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Sustainable Food Marketing Practices Via Responsible Consumption Groups

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Abstract
The responsible consumption of food has provided experiences between producers and consumers who seek to reflect on the act of purchasing as a condition for transformation and minimization of social and environmental impacts in society. In view of this, the aim of the paper is to characterize the profile of Responsible Consumption Groups (GCR) for food, identify the real motivations of the actors and highlight the internal and external stimuli and obstacles that have affected these marketing channels. For this, bibliographical research and field research (online) were used through questionnaires with 34 GCR in eight states in Brazil, which represent 70% of the total groups identified at the time of the research. As a result, common patterns were identified between the groups, most of the time, they are classified as a singular network, with agroecological production practices and a more centralized location, due to the institutional support received. In addition, the main strengths (direct contact between consumers and producers, obtaining organic/agroecological foods that contribute to sustainability); opportunities (social experiences, such as exchanging knowledge and participating in collectives), as well as weaknesses (logistics, food waste, management and communication difficulties between group actors); and threats (a low external support).

Keywords: Institutional Support. Farming Families. Alternative Food Networks.

Práticas sustentáveis de comercialização de alimentos via grupos de consumo responsável

Resumo
O consumo responsável de alimentos tem proporcionado experiências entre produtores e consumidores que buscam refletir sobre o ato de compra enquanto ação de transformação

e minimização dos impactos sociais e ambientais na sociedade. Diante disso, o objetivo do artigo é caracterizar o perfil dos Grupos de Consumo Responsável (GCR) de alimentos, identificar quais são as reais motivações dos atores e apontar os estímulos e obstáculos internos e externos que têm afetado esses canais de comercialização. Para tanto, utilizou-se de pesquisa bibliográfica e pesquisa de campo através de questionários com 34 GCR em oito estados do Brasil, que representam 70% do total de grupos identificados por ocasião da pesquisa. Como resultado foram identificados padrões comuns entre os grupos e classificados como rede singular, com práticas agroecológicas de produção e localização (mais centralizada devido ao apoio institucional recebido). Além dos principais pontos fortes (contato direto dos consumidores com os produtores, obtenção de alimentos orgânicos/agroecológicos que contribuem com a sustentabilidade); oportunidades (experiências sociais, como a troca de saberes e a participação em coletivos), assim como, os pontos fracos (logística, desperdício de alimentos, dificuldades de gestão e comunicação entre os atores dos grupos); e ameaças (pouco apoio externo).

Palavras–chave: Apoio Institucional. Agricultores Familiares. Redes Agroalimentares Alternativas.

Prácticas sostenibles de comercialización de alimentos a través de grupos de consumo responsable

Resumen
El consumo responsable de alimentos ha generado experiencias entre productores y consumidores, los cuales buscan reflexionar sobre el acto de compra como una acción de transformación y minimización de los impactos sociales y ambientales. En este sentido, el objetivo del artículo es caracterizar el perfil de los Grupos de Consumo Responsable (GCR) de alimentos, identificar las motivaciones reales de los actores y señalar los estímulos y obstáculos internos y externos que han afectado estos canales de comercialización. Para ello, se llevó a cabo una investigación bibliográfica y de campo a través de cuestionarios con 34 GCR en ocho estados de Brasil, que representan el 70% del total de grupos identificados durante la investigación. Como resultado, se identificaron patrones comunes entre los grupos, que en su mayoría son clasificados como redes singulares, con prácticas agroecológicas de producción y localización (más centralizada debido al apoyo institucional recibido). Además de los principales puntos fuertes (contacto directo de los consumidores con los productores, obtención de alimentos orgánicos/agroecológicos que contribuyen a la sostenibilidad); oportunidades (experiencias sociales, como el intercambio de conocimientos y la participación en colectivos), así como los puntos débiles (logística, desperdicio de alimentos, dificultades de gestión y comunicación entre los actores de los grupos); y amenazas (poco apoyo externo).

Palabras clave: Apoyo Institucional. Agricultura familiar. Redes Agroalimentarias Alternativas.

1 Introduction

Reconfiguring agri-food systems towards sustainability is a central concern for achieving global food security (Conti; Zanello; Hall, 2021). Thus, while the sustainability of intensive agricultural models has become questionable, consumer desire to establish a direct relationship of trust with producers has increased (Kiss et al., 2019).

Consumers assume a central role in the transformation of the food system since when choosing products, they have considered some aspects of their production process, such as elaboration and safe handling, or due to the absence of chemical or biological contaminants and production techniques, such as organic products (Belik & Cunha, 2018). However, this move towards more 'conscious' purchases is resisted. This is because the historically informed trajectories of developing the agri-food system remain resistant to a change in direction. Conti, Zanello, and Hall (2021) report five aspects that create barriers for initiatives to change the established conventional pattern of food systems to advance more significantly: 1) Dominant technologies persist at the expense of better alternatives because they are socially inserted; 2) Institutions and policies create misaligned incentives to new changes in trajectory; 3) Attitudes and cultures that cause aversion to change; 4) Political and economic factors distort the direction of change; 5) Infrastructure rigidity.

Even in this complex context, Responsible Consumption Groups (RCGs) have stood out within short food supply chains (SFSC), in which their actors seek to reduce intermediaries and the physical distance between producers and consumers, in which actors work mutually and cooperatively to control, manage, and improve the flows of products and services, as well as the resources and/or information incorporated from production to final consumption (Renting et al., 2017).

RCGs aim to redesign the dynamics of food supply chains, questioning the predominant logic of supply in large cities based on the act of purchase (Gonçalves & Mascarenhas, 2018; Miranda et al., 2020). Along with responsible consumption, Alternative Agri-Food Networks (AAN), which prioritize cooperative work and the principles of the social and solidarity economy, where responsible and ecological consumption products must be accessible to citizens, are also being created.

The RCGs and SFSC are inserted in the so-called AAN. Since the 2000s, the term AAN has been used recurrently and generically in the international literature, incorporating elements of other concepts on food systems in transformation (Darolt et al., 2016; Miranda et al., 2020), such as local food (González-Azcárate et al., 2021; Zwart & Wertheim-Heck, 2021) and transition to sustainable agriculture (Lamine et al., 2019; Zwart & Wertheim-Heck, 2021). AANs differ from the concept of SFSC by not focusing predominantly on the economic supply chain (Reckinger, 2022). AANs seek to promote a move away from the global conventional food system by encouraging the development of new relationships between producers and consumers towards a relocated food procurement movement (Haylock & Connelly, 2018).

Despite the proliferation of case studies on the development of different AAN models, it is still necessary to identify and characterize the responsible food consumption models in Brazil to understand the threats and opportunities that involve their practices.

This paper aims to characterize the profile of food RCGs, identify the actors' real motivations, and indicate the internal and external stimuli and obstacles that have affected these marketing channels. This characterization indicates the primary motivations around the formation of RCGs and can assist in strategies to promote the better establishment of groups in proximity markets. The lack of information available is considered a central issue, demonstrating the socioeconomic effects of

these modern initiatives that gradually socially build these markets, shaping the social reproduction of the actors involved on the production and consumption sides (Gazolla e De Aquino, 2021).

2 Characteristics and Evolution of Consumption Groups in Brazil

Responsible consumption encourages critical reflection on the social and environmental impacts caused by current food production and consumption patterns in our society. It translates the act of purchase into a "political act" aimed at consumption reduction, social justice, and sustainability (Instituto Kairós, 2011). Thus, it starts from consumers' proactivity in seeking healthier and more sustainable food within food systems, often called political consumption.

Most RCGs are part of the solidarity economy movement or identify with its principles, adopting a decentralized and democratic management system (Instituto Kairós, 2011). The solidarity economy uses self-management, where democratic administration occurs through assemblies or delegates elected by the partners who deliberate on behalf of all (Singer, 2002).

In 2010, the Instituto Kairós, a Brazilian non-profit civil entity, took the initiative to survey the characteristics and challenges faced by food RCGs in Brazil. Several initiatives emerged from this project, such as the development of digital platforms, the creation of the Responsible Consumption Portal[1], the elaboration of practical guides, the holding of national meetings, and the formation of a network for the groups (Instituto Kairós, 2020). The RCG Network began in 2011, with the organization of the Instituto Kairós and funding by the former Territorial Development Secretariat of the Ministry of Agrarian Development (SDT/MDA) (Preiss, 2017).

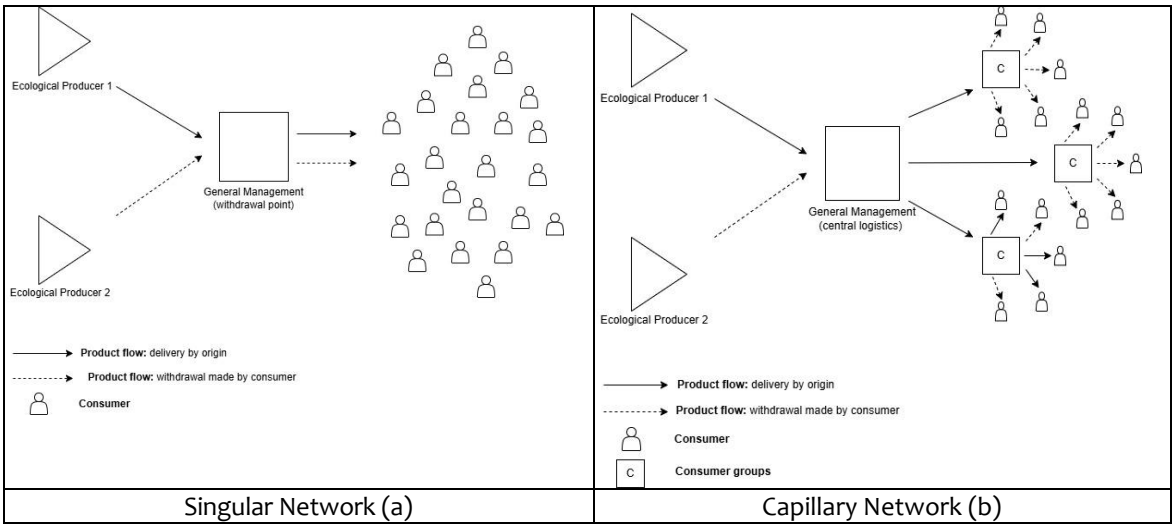
The first Responsible Consumer Cells (RCC) were created in Santa Catarina in 2017 with the articulation of the Laboratory of Family Farming Marketing of the Universidade Federal de Santa Catarina (LACAF/UFSC). The network comprises about 400 consumers organized in 12 cells, directly connected to 54 farming families. These families supply over 7 tons of food per month. The food is of organic origin, produced agro-ecologically by the region's farming families, and marketed at a fair price, leaving directly from the countryside to Florianópolis and São José/SC (LACAF, 2022).

Despite differing nomenclature, groups and cells market their food using the same concept of responsible consumption. Therefore, this paper adopts the most usual nomenclature, "Responsible Consumption Groups (RCG)".

In Brazil, the different forms of RCGs are classified into two types of networks. Singular networks (a) (Figure 1) are the consumer groups formed by a collective of consumers with a centralized axis of product management and distribution, which is directly related to producers (Instituto Kairós, 2011).

[1] RESPONSIBLE CONSUMPTION PORTAL. Available at: https://consumoresponsavel.org.br.

Figure 1. Scheme of RCG Singular Network and Capillary Network



Singular Network (a) | Capillary Network (b)

Source: Instituto Kairós (2011).

Capillary networks (b) (Figure 1) are consumer groups formed by different consumer nuclei characterized by geographical location, decentralizing product management, and distribution. Depending on the group's proposal, they may have varying degrees of autonomy from each other (Instituto Kairós, 2011).

The singular and capillary networks have two movements for product flow. In the first, the origin delivers the product, and the consumer can receive it at home. In the second, the consumers retrieve the product at the withdrawl point.

RCGs generally market fresh and processed foods, grains, cleaning and personal hygiene items, stationery, therapeutic products, and handicrafts, among others. The products are offered through an open list that shows the products offered or by ordering baskets. There are also experiences with direct purchase at the sales point (Instituto Kairós, 2011). In addition to the issue of food safety, this food procurement system reveals a change in the perception of consumption. The consumer's adherence to the basket scheme demonstrates the preference for a production that favors environmental protection (Lamine, 2005). Thus, we can consider RCGs autonomous communities that promote direct and informal marketing channels used by family, solidarity, and agroecological agriculture (Bensadon et al., 2016).

Family farming markets can be categorized into commodities, niche specialties, organic, artisanal, solidarity, and institutional (Wilkinson, 2010). Schneider (2016) proposed a new classification for the markets used by family farming based on social, political, and mercantile relations. They are characterized according to the types of farmers, the spatial reach, and the marketing channels that involve them, classifying them as follows: proximity markets (PM), local and territorial markets (LTM), conventional markets (CM), and Public and Institutional Markets (PIM).

The marketing channels are represented by the path taken by the products, from production to the final consumer, and can be characterized by the number of intermediate links (Brandão et al., 2023). The classification of the types of channels, from the zero-level channel to the four-level channel, is related to the existence of

intermediaries between the producer and the final consumer, according to their relationships with the market (Waquil et al., 2010; Brandão et al., 2020).

There may be several marketing channels for a single type of market (Brandão et al., 2023). In the case of RCGs, we can classify their reach as local through direct sales, where the farmer is the surplus-producing peasant who operates in proximity markets (Schneider, 2016; Brandão et al., 2020). Market relations are an important starting point for understanding the emergence of AANs that may encompass emerging producer and consumer networks and other actors seeking alternatives to the conventional food supply market (Murdoch et al., 2017).

The AANs were defined from the perspective of common elements, such as the shortening of distances between producers and consumers, the size and reduced scale of production establishments and within these establishments, the preference for organic production, the direct purchase and sale of food through fairs, farmers' stores, and solidarity consumption groups, among other models (Table 1), and the concern with the social, economic, and environmental dimensions of sustainable food production, distribution, and consumption (Jarosz, 2008).

The concept of SFSC is more specific than AANs and covers the relationships between the actors involved in the chain (Renting et al., 2017). The SFSC can be classified into three types. In the first, defined as face-to-face, farmers interact directly with consumers; thus, social aspects such as authenticity, interaction, and trust are fundamental for the functioning of the chain. In the second, defined as spatial proximity, products are produced and distributed in a specific region, and consumers generally seek food where it is made or in marketing locations. The third and last are especially extended chains, where it is necessary to transmit and translate the values and information around the food marketed, usually by using quality and origin seals and certificates (Renting et al., 2017).

Finally, it should be noted that AANs and autonomous communities are inserted conceptually and empirically in contexts that collaborate to consolidate aspects that lead to local and regional development, even contributing to achieving the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). There is a relationship between Goal 2 Zero - Hunger and Sustainable Agriculture, and Goal 12 - Sustainable Production and Consumption (ONU, 2024).

3 Methodology

The methodology was based on mixed methods (Paranhos et al., 2016; Strijker et al., 2020; Dawadi et al., 2021), seeking the appropriate combination of qualitative and quantitative analyses, being divided into two primary phases. The first phase consisted of elaborating the analysis instrument - a semi-structured questionnaire with 21 questions, 16 multiple-choice and five open-ended, based on the work entitled: "Organização de grupos de consumo responsável" (Instituto Kairós, 2011) and literature review using the keywords: "Redes agroalimentares alternatives"; "Cadeias curtas"; e "Grupos de consumo responsável". The questions aimed to collect information related to forming and developing groups in Brazil.

The second phase consisted of surveying Brazilian cases through indications made by the groups in informal conversations with managers and by applying the questionnaire. The questionnaire was tested in a pilot study with a participant from

the Instituto Kairós and a participant from the Grupo de Consumo Elizabeth Teixeira located in Limeira-SP to validate the questions.

Data was collected by applying 34 questionnaires to the managers of each participating group, who signed the Informed Consent Form (ICF). The choice of managers as respondents to the questionnaires can be justified due to their knowledge and vision of the entire chain. Managers are members who actively participate in groups. Financial management is among its functions, as are the activities involving the logistics of these chains, such as the organization in singular or capillary networks, the frequency, place, days, and times of deliveries, the means of product transport, and the equipment and materials used in the storage of perishable and non-perishable products (INSTITUTO KAIRÓS, 2011).

Collection took place between 2021 and 2022. The questionnaire was answered via electronic means, such as Google Forms and video calls, especially for conducting the research during the COVID-19 pandemic. This methodological approach is known as rapid assessment (Dunn, 1994; Beebe, 1995), in which data from secondary sources are used in conjunction with non-random samples and semi-structured interviews with key actors.

The relative frequency of the data was calculated based on the answers to the multiple-choice questions, which subsidized the analysis of descriptive statistics. This analysis comprises a set of analytical techniques that allows collecting, analyzing, and interpreting numerical data on a sample or population by creating appropriate instruments, such as charts, graphs, and numerical indicators (De Souza Sampaio, 2018).

Finally, the SWOT matrix management tool was adopted to contribute to the production of knowledge regarding the groups, helping the social actors who participate in this AAN model to make consistent and rational choices within the Brazilian context. The word SWOT is an acronym formed by the words Strengths and Weaknesses, which are part of the internal environment of the groups, and Opportunities and Threats, which are part of the external environment in which the groups are inserted. The analysis of the internal environment allows us to understand the evolution and situation of the organization, given its resources and business practices, where strengths facilitate the achievement of organizational objectives and weaknesses constitute the limitations that hinder or prevent achieving its goals (Chiavenato, 1997). Although the external environment is very broad, the sector structure in which the organization is inserted also directly influences its business practices (Porter, 1986).

Among the various applications of the SWOT matrix for agriculture, this tool has been used in studies (Gasperi et al., 2016; Ali et al., 2021; Firoozzare, 2023; Obbineni, 2023) aimed to raise evidence related to sustainable development in this environment.

4 Responsible Consumption Groups: settings and motivations

In Brazil, we initially mapped and identified about fifty groups in different states through websites, social networks, and work conducted by the Instituto Kairós e LACAF/UFSC. Of these, 34 groups agreed to participate in the study.

The 34 groups interviewed are located in eight states: São Paulo (14), Santa Catarina (7), Mato Grosso (5), Rio Grande do Sul (4), Rio de Janeiro (1), Pará (1), Minas Gerais (1), and Amazonas (1). Most RCGs are located in São Paulo (SP), about 41%, followed by Santa Catarina (SC), with close to 20%. The two states together account for about 60% of the groups surveyed.

The concentration in the states of SC and SP in relation to the others should be the articulations of the groups through supporting the networks and due to the institutional support of the Instituto Kairós e LACAF/UFSC. Although the Instituto Kairós project (which directly supported the Brazilian network of Responsible Consumption Groups) ended in 2015, according to a manager interviewed, the Instituto Kairós still promotes the strengthening of the group network through the exchange of information on social networks, debates, and face-to-face meetings, among other types of articulations.

Other incentives and articulations in networks fostered the RCGs. In 2011, the Brazilian network of Responsible Consumption Groups was created (Preiss, 2017), while the RCCs began in 2017 (LACAF/UFSC, 2022), both through the support of institutions linked to public power.

According to managers, the increase in demand for "healthy" and organic-based and/or agroecological foods is another factor related to the behavior of consumers acquired during the COVID-19 pandemic. When offering local products of high quality and without contact between the parties, ready for pick-up in open environments (Sitaker et al., 2020), there has been a positive change from the short food supply chains as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic (Benos et al., 2022). For example, the Farm Fresh Food Box was discussed in studies, such as in Italy, as a potential solution to food system weaknesses exposed by the COVID-19 pandemic (Foti & Timpanaro, 2021). According to the survey, about 60% of the groups have up to 100 participants, divided between farmers, managers, and consumers.

Concerning the socioeconomic characteristics of the components, as scored by the groups, some began from consumers with a higher degree of education and greater purchasing power. Environmental awareness strongly affects consumers' purchasing behavior in the autonomous communities (Benos et al., 2022). The "price sensitive consumers" were portrayed by (Sama et al., 2018) as being those in which cost can be a barrier, less inclined to pay for products derived from socially and environmentally responsible practices and fair trade products. Mancini et al. (2021) discuss how the design of AANs should consider the social environment in which it will be deployed since the sense of community is important for these networks.

Most groups market products such as fresh foods (fruits and vegetables), processed or agro-industrialized foods, cereals, grains, unconventional food plants, and eggs (Table 1). The total exceeds 100%, as the RCG markets different types of products.

Table 1 . Types of products marketed

Products	Number of Groups	%[2]
Fresh food – fruits, legumes, vegetables	33	97.1
Processed or agro-industrialized foods	29	85.3
Cereals and Grains	29	85.3
PANCs - unconventional food plants	29	85.3
Eggs	26	76.5
Cleaning and personal hygiene items	16	47.1
Therapeutic products	13	38.2
Handicrafts	12	35.3
Other	11	32.3
Stationery	1	2.9

Source: Prepared by the authors based on research data (2023).

Among the processed or agroindustrialized foods identified were cheeses (Associação de Integração Campo Cidade - MICC), homemade sweets (Cestas ZN), bakery products (Recoopsol), craft beer, and kombucha (Cooperssol). Cloth absorbents are among the cleaning and personal hygiene items, and essential oils (Comunidade Tandem) and candles (Araçá Group) are among the therapeutic products. The handicrafts are made of natural fabrics (Comunidade Tandem) and confectionery (GiraSol). The stationery includes books (GiraSol).

A study in Italy highlighted that consumers connected to AANs promote biodiversity conservation and create sustainable production mechanisms through the preference for local products or from areas with an identity connection, as in the case of biodiversity-friendly vegetables at farmers' markets in Italy (Foti & Timpanaro, 2021). In the Brazilian case, the MICC group highlights that the baskets have about eight to twelve seasonal vegetables, and the products are produced without pesticides but not certified.

In addition to cultivating the basket without pesticides, the producers compose it according to product availability (Preiss et al., 2017). All groups answered yes when asked if the marketed products obeyed their seasonality. The "closed basket" model is used in the case of RCC, where consumers do not choose in advance which foods they will receive, given that they they use products available at that time or season of the year, respecting the seasonality of farmers' production (Miranda et al., 2020).

About 62% of the groups stated that they market a variety of over fifty types of products per year. Meanwhile, 35% of respondents stated that they market between 26 and 50 products per year. In the case of RCC, there is an agreement between producers and consumers that guarantees consumers broad leaves, tubers, roots, and fruits as the minimum types and diversities of products (Miranda et al., 2020). Regarding the exchange of seeds and/or seedlings with other groups or between the group producers, about 60% of the interviewees reported conducting this practice.

Regarding the type of network, 62% of the groups classified themselves as singular network groups. This result was expected due to the importance of social capital for the transparency of AANs (Pozelli Sabio & Spers, 2022). Trust is an important motivation for consumer relations in this model (Foti & Timpanaro, 2021),

in which singular networks strengthen the proximity between producers and consumers through direct contact.

The delivery channels used. Most groups use meeting points as channels (62%), delivery - direct delivery to consumers (50%), and free fairs (32%). The least used channel is Supermarkets.

In the case of Associação de Integração Campo Cidade - MICC, one of the first responsible consumption groups that feed about 800 families, deliveries take place weekly on a fixed day and time at distribution points scattered throughout the east of São Paulo; these places include homes, basic health units, kindergartens, gyms, pastorals, spiritual temples, and Catholic and messianic churches (Preiss et al., 2017). A single group can have different types of meeting points, demonstrating how these marketing channels are diverse and do not follow a pattern.

In general, there are no supermarkets, shops, logistics, and warehouses in solidarity shopping groups; all intermediaries between the producer and the consumer have been eliminated. In some cases, shops, schools, churches, and premises of other organizations acquire new functions (Source, 2013).

For consumers, among the most important motivations in purchasing decisions are comfort with the location of markets and forms of delivery, the perceived quality, the shopping experience, and the variety of products offered (Mastronardi et al., 2019). This statement was corroborated by the groups interviewed, because in addition to the search for a more conscious and healthy consumption, consumers find in the groups the practicality of acquiring their food, especially by using various technologies.

Among the most used social networks are Trello, WhatsApp (Comunidade Tandem), digital platform (Associação de Consumidores Bem da Terra), "Faz a Feira" platform, WhatsApp group (Rede de Comercialização Solidária

Trem Bão), website (Terra Limpa). In the RCC, the administration of basket orders, payments, and possible problems during the marketing process occur between the parties via WhatsApp (Lovato et al., 2021).

Given the technological advancement in the last decade, the RCGs have adopted several Information and Communication Technology (ICT) tools in their transactions with consumers. Online interactions positively affect sustainable customer behavior change in purchasing practices and consumption patterns (De Bernardi et al., 2019). Digital platforms create a local market beyond the price and quality ratio (Giuca & De Leo, 2019). The use of the Internet and telephone has directly influenced consumer behavior in these chains, resulting in loyalty through the feeling of belonging (De Souza, 2020).

From the perspective of farmers/suppliers, an extensive study on sales on digital platforms states that the constitution of strategies for access to online markets by family farmers individually is impossible, demonstrating the need to work collectively for the social construction of these markets, especially via cooperatives and associations (Gazolla e De Aquino, 2021). Based on this research, it is assumed that consumer groups can also strengthen other links in the chain, such as farmers, assisting them in creating and maintaining marketing channels.

Regarding the type of group suppliers, most declared that their supplier is a 'Small Producer' (91%), followed by an 'Urban Farmer' (21%). The least identified was Major Producer (3%).

Small producers named for a conceptual issue, such as 'family farmers', seek to disconnect from the synonym of precariousness beyond the legal issue and resignify the notion of small production with new positive adjectives such as food producer, modern, efficient, and sustainable, among others (Honneth, 2009). The concept of a small producer was associated with parameters such as the size of the plot of land exploited. At the same time, the family farmer covers other factors such as economic, social, and cultural complexity (Picolotto, 2014).

According to the 2017 Agricultural Census survey, family farming is the basis of the economy of 90% of Brazilian municipalities with up to 20 thousand inhabitants. Of the 5 million rural properties participating in the Census, 77% of agricultural establishments were classified as family farming (EMBRAPA, 2023). Municipal fairs are still the primary short channel for commercializing Brazilian family farmers (Darolt et al., 2016; Silva & Brandão, 2023). Thus, the RCGs are potential sustainable alternatives for marketing the food production of small producers.

Table 2 shows the frequency of motivation for creating the groups by the managers interviewed. The answers are homogeneous since the frequencies of the reasons show very close values.

Table 2. Number of groups because of creation, according to managers

Reason for Creation	Number of Groups	%
Social concern	20	58.9
Income generation	19	55.9
Spaces for exchanging experiences and conviviality	18	52.9
Marketing difficulty	17	50
Environmental concern	17	50
Other	16	47.1

Source: Prepared by the authors based on research data (2023).

Other positive aspects highlighted as motivation are the promotion of a solidarity and cooperative economy (Associação de Consumidores Bem da Terra e GiraSol), the incentive to create spaces for intervention and training of university and secondary students (Cantasol), promoting the rapprochement of producers and consumers (Cooperssol), providing direct marketing without intermediaries (Amanacy and Compras Colectivas Sul), and strengthening the rural-city connection (CAUS).

Case studies developed in countries such as Germany, Spain, and Hungary classify the motivations for conscious and sustainable consumption into health awareness, ethical identity, and environmental awareness (Benos et al., 2022). In an Italian case study, the fact that there are children in families and the role of women in choosing a quality diet was highlighted among the motivations (Mastronardi et al., 2019). Issues such as health and food security may prevail over environmental issues or support for small producers (Baldi et al., 2019).

The aspects mentioned as ‘negative' and that boost group creation and maintenance are the difficulty of accessing public policies to promote family farming due to the condition of rural camps (Grupo de Consumo Elizabeth Teixeira)

and the lack of guarantee of quality food at low cost for the poorest population (Tapiri).

Table 3. Number of groups because of producer participation, according to managers

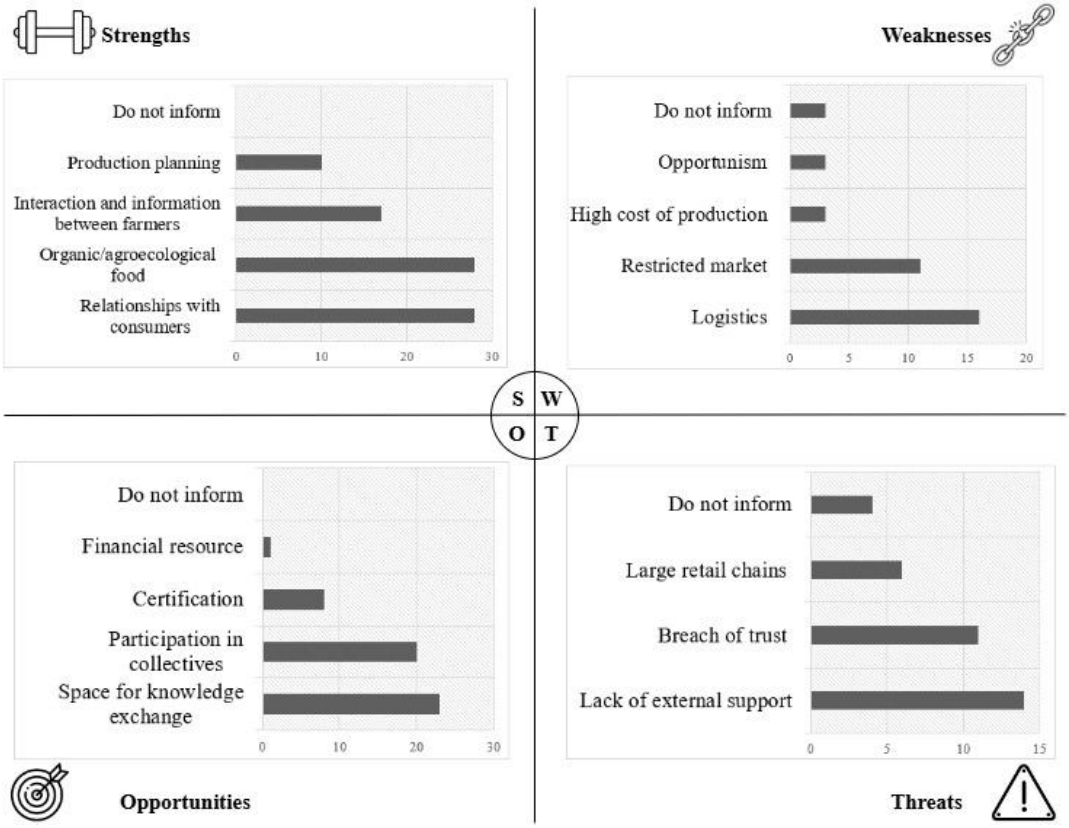
Reason for Creation	Number of Groups	%
Financial return - income	31	91.2
Reduction of risks in marketing	24	70.6
Ideological	12	35.3
Political	10	29.4
Professional	7	20.6
Other	7	20.6

Source: Prepared by the authors based on research data (2023).

Although most producers in the groups have a financial return as the primary reason for participation (Table 3), a case study conducted in North America on farmers' strategies to start and persist in alternative agriculture showed that they depend on non-agricultural income and wealth. In contrast, other farmers survive by cultivating full-time (Bruce, 2019).

Regarding the SWOT matrix, most groups mention that the products are organic/agroecological, the contact with consumers, and the interaction and sharing of information with other farmers as strengths (Figure 2).

Figure 2. SWOT matrix of the responsible food consumption groups



Source: Prepared by the authors based on research data (2023).

An example is the case of Zona da Mata, which was recognized as a pole of organic and agroecological production in Minas Gerais (Rede Agroecológica de Consumidores Raízes da Mata). The Rede Agroecológica de Consumidores Raízes da Mata was created by professors from the agroecology groups of the Universidade Federal de Viçosa (UFV), with the support of the Incubadora Tecnológica de Cooperativas Populares (ITCP-UFV), Centro de Tecnologias Alternativas (CTA-ZM), and Movimento dos Trabalhadores Rurais Sem Terra (MST) of Zona da Mata. This exemplifies how encouraging partnerships between the MST, universities, and urban sectors can promote agroecology by constructing local markets. Closer relationships between food producers and consumers have been essential for developing agroecology in Brazil (Borsatto & Souza-Esquerdo, 2019).

When asked if they promoted courses and/or workshops for rural producers, about 60% of the groups interviewed answered yes, reinforcing the importance highlighted in the SWOT matrix of interaction and information sharing with farmers.

The courses and workshops offered in production are about agroecology (Araçá, Cantasol, Grupo de Consumo Elizabeth Teixeira, Recoopsol, and Tapiri), sustainable management (Agrodea, APAOC, CanasJurê, Cestas ZN, Grupo de Consumo Elizabeth Teixeira, Rede Agroecológica de Consumidores Raízes da Mata, SISCOS), PANCs (Araçá), biodynamic agriculture (Cestão Biodinâmico Orgânico), and good practices (Associação de Consumidores Bem da Terra, Rede Agroecológica de Consumidores Raízes da Mata e SISCOS). In marketing, the workshops are about management training (Cantasol and Rede Agroecológica de Consumidores Raízes da Mata), pricing (Associação de Consumidores Bem da Terra), label production (CAUS), food standardization and use of technologies (Grupo de Consumo Elizabeth Teixeira). For consumption, the training is about the integral use of food, natural food, food awareness (MICC), and waste reduction (Tapiri). In addition to political and leadership training on topics such as youth in the field, racism, inequality, solidarity economy, political agroecology (MICC, Rede de Comercialização Solidária Trem Bão, and Recoopsol).

At the same time, most note logistics and the restricted market as the weak points. The high cost of production and opportunism in these chains are not frequent (Figure 2). A fragile logistics network means food waste, especially in the logistics and distribution chain of fruits and vegetables. Food waste in the logistics and distribution chain of fruits and vegetables is multifactorial (Lima & Oliveira, 2021), a result of operational practices, management processes, and the perishability of fruits and vegetables.

Among the outstanding weaknesses in logistics are the value of transport (Associação de Integração Campo Cidade - MICC) and lack of staff (ComerAtivaMente). Managerial problems such as few consumers interested and willing to integrate group management (Tandem community and Green exchanges) are also a concern. Difficulties in formalizing activities and forming a management team (Rede agroecológica de Consumidores Raízes da Mata) were also cited. In addition, communication is difficult (Compras Coletivas Sul and Rede Ecológica), difficulty in expanding the producer group (Cantasol), lack of workforce for production management (Amanacy), and problems of succession and aging of participants (Agrodea).

Problems related to production were also reported, among which are the difficulties of always providing good-quality products (Cestas ZN) and production planning and certification (Cooperssol). Lack of access to drinking water has also been reported (Grupo de Consumo Responsável Elizabeth Teixeira). The difficulty in maintaining the structure and fixed costs (GiraSol) and the lack of adequate structure (CanasJurê) and financial support (Rede Guandu) add to the points of attention.

Most groups' opportunities are related to 'Space for knowledge exchange' and 'Participation in collectives'. Access to credit lines was not a frequent opportunity for the groups (Figure 2).

Among the opportunities, the space for knowledge exchange was mentioned as a provider of experiences, participation, and citation in studies on fair trade, natural food, and conscious consumption (MICC). For the opportunity to participate in collectives, the strengthening of the work of RAMA - Rede Agroecológica de Mulheres Agricultoras da Barra do Turvo (CAUS), participation in the Social Control Organization (Consumo Consciente ABC), and the Rede de Economia Solidária e Feminista – RESF (GiraSol) was highlighted, as was the constant networking with institutions such as public universities, cooperatives, and NGOs (GiraSol) and participation in trade routes and fairs (Cooperssol).

In addition, some groups (Araçá, Cestas ZN, Grupo de Consumo Elizabeth Teixeira, and Rede Agroecológica de Consumidores Raízes da Mata, among others) are formed by rural producers who are part of the Movimento dos Trabalhadores Rurais Sem Terra (MST) and aims to support the subsistence of these producers in the field. The group (Cestas ZN) is reported as an experience aimed at militant consumers who mainly support the MST and are concerned with the agroecological production of healthy foods, thus generating income for small producers.

In addition to peasant movements, intersectoral national programs, such as the Programa de Aquisição de Alimentos (PAA) and Programa Nacional de Alimentação Escolar (PNAE), designed to intertwine family farmers' access to institutional markets with the fight against food insecurity, are positively or negatively affected by different governments. These public policies were dismantled starting in 2013 and deepening after 2016 (De Camargo et al., 2021). In this context and through their articulation, responsible consumption groups seek to partly supply the role that would belong to the State by giving flow to the production of rural producers marginalized by the political context.

About 77% of the groups answered that they do not depend on financing, loans, or any financial resource from public and/or private institutions to form the groups and support producers in this practice. This fact reinforces the SWOT matrix data, which indicates that this aspect should still be explored to improve these chains.

The financial support used by farmers who belong to these groups comes from different sources, such as the National Program for Strengthening Family Farming - Pronaf (as mentioned by the Responsible Consumption Cells), research and extension projects linked to public universities (Rede Agroecológica de Consumidores Raízes da Mata, Rede Guandu, and Terra Limpa), and fundraising through projects and notices (Araçá, Cantasol, and Recoopsol) or even through

collections among participants (Cestas ZN), favoring the autonomous communities as a whole.

In the last decade, research has portrayed a worsening income distribution among family farmers due to Pronaf's lack of focus on production chains and the almost total absence of technical assistance and investment credit (Guanziroli et al., 2012). The groups still report that this scenario involves a poor income distribution among family farmers.

This being said, most groups perceive the 'lack of external support', followed by the 'breach of trust' between actors in the chain as threats. However, large retail chains were not portrayed as a frequent threat to these groups (Figure 2).

Among the threats cited by the groups are those categorized in the SWOT matrix: economic crises (GiraSol), which cause prices to rise and inflation to grow (Tandem community), and the oscillation in consumer demand (Gruca). Still, difficulties were reported concerning the legislation for certification (Cestão Biodinâmico Orgânico) and regularization of products before the MAPA Ordinance No. 52/2021 (Brasil, 2021) (CanasJurê e Cooperssol). Political threats (Grupo de Consumo Elizabeth Teixeira) and insecurity in land occupation (Cestas ZN) are also considered difficulties. The younger generation's lack of interest in social projects (MICC) and the lack of volunteers (Araçá) are also concerning.

5 Conclusion

The literature on AANs shows that using only economic logic for food consumption is insufficient. In this context, RCGs and food arise as experiences between producers and consumers who, when organized, seek socio-environmental changes in their commercial relations.

However, the motivations of the actors of this type of marketing channel may be different. From the perspective of the group managers, the primary motivation for forming these chains has been direct access to quality food at a fair price, that is, without the intermediation of intermediaries. This was followed by encouraging the permanence of small farmers in the countryside by creating more equitable marketing relationships and stimulating the local production and consumption of organic and agroecological products from family farmers, quilombolas, Indigenous people, and artisans.

The managers also believe that the primary motivation of the rural producers participating in the groups is income generation, that is, the need to expand their marketing channels and diversify their sources of income. Producers may treat socio-environmental issues as secondary because survival in the field is still an issue to be overcome by family farming. Thus, the alignment between the different group actors and their motivations must be addressed to ensure the sustainability of these experiences.

The answers to the questionnaire allowed us to identify common patterns among the groups, such as location, which is currently centralized in some states. Most of the identified groups are present in the states of São Paulo and Santa Catarina, mainly due to the participation in networks with institutional support from organizations such as Instituto Kairós and UFSC, respectively, which have provided the strengthening and consolidation of this type of food marketing. Another

outstanding element was the organization of a singular network. This configuration can provide direct contact between producers and consumers.

The SWOT matrix indicated direct contact between producers and consumers as the primary strength of this type of marketing, followed by the production of organic/agroecological foods that contribute to sustainability in agriculture within the internal environment of the groups. In contrast, the primary weak point was the logistics of these chains, which implies food waste, and the difficulties of management and communication between the group actors.

Analyzing the external environment, most groups stated that the opportunities concern social experiences, such as the exchange of knowledge and participation in collectives. On the other hand, the primary threats identified dialogue with the weaknesses raised since internal articulation problems limit the search for external support and can generate a breach of trust between the parties involved.

In general, the social actors involved in this model, such as rural producers, consumers, and entrepreneurs, seek to conquer market niches that value agroecological products. The COVID-19 pandemic favored food acquisition through groups by causing changes in consumer relations. To the extent that consumers have ceased to leave home without frequenting public spaces and markets, the use of digital technologies in conjunction with *delivery* contributed to the consumption of food directly from farmers; the delivery of baskets has become a healthy and safe alternative.

The study presents limitations regarding the sample since identifying the existing population of groups was challenging, and the sample used was conditioned to the voluntary participation of the managers who represented the groups. Thus, there may be several other RCGs in Brazil. However, if they do not have a formality, such as some means of dissemination or records, the most comprehensive research at the national level cannot identify and better understand these groups.

Transformations in the form of food acquisition are important themes for future research that seeks to understand the new food supply arrangements in Brazil and worldwide. Encouraging responsible food consumption groups can contribute to the sustainable development of agriculture.

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