the new context by adopting cultivation technologies so that they could continue their activity in such a dynamic geographical space. However, many small farmers cannot afford to maintain and develop agricultural activity (SILVA; MARAFON, 2004; MACHADO, 2019).

Portilho *et al.* (2019) pointed out that family farmers who have long remained in the metropolitan region, especially in Baixada Fluminense, are in a social context of competition for space with several other legal and illegal activities, with constant danger of suppression of the places that were destined for land reform settlements. Working in non-agricultural activities to supplement one's family income is common among urban crop growers, as shown in the works of Marafon (2017), Portilho *et al.* (2019) and Souza (2019). The literature indicates that, in general, in the metropolitan region, family farm workers have difficulty in applying technological modernization to their activities, often resorting to partnerships with universities, cooperatives, municipal agencies and other institutions to strengthen the agricultural practice and social identity of family farmers through training and recovery of knowledge about traditional and agroecological management (SANTOS; RICHARD, 2017; MACHADO, 2020; VIANNA, 2020). The study of Machado (2019) stressed that family farmers who persevered in the metropolitan region with good capitalization conditions adopted the cultivation of high-value fruits and certified organic foodstuffs. Portilho *et al.* (2019) reported that in Baixada Fluminense, there are still small farmers that grow alternate crops for subsistence and receive a low income by selling a part of their production.

The modernization of production techniques, along with the emergence of new policies and social structuring, is needed for strengthening family agriculture, although there are differences in access to technology and compliance with public policies (GRISA, 2018; SOUZA *et al.*, 2019; QUIJADA; CAVICHIOLI; SOARES,2020). These transformations have directly impacted the lives of individuals who dedicate to agriculture at present, and they are reflected in such individuals' trajectories, forms of planting, harvesting, and production, and even in their living and eating habits. The recognition of the social role of family farmers also encourages reflection on the fact that government institutions must formulate public policies aimed at small farmers.

Public policies for family farming

The Brazilian rural area suffered considerable changes in the political and social aspects, mainly after the promulgation of the Federal Constitution of 1988. Despite the growth of liberal ideals and lower State intervention in the 1990s, the recognition of family farmers as a political group represented a milestone in public policy participation (GRISA; SCHNEIDER, 2014; SILVA, 2011; GRISA, 2018). Quijada, Cavichioli and Soares (2020) noted that, until the 1990s, public policies aimed at the agricultural sector had favored the modernization and capitalization of large properties by offering access to credit and tax subsidies, while ignoring small family farmers, thus maintaining the peasantry-based land structure.

Grisa and Schneider (2014) made an in-depth analysis of Brazilian public policies for family farming, and divided them into three generations separated by critical moments of government action for the class. The first generation was marked by a context of dispute between two opposing lines of demands for sectoral reforms. One line was represented by the struggle of social movements, political and academic figures, for basic reforms, especially the lad reform; the other line was the struggle of the agrarian and economic elites for the technological modernization of agriculture. The authors noted that the first generation of public policies for family farming was focused on political recognition of the class amid an earlier orientation of the state that benefited large farmers. In this generation, the National Program for Strengthening Family Farming (Pronaf) was launched in 1995, followed by other subsequent policies, such as the creation of the Ministry of Agrarian Development (MDA) in 1999 and the Department of Family Farming (SAF) in 2001. In addition, other initiatives included the Land Reform Settlements Policy, the creation of the Family Agriculture Insurance (Seaf-2004), and the Family Agriculture Price Guarantee Program (PGPAF-2006) (GRISA; SCHNEIDER, 2014; GRISA, 2018). Pronaf was consolidated in the following years as the most solid public agricultural policy for the benefit of family farmers by providing funding opportunities. It was the basis for the subsequent development of other public policies (SILVA, 2011; DE FREITAS, 2018; QUIJADA; CAVICHIOLI; SOARES, 2020).

The second generation started in the last years of the 1990s, and it was characterized by the focus on social and welfare activities (SCHNEIDER; SHIK; BELIK, 2010; GRISA; SCHNEIDER, 2014). Within Pronaf, lines of action were created to handle socioeconomic diversity in the class of family farmers, aiming to reduce the vulnerability of some groups with support to infrastructure, income, and fight against hunger and poverty. According to these works, the second generation of public policies was marked by the inclusion of family farmers in social benefit programs such as Pronaf Infrastructure and Municipal Services, Zero Hunger, "Bolsa Família"; the creation of the Crop Guarantee Program and the National Rural Housing Program; the participation of family groups in the Sustainable Development Program of Rural Territories (Pronat), among other actions.

The third generation of public policies for family agriculture was focused on sustainability, agroecology, economic participation and food and nutritional security (GRISA; SCHNEIDER, 2014; NIEDERLE *et al.*, 2019). According to the authors, this generation emerges in the context of changing the political structure in the country in the 2000s, with previously marginalized social actors gaining importance in the

scenario. Public policies that have been formulated since the 1990 were institutionalized in this new context. The Zero Hunger Project was strengthened; the National Council for Food and Nutrition Security (Consea) was reestablished; and Extraordinary Ministry of Food Security and Fight against Hunger (MESA) was created. All these were milestones for the creation of public policies that characterize the third generation (GRISA; SCHNEIDER, 2014; GRISA, 2018; NIEDERLE *et al.*, 2019).

Seeking to focus on family agriculture the government budget that was intended for the institutional purchase of food and distribution to vulnerable families, the Food Acquisition Program (PAA) was created in 2003 (HESPANHOL, 2013; GRISA; SCHNEIDER, 2014; BORSATTO *et al.*, 2020; QUIJADA; CAVICHIOLI; SOARES, 2020). According to Borsatto *et al.* (2020), the program enabled the autonomy of family farmers and encouraged their participation in other public policies, in addition to ensuring the flow of food production and food security of those to whom the inputs were intended. The success of the program was important for reformulation of another policy years later, in 2009, namely the National School Meal Program (PNAE). In this program, it was established that 30% of public resources for school meals should be allocated to acquisition from family farmers, again promoting the generation of income to crop growers and food and nutritional security to the actors involved, in addition to the increased coverage of participating schools (PEIXINHO, 2013; GRISA, SCHNEIDER, 2014; LOPES JUNIOR *et al.* 2018; KROTH, GEREMIA, MUSSIO, 2020; QUIJADA, CAVICHIOLI; SOARES, 2020).

However, it should be noted that, over the years, less capitalized farmers have had considerable difficulty in accessing public policies for family farming. Obstacles related to organization of production, meeting the demand of institutional bidding, adequacy to sanitary requirements, and logistical difficulties were reported in some studies that have addressed the PAA and PNAE (DE PAULA, KAMIMURA, SILVA, 2014; ESTEVAM, SALVARO, DOS SANTOS, 2018; LOPES JÚNIOR *et al.* 2018; ASSIS, FRANÇA, COELHO, 2019). Similarly, Cazella, Capellesso, and Schneider (2020) made an analysis of why some family farmers have difficulty in accessing Pronaf. Through a literature review, the authors found that such access tends to remain nearly exclusive to large-scale farmers owing to different obstacles, e.g., both prospective beneficiaries and credit operators lack knowledge of credit standards; there r=are problems in financial agencies; farmers in vulnerable condition are not always interested; crop growers lack assistance, etc. The study shows that the lack of participation of family farmers is not only due to the inefficiency of public management, but also because some of the farmers that would otherwise be supported by Pronaf choose not to join the program.

The activity of social movements and the closer ties between family farmers and the government, which are characteristic of the second and third generations of public policies, is a way to avoid the exclusion of farmers and allow the creation of new markets related to food security and sustainability issues (GRISA, SCHNEIDER, 2014; NIEDERLE *et al.*, 2019). In this context, further debate on alternative forms of agriculture and the increased integration of social actors who defended agroecology as a production benchmark was important for including it in the guidelines of government action (PETERSEN, MUSSOI, DAL SOGLIO, 2013). Picolotto and Brandenbrug (2015) pointed out that the negative consequences of

agricultural modernization as of the 1970s mobilized agricultural social movements to gear family farmers and small producers towards agroecological practices, while they carried out political representation against the State for the creation and inclusion of public policies for the class. Thus, after the first public policies for family agriculture, initiatives were taken to promote agroecology, initially within in the National Policy for Technical Assistance and Rural Extension (PNATER), in 2003 (NIEDERLE *et al.* , 2019). Years later, the Government created the National Policy for Agroecology and Organic Production (PNAPO), in 2012, and the National Plans of Agroecology and Organic Production (PLANAPOs), in 2013 and 2016 (GRISA, CHECHI, 2016; CHECHI, 2017; NIEDERLE *et al.* , 2019). These policies, therefore, arise with the objective of encouraging the Brazilian rural development, based on agroecological production systems, with family farmers as the main social actors to promote the production and consumption of organic and agroecological foods.

Agroecological and organic food products

Agroecological agriculture is not a new movement, because, according to Fonseca (2009), there was already a set of alternative activities around non-industrial forms of agriculture in the 1970s and 1980s. At that time, such practices were called alternative agriculture, owing to a lack of more specific term. The techniques for large-scale production of the industrial model, which had emerged in the early twentieth century, were questioned on behalf of a more sustainable production of healthier food for human consumption. in Brazil, the emergence of movements in favor of alternative forms of agriculture occurred in response to the so-called Green Revolution, previously consolidated in Europe and North America (FONSECA, 2009; ALTIERI, 2010; SANTOS et al., 2014; OLIVEIRA, GRISA, NIEDERLE, 2020). Assis and Romeiro (2002) defined agroecology, at first, as an interdisciplinary science that was developed to provide theoretical support to the reformulation of food production systems, rather than as an agricultural practice. Abreu *et al.* (2012) corroborated such idea by discussing the relations between agroecology and organic agriculture, showing the similarities and differences between them. Other studies on the subject showed that the concept of agroecology appears not only in the scientific arena, but also in the professional field, as an agricultural practice, and at the social level, as a representation in activist movements (WEZEL *et al.*, 2009; RIVERA-FERRE, 2018; LOCONTO; FOUILLEUX, 2019).

The review of Wezel *et al.* (2009) described the historical evolution of Agroecology and its applications, shifting from the academic field to agricultural practice to the struggle for social mobilization. Their work shows that, as of the 1970s, in response to the advance of the Green Revolution, the interest in the implementation of organic production systems stimulated the development of sustainable agrosystems that were based on agroecological principles. In the following decade, research began to focus not only on agrosystems, but also on the entire food chain. In addition, Agroecology becomes recognized as an agricultural practice according to the effective application of concepts in production systems, especially in family-run establishments (WEZEL *et al.*, 2009; GLIESSMAN, 2014). The perception of sustainability in agroecological food systems also includes the issues of economic integration, policy, and social vulnerability of local farmers, in addition

to the producer-consumer relationship (GLIESSMAN, 2013; LAMINE; DAWSON, 2018). Thus, environmental and rural social movements have adopted Agroecology as a cause, emerging strongly in Latin America and fighting for the implementation of public policies for sustainable agriculture and the defense of local crop growers (ASSIS; ROMEIRO, 2002; WEZEL *et al.*, 2009; GLIESSMAN, 2013; LOCONTO; FOUILLEUX, 2019; NIEDERLE *et al.*, 2019). Regarding its practices, ecological farming is based on a dynamic system involving nature and human beings. On the one hand, there are environmental, ecological processes such as nutrient cycles, predator/prey interactions, competition, commensalism, and ecological successions. On the other hand, there are human beings and all their historical and cultural background that directly impacts their actions in the field, whether in the preservation of ecosystems through responsible management, or in the search for food and economic sovereignty through the mechanisms of solidarity and economic viability among workers (ALTIERI, 2012; *SANTOS et al.*, 2014). Miklos (1999) previously reported that the measures used in ecological agriculture add to agricultural systems values related to environmental protection, the social engagement of producers and consumers involved in the activity, as well as the ecological sustainability of production systems.

In the case of agroecological practices, organic production of food on a local scale commonly takes place. Abreu *et al.* (2012) stressed that the concepts of Agroecology and Organic Agriculture are often used interchangeably. Organic foods come from a system in which pesticides or other artificial inputs, medicines, and genetically modified organisms are not used. Rather, it employs measures for sustainable management of the soil and the natural resources involved (FONSECA, 2009; SOUSA *et al.*, 2012; WEBER; DA SILVA, 2021). Dias *et al*. (2015) pointed out that the cultivation of this type of food was an expanding activity in recent years, and they also highlighted an estimated increase by 9%. This estimate is associated with the growing global demand for products and services that provide improvements to health and human well-being, added to the distrust of part of society regarding food from conventional production systems (DIAS *et al.*, 2015; MORAES; OLIVEIRA, 2017; LIMA *et al.*, 2020). The study of *Lima et al.* (2020) shows that between 2000 and 2017, the consumption of organic foods marketed in retail worldwide increased by a rate of 11%. Despite a slower growth in Brazil compared to other countries in the world, there was an increase in the number of certified farmers in the country as of 2010 (MARINI *et al.*, 2016; GALHARDO; DA SILVA; LIMA, 2019; LIMA *et al.*, 2020). It is noteworthy that part of organic production in Brazil occurs on an industrial scale, some of which are large companies responsible for a large portion of national production (LIMA *et al.*, 2020).

Even with public policies for agroecology and family agriculture, and the increase in consumer market demand, organic and agroecological producers still face challenges to growth, especially smaller farmers. One of the biggest obstacles is the difficulty in obtaining certification and standardized registration of farmers (CASTRO NETO *et al.*, 2010; MARINI *et al.*, 2016; LIMA *et al.*, 2020).

The certification of organic products can be granted by different agencies in Brazil, under specific rules that ensure, after compliance, that farmers receive a guarantee seal. This document not only protects and legitimizes the activity of farmers, but also increases credibility to the product and transparency in the

techniques and principles used in organic production (ALVES; SANTOS; AZEVEDO, 2012; MARINI *et al.*, 2016; GALHARDO; DA SILVA; LIMA, 2019; WEBER; SILVA, 2021). Certificates are obtained through Organic Conformity Certification Agencies, which are defined as legal entities registered in the Brazilian System of Organic Conformity Assessment (SisOrg), accredited to the Ministry of Agriculture, Livestock and Supply (MAPA) (ALVES; SANTOS; AZEVEDO, 2012; MARINI *et al.*, 2016; GALHARDO; DA SILVA; LIMA, 2019; NIEDERLE; DORVILLE; LEMEILLEUR, 2021).

The documentation allows farmers to perform the marketing of organic products in free and specialized fruit and vegetable street markets, stores, restaurants, public and private markets, such as canteens inside companies and schools. There is, however, a social control mechanism provided for by law that allows direct sale without the need for certification, with the guarantee attested by a Social Control Organization (OCS) or a Participatory Organization for the Evaluation of Organic Conformity (OPAC) linked to MAPA (MIKLÓS, 1999; GALHARDO; DA SILVA; LIMA, 2019; NIEDERLE; DORVILLE; LEMEILLEUR, 2021).

3 Method

To achieve the objective of the study, exploratory research was conducted, adopting the hermeneutic approach, under the interpretative paradigm (THOMPSON, 1997). In such approach, the construction of knowledge occurs through the combination of different perspectives on the same theme, assuming that reality is socially elaborated, multiple, holistic, and contextual (LINCOLN; GUBA, 1985), which enables the description and interpretation of social phenomena (CUTHBERTSON; ROBB; BLAIR, 2020). This approach interacts with that of other studies that showed narratives of the researched group and their perceptions about topics related to the activity practiced or socioeconomic conditions which they experience (DURAM, 2000; MEDINA; NOVAES, 2014; DREBY; JUNG; SULLIVAN, 2017; PEREIRA; BRITO; PEREIRA, 2017; POTRICH; GRZYBOVSKI; TOEBE, 2017; CORONA; VASQUES; GODOY, 2018; FOSSÁ; COMERLATTO; MATTEI, 2018; FERNANDES *et al.*, 2020; RIBEIRO; PÉRICO; FEIL, 2021).

For the empirical part of this study, the selected group consisted of family farmers living in the region known as Baixada Fluminense; they produce organic and/or agroecological foods and meet to market them at the street market Feira Popular da Agricultura Familiar (FPAF), operating since September 2013 in the municipality of Duque de Caxias, state of Rio de Janeiro. Farmers were selected to participate in in-depth interviews to access, through their narrative *per se*, their perceptions and the meanings regarding the role of family farming. There was a previous stage in which the researchers made three visits to the site of the street market; it was an opportunity to have informal conversations with the greengrocers and some consumers, as well as record the researchers' impressions of the environment. This stage followed Bardin's (2011) pre-content analysis protocols, to establish elements that served as the basis for the design of a script for the interviews, to be conducted later. The interviews were conducted directly by the researchers at the place where the food street market takes place. The visits occurred between January and March 2019. The interviewees were invited to participate in the interview by signing an informed consent form. Table 1 shows the

list of farmers participating in this study, their ages, and the main products grown on their farms. To preserve their identities, the names of the respondents were changed to fictitious names.

A total of 51 traders are registered with FPAF. The space of the fruit and vegetable street market is shared among family farmers, craftsmen, and food traders who participate in a solidarity economy project of the municipality. Over the years, there were fluctuations in the number of greengrocers; currently, FPAF is composed mostly by craftsmen (37 sellers), followed by farmers (11) and food traders (3). At the time of the survey, only 8 food sellers comprised the sector intended for family farming. Three of the farmers were away from the trade activity at the fair, even though they kept growing their crops. Most farmers, 10 in all, come from settlements located in the rural district of Duque de Caxias (4th District), while one of them lives and grows crops on the outskirts near the city center (1st District). The engagement of farmers at the street market is dynamic, since the number of participants fluctuated owing to logistical limitations, difficulty in distributing production, and even health problems. These problems particularly affect farmers settled in the 4th District.

Table 1. List of family farmers (fictitious names) at the Feira Popular da Agricultura Familiar (FPAF) in Duque de Caxias, interviewed by the researchers, their ages. and the main products they sold at the street market.

FARMER	AGE	MAIN CROPS GROWN	PRODUCTS SOLD AT FPAF	AGROECOLOGICAL PRODUCTION	CERTIFICATION OF ORGANIC PRODUCTS
1. Suzana	**56 y/o**	**Cassava** (Manihot esculenta), **potato** (Solanum tuberosum), **persian lime** (Citrus × latifolia), **banana** (Musa spp.), **seasonal foodstufs.**	Fresh vegetables, peeled cassava (Manihot esculenta), juices and cakes made from produce grown seasonally.	**YES**	**No. (Self-reported production)**
2. Caroline	**24 y/o**	**Jackfruit** (Artocarpus heterophyllus), **cassava** (Manihot esculenta), **orange** (Citrus × sinensis), **banana** (Musa spp.), **bovine milk** (Bos taurus), **leafy vegetables, seasonal foodstufs.**	Fresh vegetables, peeled cassava (Manihot esculenta), peeled and portioned jackfruit (Artocarpus heterophyllus), bottled and refrigerated raw milk.	**YES**	**No. (Self-reported production)**
3. Luis Paulo	**57 y/o**	**Cassava** (Manihot esculenta), **banana** (Musa spp.), **seasonal foodstufs.**	Peeled cassava (Manihot esculenta) and fresh vegetables.	**YES**	**No. (Self-reported production)**
4. Mariana	**25 y/o**	**Cassava** (Manihot esculenta), **genipap** (Genipa americana), **persian lime** (Citrus × latifolia), **yam** (Colocasia esculenta), **sweet potato** (Ipomoea batatas), **seasonal foodstufs.**	Peeled cassava (Manihot esculenta) and fresh vegetables.	**YES**	**No. (Self-reported production)**
5. Douglas	**38 y/o**	**Banana** (Musa spp.), **orange** (Citrus × sinensis), **jackfruit** (Artocarpus heterophyllus), **cassava** (Manihot esculenta).	Fresh vegetables, peeled cassava (Manihot esculenta), peeled and portioned jackfruit (Artocarpus heterophyllus).	**YES**	**No. (Self-reported production)**
6. Marcos	**36 y/o**	**Potato** (Solanum tuberosum), **rangpur** (Citrus × limonia), **yam** (Colocasia esculenta), **pumpkin** (Cucurbita spp.), **okra** (Abelmoschus esculentus), **pepper** (Capsicum spp.), **eggplant** (Solanum melongena), **banana** (Musa spp.), **sweet potato** (Ipomoea batatas), **cassava** (Manihot esculenta).	Peeled cassava (Manihot esculenta) and fresh vegetables.	**YES**	**No. (Self-reported production)**
7. Antônio	**N/A**	**Cassava** (Manihot esculenta), **potato** (Solanum tuberosum), **Persian lime** (Citrus × latifolia), **banana** (Musa spp.), **seasonal foodstufs.**	Peeled cassava (Manihot esculenta) and fresh vegetables.	**YES**	**No. (Self-reported production)**
8. Pedro	**60 y/o**	**Arabica coffee** (Coffea arabica), **cassava** (Manihot esculenta), **chicken eggs** (Gallus gallus domesticus).	Arabica coffee - beans and ground.	**YES**	**No. (Self-reported production)**

The FPAF is officially held on Tuesdays, between 8 a.m. and 4 p.m. The stands are distributed along a square in the center of the municipality and separated into two sectors that divide the family farmers and traders of the solidarity economy. In the family farming sector, *fresh* products are sold; some of them are portioned and packaged, going through minimal processing, e.g., removal of stalks and husks. Occasionally, farmers sell preparations such as juices and cakes prepared with the food they grow.

The interviews were based on a semi-structured script that addressed topics regarding their routine as farmers, the processes of production and cultivation, and the sale of food at the popular fruit and vegetable street market. The researchers at first proposed 15 open questions, but they focused the interviews on key questions:

1. How do you feel about contributing to the development of agriculture?
2. Could you tell us your story as a farmer? What about your family?

3. For you, what is "real food" like?
4. What do you realize has changed in food since the time your parents/grandparents were farmers to this day? And what has changed in the forms of cultivation?
5. What does the sales space at the street market mean for you and your family?

The interview is a method that seeks to collect answers from the subjective experience of a source, chosen for having information that one wants to know (ELLIOTT; JANKEL-ELLIOTT, 2003). Seidman (2006) and Moura (2021) argued that the objective of an in-depth interview is to understand the experience lived by the informant to understand the meanings attributed to such experience. McCracken (1988) stressed that this technique allows researchers to interact directly with interviewees, encouraging them to share their thoughts and internalized beliefs about the phenomenon being investigated. In addition, as highlighted by Oliveira (1996), the "native categories" can only be achieved through the qualitative interview technique, which demands a "special type of listening" (p.19) to grasp the reality described by the individual who is immersed in the study phenomenon.

Eight interviews were conducted with FPAF family farmers. The interviews lasted approximately 30-50 minutes, and they were fully recorded and transcribed for analysis. Data processing used content analysis (CA) of the main elements identified (STRAUSS; CORBIN, 2008; FERNANDES; VINHAS, 2019). The collected data were analyzed together. Content analysis followed the protocols introduced by Orlandi (2012) and Strauss and Corbin (2008). Considering the set objective, the process of analysis of the meanings attributed to the messages was started, taking into account the process of construction of meaning by family farmers.

According to these protocols, the analysis consisted of several stages, namely: (1) immersion in the study space for an analysis of the context of the phenomenon; (2) after the analysis of the interviews, the development of a set of previously labeled initial themes and categories; (3) identification, in the transcriptions, of the discourses corresponding to more general categories identified in the literature; (4) Identification of new aspects that emerged from the field for refinement; (5) re-reading the interview transcripts; (6) selection of new sections of the informants' discourses corresponding to the identified categories; (7) re-checking the data based on the interviews to confirm the emerging categories. The collected material was interpreted using the constant comparison, a technique proposed by the cited authors.

This data treatment procedure allowed us to make efforts to understand the meaning of food from the perspective of the individuals who were involved in the phenomenon under analysis. It is also found that the identified categories are native, because, as recommended by Araujo *et al.* (2019) and Oliveira (1996), they emerge directly from the data collected, based on the view of individuals immersed in the investigated reality. These categories of analysis were understood as units of meaning, which led to the design of the material that will be presented in the next section of this article.

Finally, it is noteworthy that owing to the qualitative nature of the study, there is no intention of generalization or extrapolation of the results. Owing to its

exploratory nature, this study seeks to contribute to new aspects of the consumption of organic and/or agroecological foods produced in the context of family agriculture, advancing the knowledge of the subject.

4 Analysis of results

Data processing resulted in four different categories of analysis: 1. Importance of the FPAF for the recognition of family farming; 2. Sustainable foods produced by small-scale farmers; 3. Tradition in the means of production; 4. Meaning of *"Food from the Farm"*. These categories are detailed below.

(1) Importance of the FPAF for the recognition of family farming

A category that emerges markedly in the discourse of the interviewees, is related to the political appeal of the FPAF and its influence on the family farmers who participate in FPAF, regarding its drive to make the work of the small farmers better known. The interviewees mentioned the importance of this street market for the municipality and for the dissemination of family agriculture as an activity promoting quality of life. As reported in the interviews, there is concern about the sale and origin of the products, and an intention to promote the venue as an access point and share knowledge about organic or agroecological foods and their benefits for a healthy diet. The direct interaction with customers enabled by the FPAF brings visibility to the theme and the work performed by these farmers. In addition, the group understands the value of their own work and the importance of being agents to provide healthy food to the population; these findings are aligned with those of the study by *Ell et al.* (2012) and, more recently, with the work of Pereira, Brito and Pereira (2017). Some statements made by the interviewees exemplify the findings of this study:

"It's important, because people try to eat better, good food, and it's very difficult to find it. (...) It's not every place that has it, so it's very important for us to be here selling food so these people can buy it." (Family farmer 2 in an interview with the researchers).

"I'm very happy to produce something good, which won't be bad to me or to my colleagues, who buy products that won't harm their health." (Family farmer 6 in an interview with the researchers).

"It is very good to be able to sell agroecological products that have good quality and are not expensive in a municipality of Baixada Fluminense. You only see organic or agroecological products in richer areas." (Family farmer 3 in an interview with the researchers).

In addition, the possibility to market their products regularly ensures they have regular clients and income, which encourages them to continue producing, thus leading to the growth of the fair.

"It is our economic activity. In addition to eating what we grow, we make a living out of it. We sell these products. Everyone wins." (Family farmer 5 in an interview with the researchers) .

"It is our sales space, where we can make contacts and spread the word about what we do." (Family farmer 4 in an interview with the researchers).

Importantly, the obstacles regarding the quality of life and work, the need for greater investment of the public power, and consumer engagement were mentioned in their answers. Farmers still feel marginalized and hardly recognized by public institutions and people outside that environment. Despite the visibility increased by the FPAF, the interviewees' narratives show the difficulties faced by their families in consolidating the activity, which reinforces the dedication and potential of their work.

"In a landless project, they [grandparents] were given this land... Difficult at first. They had to live in a canvas tent, fighting for space. But everyone works hard, wakes up early, they dedicate to it...". (Family farmer 5 in an interview with the researchers).

"It was going to be much better for agriculture if the government helped the settlers, donated machines to help production (...) We could even provide food for school meals in Caxias". (Family farmer 7 in an interview with the researchers).

During the visits to the street market, farmers reported being duly registered in institutions of political and social representation in the municipality; in addition, they were included in the main public policies in force. However, the narratives showed that there is still detachment and the political representation for the class is not so effective in their routines.

(2) ***Sustainable food produced by small farmers***

The narratives show that the farmers perceive the benefit of environmentally responsible management linked to initiatives of engagement and strengthening of the community through exchanges. This position points to the association with the ideals of sustainability that refer to environmentally friendly, economically viable, and socially fair attitudes. Farmers' discourse goes beyond the product that brings health benefits, grown without synthetic additives or pesticides. They also highlight their vision that it is the best way to ensure the origin of food until it reaches consumers in an ecologically clean manner. In conversations with researchers, expressions such as "natural", "which nature gives us", "respecting nature" were frequently mentioned. Therefore, they are evidently concerned about the impact of agricultural activity and the approval of their practices.

> We have always eaten something natural like that. But there was always a farmer [in the state of Espírito Santo] who used pesticides that could contaminate some fruits and vegetables. Now, living here, there is no such thing. It all comes from nature, really. (...) It is natural food, legumes and vegetables that come right from our farm (Family farmer 6 in an interview with the researchers).

As a social group that relies among the components themselves, they find it important to supply seeds among the members of the settlement as a way to guarantee the quality of the food that will be produced. Farmers are still trying to maintain such practice, although they recognize there is some difficulty in doing it.

"Even the seeds that we used to pick up from our neighbors, nowadays are more difficult to find. You only have a few seeds if you buy them in the market, and you still don't know how these seeds were made." (Family farmer 3 in an interview with the researchers).

The profile of the FPAF farmers is similar to that of the participants in the study by *Santos et* al. (2013), as regards the culture of sustainability and the propensity to show solidarity with their peers in the social group. The theme of food origin and the benefits of agroecological practice, in the daily life of families and consumers, appears in studies that carry out theoretical discussions, such as that of Castro *Neto et* al. (2010). However, in some studies that evaluate the perceptions of crop growers on the subject, it was found that the workers have not fully developed such perceptions (Silva, 2017; *Almeida et al.* 2018). In this study, the finding in this category highlight the advanced perception of the farmers of the FPAF. The following excerpt depicts the view of the farmers of Duque de Caxias on the subject:

"I care about what human beings eat, what they wear, what they breathe, and how they live in society. (...) Agriculture is the beginning of the life cycle." (Family farmer 3 in an interview with the researchers).

(3) Tradition in the means of production

Based on the interviews, few changes were found to have occurred in the cultivation methods over the period of residence of the families in the settlement. Despite the introduction of some technological apparatus, farmers still work without cutting-edge technology. There are also indications of a system of sharing scarce resources to assist food production.

"It hasn't changed much. The cultivation is still very similar. The biggest difference is that before we lived in a canvas structure." (Family farmer 4 in an interview with the researchers).

"Today we have some machines, don't we? It makes it easy, but everything was done by hand in the past. We have a tractor that belongs to the settlement where we live, then we pay to use it." (Family farmer 2 in an interview with the researchers).

In addition to those cited, three other interviewees said that the whole method of production of agroecological foods on their land is basically done manually, as before. These reports show a condition of heterogeneity in the access of small producers to technologies that are very widespread in conventional agricultural crops; the existing differences are thus considered as obstacles to the development of family agriculture.

"The whole production process at the time of my parents and grandparents was manual. I only got to know about machines and tractors when I arrived in Rio de Janeiro". (Family farmer 7 in an interview with the researchers).

"My family has always grown coffee. Back in Espírito Santo first, and then when we came here. I have been working with coffee for 40 years. (...) Cultivation is the same since I started." (Family farmer 8 in an interview with the researchers).

This finding corroborates those of other studies on the characterization and changes in the production systems of agroecological agriculture, such as the work of Cambosco and Valarini (2001), Santos and Monteiro (2004), Moraes and Oliveira (2017).

Along the production chain of the farmers of Duque de Caxias, it was found that the organization of the community, along the lines of an agricultural

cooperative, favors the distribution and marketing stage at the street market. The organization of small farmers in local networks or cooperatives is a way to facilitate logistics operations and an alternative for agroecological food producers to sell. However, they face difficulties in certification, as reported by the group researched by Cambosada and Valarini (2001) and Souza, Batista and César (2019).

The conversations with the FPAF crop growers indicate that, although they recognize the most rudimentary form of their cultivation conditions, some interviewees have a positive perception of the manual aspect of the techniques they employ. The discourse brings to light a meaning of tradition attributed to the work, although it conflicts, in certain points, with complaints about the difficulties faced by the little access to technology.

(4) Meaning of "Food from the Farm"

The conceptions of healthy eating, high-quality food, relationship with the land and the family, from the perspective of farmers, emerge in a singular way in the concept of "food from the farm". When asked about food, the discussions showed that these previously cited concepts were a pattern of response. This perception reinforces the identity of crop growers with their land and shows how important organic and agroecological agriculture is to them.

Virtually all respondents defined as healthy and true what they themselves were able to produce and bring to their own table, thus ensuring knowledge about the origin and quality of food. Called by the interviewees "food from the farm", agroecological foods represent the tangible form of their identity as individuals and as a social group, since the term was also charged with meanings attributed to affective memories and community consumption of cultivated products.

The farmers from Duque de Caxias clearly realize benefits of organic food and attempt to mention the concept of "food from the farm" to their customers during sales at the street market.

"This is what does not harm your health. (...)Everything we can plant, we eat. (...) Yam is our favorite. Also, cassava, when we want to make fritters. (...) It is the recipe that brings our family together." (Family farmer 4 in an interview with the researchers).

"They are healthy foods, which you can plant and harvest, and foods without pesticides. This culture of poison in food and food bought in supermarkets makes children have health problems...". (Family farmer 7 in an interview with the researchers).

Therefore, farmers perceive that agroecological foods help them to feel as being individuals. In addition to planting, these farmers consume food in daily life and develop special recipes, which allow the participation of all family members, gathering and sharing the common identity of "family farmers". When they speak about the importance of food from the farm associated with the consumption of agroecological foods planted by them, family farmers point out that the selection of food, preparation involving family members, and gatherings to eat meals suggest that terre is a strong relationship between these workers and their activity.

"We like chicken and okra, yam broth, cassava broth... It is typical dish from the countryside, always prepared with ingredients that we'd planted". (Family farmer 5, interviewed by the researchers).

> Cassava fritter, but only my mother really knows how to make them. It's the recipe that brings the family together... Each family member has a task to do. We make the filling, my father kneads the dough, my mother rolls the balls of dough, and my father fries them. (Family farmer 4, interviewed by the researchers).

Similarly to the family farmers participating in FPAF, *Santos et al.* (2013) reported that farmers at the agroecological fair *Feira Agroecológica da Orla de Olinda – PE* have chosen organic farming based on the fact that organic foods are essentially seen as healthy.

5 Discussion

The guarantee of access to public policies covered by Law No. 11,326 (Brazil, 2006) does not directly reflect on an improvement in the living and working conditions of the family producers targeted in this research. The results show that the farmers attributed meanings of economic, social, and health-promotion importance to their work, but they also recognized the lack of visibility and the need for more initiatives of the public power in favor of the class. Public policies for family farming began in the 1990s with the National Program for Strengthening Family Agriculture (Pronaf), which expanding mostly in the 2000s (GRISA *et al.* 2017; GOULART; VIEIRA; BITTENCOURT, 2021). Several actors make up the national network engaged in supporting family workers; however, on several occasions, they are not acting satisfactorily to the objectives of the programs, revealing the inability to mitigate the inequalities between family groups (GRISA *et al.* 2017; AQUINO; GAZOLLA; SCHNEIDER, 2018; GOULART; VIEIRA; BITTENCOURT, 2021). Despite the greater reach and financial capacity of federal programs, the discrepancy between family groups, together with the bureaucratic difficulties of adequacy and necessary certifications, in addition to the privilege of credit to the most capitalized centers, keeps most small producers on the margins of government support (BELIK, 2015; CAZELLA; CAPELLESSO; SCHNEIDER, 2020), including the workers who participated the present study. The crop growers from Caxias depend on the support of the smaller spheres of public power, especially the municipal one, and on their capacity to organize themselves as a group. For this reason, their political participation in fighting for their rights is surprising when considering their economic vulnerability. There is a very clear contribution to the process of identity construction as family farmers and the attribution of meanings of importance to the activity, and the view of FPAF as a strategy of promoting the group.

The street market is a point of access to food produced by farmers in Baixada Fluminense in the state of Rio de Janeiro. It plays an essential role for these small farmers to gain visibility and space, form bonds, create memories and construct a food-related identity, as well as feel that they belong to this group. This finding is similar to the results reported in the studies of Cassol and Schneider (2015) and Silva-Lacerda *et al.* (2016).

On the perspective of farmers, regarding sustainable management in food production, as mentioned in the second category, there is a concern with the path

taken up to the consumers' table, which is rooted in the community of the settlers. They oppose to the use of pesticides and seek to maintain the exchange of seeds among the group's members, which reaffirms their convictions about family agriculture as an activity promoting sustainability and food security. It is worth noting that the meaning of sustainability attributed by the farmers surveyed and the perception of the risks of pesticide use cannot be generalized for all the activities of Brazilian family agriculture, so it covers only the context in which the interviewees are inserted. Other studies showed that family nuclei use pesticides and chemical fertilization in Rio de Janeiro (PAES; ZAPPES, 2016) and other localities of Brazil (OLIVEIRA; ZAMBRONE, 2006; ABREU; ALONZO, 2016; CRAVEIRO *et al.*, 2019; BUSATO *et al.*, 2019).

The data collected in the visits to the FPAF indicate the organization of the producers as a community, in the form of an agricultural cooperative, to participate in the management committee of the fruit and vegetable street market and any public calls for bids of the municipal administration. However, it should be noted that there is no formal registration of participants in any official cooperatives. Even though the grocers spend money on transportation and machinery, this is the way they found to overcome logistical challenges. Wanderley (2017, p. 80) claimed that clarifying the internal differences of the comprehensive family farming group is necessary to "recognize their specificities and adapt public policies to their demands and needs", thus preventing the marginalization of farmers.

Among the demands found in the interviewees' answers, access to the most modern equipment appears as a solution to the working conditions, but it does not show an impediment to their activity. The predominantly manual means of production are characteristic of the less capitalized family groups, which require financing to be able to purchase machinery (BUAINAIN, 2006; BELIK, 2015; AQUINO; GAZOLLA; SCHNEIDER, 2018). The study farmers have limited access to technology and claim to maintain the cultivation methods from past generations. From an external perspective, this fact reflects the distinction of resources destined for family agriculture compared to agribusiness. However, for farmers, this is an already consistent reality and the maintenance of rudimentary cultivation techniques has a meaning of tradition attributed to the activity. Naturally, there is a desire for modernization when opportunity arises, but the effort to maintain traditional cultivation is well accepted, and it is a constituent element of the identity of family farmers that they defend with pride, as seen in the third category of results.

The attribution of meanings related to family agriculture and the FPAF shows the importance of marketing in short circuits. In short circuits of marketing, farmers have greater autonomy, and greater appreciation of their products because of the guarantee of origin and labor. Despite the advantages of direct sales, access to these channels is usually limited by the lack of information, documentation, and difficulty in meeting the requirements for volume, periodicity, and diversity of the items offered (DAROLT, 2013). In the interviews, there was an evident concern with the higher selling price and the preference of the general public for conventional products.

The last category identified in the narrative of the farmers, relates to the set of concepts that are summarized in the definition of "food from the farm". They attributed the meaning of a genuine and truly healthy food to agroecological foods.

As family farmers have an active and militant role in this process, and they see themselves as a means of access to the agroecological product, they reinforce the identity, and their activity is a significant expression of their "role in the world". The "food from the farm" is what they can cultivate for their consumption and make available to an audience that appreciates the value of health. Both the activity and the product are constituent elements of the farmers' identity, since they are associated with their professional and social dynamics.

In this sense, the food they produce represents an extension of who these family farmers "are" in the world. These findings are in line with Belk's (1988; 2018) insights into the role of consumer behavior in the construction of social identity. As also pointed out by Ahuvia (2005), Araujo and Rocha (2019), Winkler (2018) and Lima (2021), when there is a relationship of affection for an objective or even for the practice of an activity, they help to constitute "who we are", because ideological beliefs are the result of our life history and generate real consequences in behaviors, contributing to generate social identity.

6 Conclusion

Family farming is an activity with a diversity of economic and technological resources, labor, and land division. Most family farmers have been on the sidelines of the innovation process, but anyway the sector has a relevant turnover in the national scenario.

This exploratory study aimed to highlight the perspective of small farmers regarding the importance of their activity, and the recognition of their potentialities. It also investigated the meanings that they constructed for the consumption of agroecological foods. The results of the analysis provide indications on the communication of the social identity of those involved as family farmers. Elements of this social identity can be identified in the discourse of participants through the meanings attributed by them to the issues of visibility, work routine, obstacles faced, and their expectation of being recognized as transforming agents of the economy and society.

In this context, the results found throughout this article suggest that the FPAF was developed as a space for dissemination of these ideas and identity construction for the study group. There are four structuring categories of the meanings attributed by the interviewees. The analysis of the interviews showed that the practice of family farming, from the perspective of the participants, is based on manual techniques that last until the present day as a tradition. The narratives show that this precarious way of work, even though positively communicated with some pride, reflect that they need assistance and have difficulty in accessing technological and logistical apparatus. Their perception that organic food represents "real food" is another element that emerges from the personal stories of these farmers, assuming a representative character of their social identities. The study group recognizes their own importance and attempt to perpetuate their work as a transforming agent in society by encouraging healthier and more sustainable food consumption practices.

The consumption of organic food is still very modest compared to that of conventional foods. The slightly higher price, the specific places of access to these

products and the still insufficient dissemination on the importance of their consumption for health contribute negatively to the aggravation of this situation, according to the interviewees. Making information available in digital channels, designing materials to promote the activity, and encouraging consumption can be effective solutions for this situation. In addition, it would be important to encourage the development of projects in institutions, such as city councils and universities, which can promote initiatives of planting and sales of organic food. Thus, technological innovations could be combined with new forms of organizing farmers' work, i.e., not limited to subsidized credit or federal government protection, since the latter can be ineffective in reducing class vulnerability.

This study reaffirms the diverse profile of crop growers and the challenges faced by family farmers, and it reinforces the importance of greater support to these farmers and the promotion of health through the consumption of organic and agroecological foods. Because this study is limited to a specific context, further research on the theme should be conducted in other localities to make the external public aware of the perception of farmers about the potential of their work and the challenges that are to be faced.

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