

Family farmers' strategies to develop autonomy through agroecological and solidarity economy practices: The case of BioVida in the Ecuadorian Andes

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Abstract

Considering the global restructuring affecting agrarian landscapes, we build on the concept of autonomy proposed by van der Ploeg and colleagues (but extended and critically complemented) to analyse how family farmers can build this autonomy to face rural capitalist tendencies and maintain their activities and identity. We offer insights from a case study in the Ecuadorian Andes, the BioVida organization that is linked to agroecological and social and solidarity economy movements. Our findings show that family farming autonomy is not being achieved homogeneously for the whole household but must be analysed through an intersectional approach. Furthermore, there are simultaneous processes to achieve different degrees of autonomy and (inter-)dependency, which are co-constitutive along gender and age lines and are conditioned by structural constraints. Therefore, for our case study area, agribusiness and family farming processes and spaces seem to operate co-constitutively rather than antagonistically in practical terms. Agroecology-based achievements so far act as a localized buffer against adversity rather than an emancipative territorial project of autonomy.

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agroecology, alternative markets, autonomy, *circuitos económicos solidarios*, family farmers, social and solidarity economy

1 | INTRODUCTION

The questions of agrarian change and rural transformations are long-standing and have been widely analysed because of their vital relevance both in shaping the general development model of a country and in affecting the concrete livelihoods of millions of people. Within contemporary neoliberal agrarian and rural restructuring, many questions have evolved around two issues: Processes of both de-/re-agrarianization and de-/re-peasantization in studies focused on the contingent and context-specific processes of family farming differentiation and persistence (Hebinck, 2018; Kay, 2015; van der Ploeg, 2018) and the importance of agency and politics in influencing agrarian and rural transformations (Calvário et al., 2019; Copeland, 2018; van der Berg et al., 2019; van der Ploeg et al., 2015).

The role of family farmers' agency in both resisting the corporate-led intensification pathway of rural change and building a different way of life is a subject that stands out. In this respect, the role of agroecology and the peasant way of farming¹ in constituting potential emancipatory alternatives through the construction of differential family farming-based agroecological agrarian and food justice transition is highlighted (Akram-Lodhi, 2021; Giraldo & Rosset, 2018; Nicholls & Altieri, 2018; van der Berg et al., 2022; van der Ploeg, 2020).

We engage with this debate building from the framework of autonomy as a politico-economic concept for family farming practices proposed by van der Ploeg and Schneider (2022) (see also van der Ploeg, 2008; Schneider & Niederle, 2010). While some scholars criticize this concept of autonomy because of its lack of analytical clarity or purpose (Jansen et al., 2022), we still consider it to be useful. But we try to extend and nuance some aspects of this framework with both insights from critical authors and contributions from the social and solidarity economy (SSE) literature.

We consider this contribution from the SSE to be relevant because during the last decade, attention to SSE approaches and initiatives has grown both in Ecuador (Coraggio, 2011, 2014; Villalba-Eguiluz et al., 2020) and worldwide (OECD, 2021; UNRISD, 2016; UN Inter-Agency Task Force on Social and Solidarity Economy, 2014). The SSE is seen as an approach with potential in various arenas to face the tendencies of capitalism that create poverty, inequality, lack of justice and ecological unsustainability, and, of course, in the rural and agrarian arenas as well.

Despite the relevance and potential resemblance between these approaches, the complementarities between family farming autonomy and the SSE remain underexplored, the most common being the references to 'peasant nested markets' and 'alternative food networks' (Schneider et al., 2016; Tregear, 2011; van der Ploeg et al., 2022). We analyse a case study in the Andean region of Ecuador to try to understand the complex interrelations between family farming agency (conditioned through gender, class and age lines) and structures that play out in specific contexts and shape to what extent family farmers' strategies linked to agroecology and SSE are able to construct autonomy.

Regarding the context of Ecuador, the debates and practices linked to food sovereignty and agroecology approaches have had a significant relevance (Clark, 2016, 2017; Giunta, 2014; Intriago et al., 2017). As a result of family farmers' struggles and agroecological movements, Ecuador institutionalized the concept of food sovereignty in its legal system since 2008, although its implementation by the state differs significantly from the principles put forward by the *Via Campesina* movement. Beyond the state policies on food sovereignty, there is a strong civil society promoting and advancing its own agenda in this field. It is estimated that there are around

¹The term 'peasant' is a concept with a long history of detractors and supporters. This discussion will be developed later. In the context of this debate, we prefer to use the concept of 'family farmers' because it is the concept used in Ecuador by the actors themselves and refers to actors who practise agriculture oriented by use value (family reproduction) versus an agricultural activity based on exchange value. This category encompasses a wide and heterogeneous range of groups with different access to physical, economic, human and social resources. However, we will use the concept 'peasant farming style' to refer to the way of practising agriculture following the conceptual framework proposed by van der Ploeg.

230 alternative market circuits nationwide that connect 6577 farming families, pertaining to 712 organizations across the 17 provinces of Ecuador (MAG, 2019). Two civil society groups at the forefront of this expansion are the *Confederación de Campesinos Agroecológicos de Ecuador* (CCAEC—Confederation of Agroecological Peasants of Ecuador) and the *Movimiento de Economía Social y Solidaria del Ecuador* (MESSE—Movement for Social and Solidarity Economy of Ecuador). The organization, BioVida, selected as our case study belongs to both of them.

Therefore, our research questions are as follows: To what extent can family farmers build autonomy as a way to survive and maintain their activities and identity? What are the main achievements but also the main limits and obstacles to building autonomy at different levels in the context of our case study in Ecuador? How is this search for autonomy linked to agroecology and solidarity economy practices?

Our main contributions are, first, at the theoretical level, to draw an extended and critical analytical framework on family farming autonomy that incorporates the main contributions of both agrarian studies and SSE approaches and, second, at the empirical level, to illustrate through a case study linked to agroecology and solidarity economy in the Ecuadorean Andes how the search for autonomy is developed in an agribusiness-oriented region. Our findings show that family farming autonomy is not being achieved homogeneously for the whole household but must be analysed through an intersectional approach. Furthermore, building autonomy is a process that entails trade-offs; that is, some degrees of autonomy and (inter-)dependence emerge simultaneously and are co-constitutive along gender and age lines and conditioned by structural processes. Therefore, for our case study area, agribusiness and family farming processes seem to operate co-constitutively rather than antagonistically in practical terms. As a result, BioVida's agroecology-based achievements so far can be understood as a local buffer against adversity rather than a territorial emancipative project of autonomy.

The remainder of the article is structured as follows. Section 2 is dedicated to the theoretical framework of autonomy building and its criticism and complementarities from different academic strands. Section 3 briefly explains our research methodology for the case study and the contextualization of the territory in which it is located. Section 4 presents the main results and findings regarding each level of autonomy construction. Section 5 succinctly discusses our findings and summarizes the main conclusions.

2 | THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

2.1 | Struggles for existence: Autonomy and family farmer agency

There is a large body of literature that focuses on different mechanisms of resistance created by family farmers to face the 'squeeze' in agriculture caused by globalization and the liberalization of food markets (Schneider & Niederle, 2010; van der Berg et al., 2019; van der Ploeg et al., 2012). This literature emphasizes the remarkable capacities and creativity of family farmers in building post-productivist, territorialized reproduction strategies in contexts of growing commodification and vulnerability. Taking an actor-oriented approach, van der Ploeg (2010, 2018) and van der Berg et al. (2022) make an outstanding contribution to this debate through the concept of 'autonomy'. In this sense, they employ the terms 'resistance of the third kind' or 'fight for existence' to refer to the family farmers' struggle for autonomy, which manifests itself through a wide range of heterogeneous and increasingly interlinked practices through which family farmers position themselves as being distinctly different from capitalist modes of being. This is about working, producing, trading, consuming and living (about existing) in ways that escape from and/or resist the script and imprint of capitalism. In other words, family farmers wish to do things differently, and in so doing, they construct alternative farming, innovation, marketing and other practices that promote their emancipation.

Specifically, van der Ploeg and Schneider (2022) define 'autonomy' as a set of practices that result in the production and reproduction of resources for the self-organization of people, communities and movements in their struggle to distance themselves from control by capital. This struggle is manifested in both defending and controlling the resources that allow for autonomous actions and practices and in their capacity to define developmental

trajectories that are in line with their interests, projects and expectations. In this sense, autonomy is constructed through social processes mediated by structural constraints, in relation with other actors, with whom alliances and agreements—but also disputes and struggle—might occur.

This particular form of patterning of agriculture (peasant way of farming), whereby autonomy is increased, is opposed to two other farming styles (entrepreneur and capitalist style of farming) that actively seek to reproduce themselves within the framework of conventional food markets (van der Ploeg, 2008). The 'entrepreneurial type' is mainly (though not exclusively) built upon financial and industrial capital. Production is highly specialized and completely oriented towards markets, and ongoing expansion through scale enlargement is a crucial and necessary feature. The farm is managed following the maximization of profits, and it is characterized by a partial industrialization of the labour process. The 'capitalist mode' is geared and organized as a function of profit maximization, in which the labour force is mainly or even exclusively based on salaried workers. It tends to appear in the agro-export sector and increasingly conditions major segments of food and agricultural markets. These contrasting styles of farming must be seen as 'ideal types' within a continuum of dynamic farming trajectories on which real agrarian producers rely (van der Ploeg, 2008).

Therefore, there co-exist hybrid forms of production and social reproduction that contemporary family farmers have regarding their styles of farming and livelihoods in the context of agri-food globalization. This, in turn, acknowledges the heterogeneity of needs, aspirations and conditioning factors that structure the variety of existing degrees of agency among family farmers within the framework of their autonomy aspirations nowadays. Some scholars criticize the concept of peasant autonomy as a classification that is insensitive to the processes of social differentiation among family farming actors (Bernstein, 2006; Jansen et al., 2022). For them, the peasant style is an all-encompassing category that conflates several agrarian social classes such as semi-proletarians, simple commodity producers and rural proletariat into one category.

However, we still consider useful the approach of van der Ploeg et al. (2022), if applied expanded through critical perspectives. They describe five interrelated levels at which autonomy can be pursued, which we will be also using to structure our analysis: (1) micro-level at the farm; (2) the level of farms cooperating through mutual help; (3) the level of circulation, that is, markets; (4) the territorial level; and (5) the level of 'political autonomy'.

In what follows, we further develop these five levels of autonomy while providing some critiques and complementarities of them coming from both critical agrarian scholars and SSE literature.

2.2 | Possibilities and constraints for autonomy at the micro-level of the farm

The pursuit of autonomy at the level of the production unit is related to the restructuring of farming in a peasant-like way, which means that the process of farming aims to minimize the degree of commodification. Van der Ploeg (2010) describes several interrelated processes through which this decommodification could occur. (1) *Re-grounding of farming in nature*: Human actors and living nature interact and are transformed mutually. Farming goes beyond relying on ecological processes and resources and involves a dynamic process of feedbacks in the components of agroecosystems whose outcome usually leads to improved productivity and efficiency. One result of this process is the recovery and strengthening of local knowledge and the networks associated with it, which makes it possible to stop depending on external knowledge and technological packages. (2) *Enlarging the self-controlled resource base*: This is achieved through the decommodification of factors such as land, labour, credit and product markets. Reducing dependency on external resources while simultaneously enlarging and improving the stock of internal resources could allow family farmers to reduce the monetary costs of production, which, in turn, allows them to have more room for manoeuvre to build new alternatives. However, some scholars point out the impossibility for many family farmers to broaden their resource base in conditions of strong land fragmentation and precariousness, where off-farm activities have an increasing weight (Martínez Valle & Martínez-Godoy, 2019). Furthermore, they indicate the interrelationships and trade-offs that exist in actively pursuing the decommodification of the resource base. That

is, often, autonomy in one sphere (be it land, product markets or labour) comes at the expense of building dependency or negotiating interdependencies in another (Henderson, 2019; Jansen et al., 2022). (3) *Development of pluri-activity*: This means a part-time engagement in the labour market. This allows them to obtain the economic resources to start farming in an agroecological way and to continue farming in a more autonomous way. A modality of pluri-activity on the farm itself is the so-called multifunctionality, that is, incorporating other economic activities on the farm, such as energy production, agrotourism, on-farm processing and management of landscapes. Such income diversification makes it possible to reduce vulnerability and at the same time improve household income. It is important to highlight the critiques made to the way van der Ploeg conceptualizes pluri-activity. He treats all types of pluri-activity as contributing to building autonomy, as an active decision made by family farmers. However, it is pointed out whether this is true, or rather, in many cases, pluri-activity within family farming livelihoods' strategies is a necessity (rather than an active engagement) related to their condition of impoverishment and exploitation (Jansen et al., 2022).

Finally, another critique that comes from SSE and critical feminist studies is the treatment of the family farming household as a whole unit, instead of differentiating it along gender lines. These perspectives call for consideration of the differential roles of women and men in the expanded reproduction of life with a focus on gender equity, beyond the mere generation of incomes and employment within the family farming household. It is argued that these gender roles condition what women and men as active agents are, what they do and what are their specific oppressions and autonomy's struggles (Natarajan & Brickell, 2022). The SSE entails a conceptualization of 'work' beyond mere productive activities to encompass every reproductive labour oriented towards the social reproduction of the household and the extended community and, thus, broadens the focus from just product- or market-oriented activities to socially embedded interchanges. The MESSE (2015) itself speaks of the capacity to take their own decisions concerning what and how to produce, exchange and consume in their territories aimed at satisfying their needs, underscoring the 'generation of mechanisms that break the conditions of selling labor, strengthening [...] non-capitalist systems of life and procuring autonomy' (p. 17).

2.3 | Possibilities and constrains for autonomy at the level of cooperation among farms

This level of autonomy refers to the formal and/or informal collaborative practices between farmers that are explicitly designed to share, manage and/or exchange equipment, labour and material resources (seeds, feed, water, land, inputs, etc.) (Lucas et al., 2018). It may also include the management or exchange of intangible resources such as knowledge, identity or social values. The objective of these collaborations is for family farmers to have greater access to these strategic resources for the production process as well as to optimize labour processes. This, in turn, allows for less dependence on the market to meet these needs. In our study area, the informal institution called *minga* (i.e., community work) is key to both the management of irrigation systems and the production process among extended families.

Without disregarding these cooperative relationships, it is important to recognize the heterogeneity within family farming communities and the power relations that exist within them. This is important in order to not essentialize and characterize them as inherently solidarity based as opposed to other types of rural/agrarian agents who always seek relationships of dependency and exploitation (Jansen et al., 2022).

Regarding this cooperative level, one relevant contribution of the SSE is to underline one specific form of cooperation that refers to solidarity finances or communal banks (Coraggio, 2011; Mejía et al., 2020). These mechanisms allow family farmers to access credit aimed purposefully at investing in agroecological production practices and at the same time helping to retain savings as a key scarce resource within the community. The self-management mechanisms and criteria established for these banks also foster engagement and cooperation among family farmers.

2.4 | Possibilities and constraints for autonomy at the market level

Van der Ploeg et al. (2012, 2022) point to the active construction of new markets by family farmers and allies, called nested markets,² as a reaction to the failures associated with conventional markets such as inequality and environmental impacts. They define these nested markets as a segment of a wider conventional market; they coexist and are in continuous connection in terms of competition, regulation or appropriation with broader agri-food markets. They are a specific segment that is organized around social interactions between specific actors who occupy specific spaces. As a result, they constitute new organizational and economic mechanisms based on innovative standards and models of trade that aim to develop alternative ways for marketing food (van der Ploeg et al., 2012, 2022).

Although there is a diversity of these markets, they share some common characteristics, such as the following:

(1) They are centred on the transaction of food produced in family farming agriculture (consumers are aware of and appreciate this); (2) the transactions take place in and through short channels (in geographical and social terms); (3) members of family farmer households play a predominant role in the production, packaging, transport and exchange of food products and also in the associated flows of information; (4) the operation of these markets is nested in mutual understanding between producers and consumers and/or is nested in the territory; and (5) they are not directly controlled by capital or oriented towards maximizing monetary profits at any cost.

These common characteristics are explained by five dimensions that these markets display, that is, their structuring features, namely, (1) specificity, referring to the distinctiveness of both the product (in its taste, freshness and price) and the production and marketing processes (origin, the marketplace and the social definition of quality shared by different actors involved); (2) connectedness, emphasizing the socio-material infrastructure or networks between producers/traders and consumers, which are typically non-hierarchical with power diffused across different actors; (3) rootedness, referring to the materiality of these food networks (the rhythm of production, the degree of food processing, the knowledge and skills associated with farming are conditioned by the co-production between nature and farmers); (4) relevance, referring to the results of nested markets in terms of, for example, improved incomes and/or increased jobs for producers, increased accessibility to fresh, high quality food for both producers and consumers, or the inclusion of producers who are often marginalized or lack access to conventional markets; and (5) transformativity, or the capacity to actively contribute to processes that transform the wider society. This dimension focuses on the transformational potential of these markets when they are interrelated and integrated with each other.

For van der Ploeg and colleagues, autonomy at this level is not distancing per se of the markets, but constructing other types of markets that favour family farming actors. However, some scholars have critically emphasized the need to include the study of family farming autonomy within conventional commodity markets (Henderson, 2017; Latorre et al., 2022). There are empirical cases in which family farming actors actively decide to be integrated into commodity markets and to fight for certain degree of leverage over them. Critical literature also points out the danger of essentializing alternative markets when speaking of 'self-regulated' or 'self-organized' markets by family farming actors and allies through social relations of reciprocity and recognition (Jansen et al., 2022; Tregear, 2011). In this regard, it is important to recognize that there might exist unequal power relations among the actors who manage these markets and lack of mutual understanding among themselves. Even more, their existence often depends on local regulations issued by authorities that allow them to exist in public spaces. Therefore, the 'self' and its 'self-regulation capacity' are always relative and negotiated through power relations.

²Van der Ploeg et al. (2022) use the term peasant markets instead of nested markets. In their original exposition, they highlight two crucial aspects: (1) the rise and reproduction of these in relation to conventional markets, which explains the adjective 'nested', and (2) they also differentiate them from conventional markets in that they allow fairer and more sustainable social and economic relationships to be developed. However, the change of term is because of this 'nested' characteristic, given that multiple forms of selling, co-existing with a diversity of social interactions and practices that govern commercialization, is not something that is exclusive to alternative markets, because it also applies to other kinds of markets. They therefore clarify that the concept of 'nested market' is applicable to all kinds of different markets, and so, they prefer to call the markets that have an alternative character 'peasant markets'.

Other shortcomings related to autonomy via alternative markets come from SSE literature. According to Veltmeyer (2018), under different conceptualizations and contexts, solidarity economy practices can apparently serve both capital accumulation through mainstream development or, on the contrary, anti- or non-capitalist strategies linked to alternatives to development. This duality or ambivalence is also present in our case study regarding the 'actual versus potential' autonomy scope and transformative capacity. In this aspect, the problem is not so much market integration itself, given that many family farmers are seeking greater market access, but asymmetry and dependence in the conditions of this relationship. For this reason, SSE tends to acknowledge plural economies whereby different economic modes co-exist: self-consumption, reciprocity and redistribution, together with market interchanges. Therefore, there can be interfaces and confluence zones among markets and not necessarily always opposition.

Finally, usually, there is a lack of considering the cultural and learning dimensions associated to these markets. These alternative markets are not only outlets of food provisioning but also spaces where identities are re-configured and strengthened through the valuation of traditional food and practices, or where educational processes occur towards healthier food-related behaviours. For instance, in the case of Quito farmer markets, the main reason for consumers to buy in these markets is for health concerns and not so much to support family and peasant agriculture (Latorre et al., 2023).

2.5 | Possibilities and constrains for autonomy at the territorial level

This level of autonomy builds on the previous three and emphasizes the role of family farmers as the leading agents of territorial development. The initiatives and novel practices at the farm, inter-farm and market levels are the basis for new autonomy and competitiveness of rural areas in an increasingly globalized world (van der Ploeg, 2018). Taken together, they constitute diversified socio-technical networks that allow for an endogenous territorial development process characterized by local resources and local control. This endogenous trajectory of territorial development is guided by a model of labour intensification (skilled labour to promote ecological processes at the level of landscape), instead of market-supplied factors of production. As a result, in terms of effects on rural development, the ecological resource base is strengthened (improved soil fertility, conservation and enrichment of agrobiodiversity, reduction of greenhouse gas emissions, etc.) as are the territorialized social ties needed to build, defend and continuously reproduce common goods (Petersen & Silveira, 2017).

This conceptualization of territorial autonomy has been criticized for over-emphasizing individualized agency rather than assessing how structural economic, social and political factors limit and condition the set of possibilities or room of *manoeuvre* that family farming actors have to build autonomy at different levels (Jansen et al., 2022). This is very important in the context where family farming is very heterogeneous (as a result of processes of differentiation) and associated with the process of ageing, small landholdings and multiple off-farm activities (Martínez Valle & Martínez-Godoy, 2019).

For its part, transformative SSE proposals like the CESI (Circuitos Económicos Solidarios e Interculturales) resonate well with the autonomy construction projects at a territorial level. The CESI emphasizes several dimensions simultaneously, such as (1) the centrality and autonomy of labour (over capital) in any economic process and its social resignification; (2) sustainable production, linked to the use of the farmers' own resources, and in the case of rural/agrarian contexts, linked to agroecology and food sovereignty; (3) the generation of alternative and self-managed channels of commercialization and solidarity exchange, financing, consumption, self-consumption and other forms of reciprocity; (4) interculturality and the recovery of identities based on rootedness in the territory; and (5) the building of economic democracy for political autonomy and horizontal participation (Jiménez, 2022). Although involving a differentiated terminology and emphasis, in our investigation, we find that several of these dimensions of the CESI, starting from concrete practices, fit into the analytical frameworks of building autonomy on the basis of family farming at several of the levels described by van der Ploeg.

2.6 | Possibilities and constraints of autonomy at the political level

This last level of autonomy refers to the independence of social movements from political parties and the state, which gives family farming social movements the control of the decision-making processes and active participation in the policy-making that affects the countryside and the nation (Bretón et al., 2022). As a social and political praxis, it relates to horizontal participatory decision-making that seeks to transform the traditional hierarchical relationships between leaders and the membership base. Finally, it also relates to the capacity of these family farming actors to defend or claim their rights (Vergara-Camus & Jansen, 2022).

The SSE proposals reinforce this political view and expand it to the democratization of the economy as a whole. SSE also seeks to reassert social control over the economy, recognizing the social embeddedness of the economy and emphasizing the place of ethics in economic activity and rethinking economic practices in terms of democratic self-management and active citizenship (Utting, 2015). Thus, the SSE can also be seen as a social movement, operating also at a political level, that promotes the democratization of the economy, starting with its own governance systems (Coraggio, 2011).

3 | CASE STUDY, MATERIAL AND METHODS

3.1 | The case of Cayambe

The case study is situated in the Cayambe canton, in the inter-Andean region of Ecuador's north-eastern Pichincha province. It has a population of 85,795 inhabitants, of whom 51% are women and 56% live in the rural zone; 42% of the population self-identify as indigenous Kichwa of the Kayambi people; 66% of the population live in conditions of poverty; and 17% live in extreme poverty (GAD Cayambe, 2020).

In Cayambe, there is an unequal productive structure that combines big farms producing flowers and milk with family farming that is increasingly heterogeneous (Martínez Valle & Martínez-Godoy, 2019): 66% of the productive agricultural units (UPAs according to its Spanish initials) have a surface of between 1 and 5 ha, while 2% of the UPAs encompass 42% of the surface area of productive lands (GAD Cayambe, 2020). The concentration of the land has become the decisive factor in the model of production in Cayambe, where the flower sector is the most dynamic in the canton, dominated by urban entrepreneurs sometimes in partnership with foreign investors (Mena-Vásconez et al., 2020). For example, in 2021, it generated 80,000 jobs and represented 5.8% of the country's exports, in spite of only covering 1.9% of the canton's surface area. With regard to the use of space, pasture cultivation represents 27% of the canton's surface area and is dominated by big *haciendas* (estates) or family farming with access to irrigation under contract farming relations (Martínez-Godoy, 2016); short-cycle crops (maize, potato and barley) make up 14.6% and are mainly controlled by family farming (see Figure 1).

This highly unequal agrarian structure results from the agrarian history of this territory. During the 19th and 20th centuries, the *haciendas* (estates system) played a determinant role in the political, social and economic structure of Cayambe. The *haciendas* controlled productive resources like land and water, while peasants and indigenous people were located on hillsides and in the highlands, where they faced problems of land erosion and access to irrigation water.

The agrarian reforms of 1964 and 1973 marked a shift in the social and economic structure of Cayambe. They fomented a share-out of land to the *huasipungueros*³ but did not significantly change the structure of landholding (Korovkin, 2003). The law promoted capitalist forms of agrarian employment and insertion into international markets. One of its axes was the share-out of land through the creation of cooperatives of family farmers. The share-out of

³These were people who had been provided with a small allotment for cultivation and animal husbandry within the *hacienda*, in exchange for working on the *hacienda* for low wages.

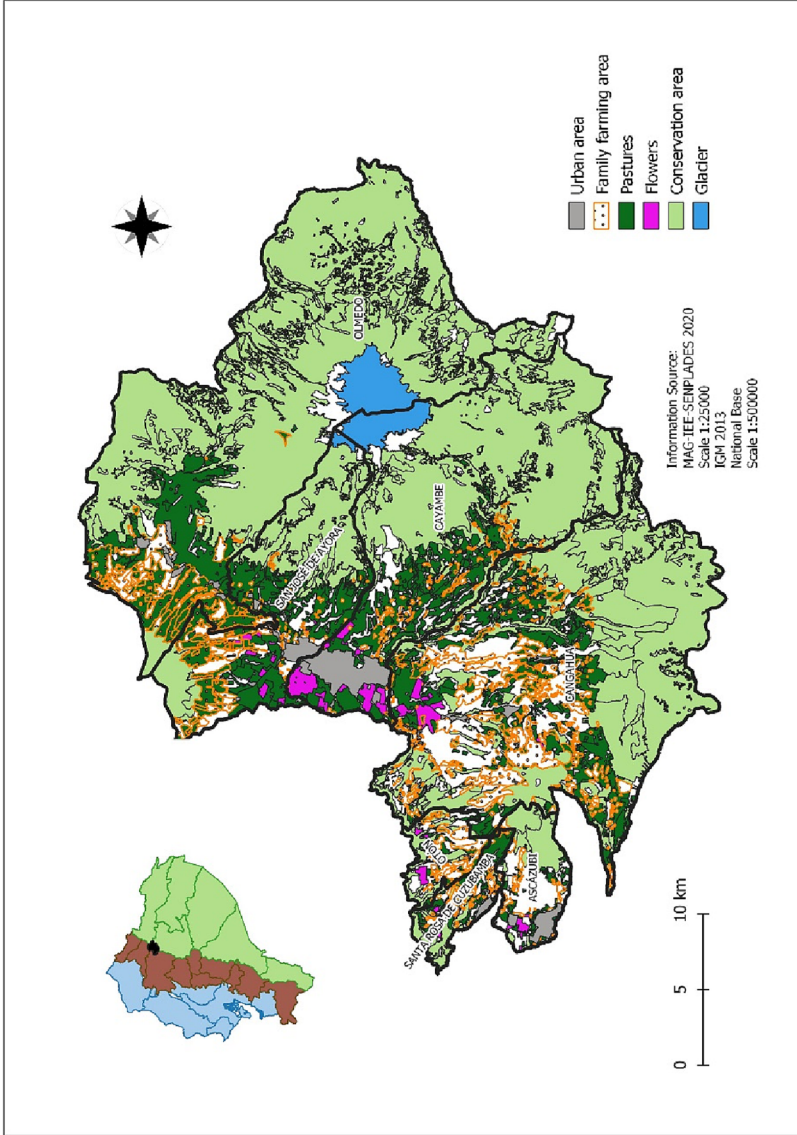


FIGURE 1 Family farming area and main categories of land use in Cayambe. Source: own elaboration.

land through the cooperatives resulted in peasants gaining access to small plots of land (on average 2 ha), which did not guarantee the reproduction of labour, leading to open proletarianization, as they had to sell their labour power in or outside the estate (Martínez Valle & Martínez-Godoy, 2019). This generated a family farming sector characterized by land fragmentation, declining yields and incomes and growing dependence on off-farm jobs.

From the 1980s, the flower industry emerged in a context of structural adjustment programmes that the Ecuadorian government implemented (Korovkin, 2005), where a key component of pro-market programmes was the promotion of non-traditional agri-food commodities. In this regard, a set of market and state incentives was issued, which explains the rapid growth of the cut flower industry during the first half of the 1990s (Kay, 2015). While highly intensive in technology, flower plantations also created substantially more employment per hectare than other production systems. The employment opportunities explain why the cut flower industry was welcomed by many impoverished families in the early years of its emergence (Korovkin, 2003). However, acceptance of flower agribusiness by the local rural population has diminished over time due to harsh labour conditions, little or no impact on rural poverty and occupational health issues, as well as the multiple negative environmental effects (Breilh, 2007; Mena-Vásquez et al., 2018).

Despite constitutional, legislative and policy changes in 2008, the agro-export-oriented economic process and neo-developmental rural policies aimed at increasing domestic production and stimulating the national agro-industrial processing sector have continued (Kay, 2015). In this regard, a new model of contract farming that tied family farmers to national agribusiness firms was promoted, which for our case study's area meant that family farmers entered the dynamics of milk production to be sold through agribusiness-led production chains (Martínez-Godoy, 2016). Besides, since 2005, family farmer flower growers have emerged as a response to the economic stagnation of traditional agriculture (Mena-Vásquez et al., 2020). Therefore, the previous marked antagonism between flowers (capitalists) and food (family farmers) has become more complex with the emergence of these family flower growers.

In this article, we study the experience of the *Asociación de Productoras Agroecológicas BioVida* (BioVida Association of Agroecological Producers), an organization founded in 2004 on the initiative of indigenous women and peasants in Cayambe. It currently consists of 65 families, whose philosophy includes promoting the CESI and contributing to strengthening agroecology, food sovereignty and the solidarity economy in their territory. But beyond the number of families, this organization is relevant because of its capacity to foster and to lead second-grade networks that operate together with other peasant organizations in the area.

In BioVida, 90% of the members are women, 59% married, 19% single mothers, 11% widows and 11% cohabiting with a partner. In each family, there is an average of six members including children, grandchildren, grandparents and other close relatives. Fifty-one per cent of the women in the association identify themselves as being *mestizas* and 49% as indigenous. Ages vary between 20 and 71 years, with an average of 54 years; 69% of the members completed primary education, and 30% secondary education. Twenty-six per cent of BioVida's families have less than 1 ha; 19% have an average of between 1 and 2 ha; 17% have between 2 and 3 ha; and finally, 36% have a property of between 3 and 10 ha. The general average is 3.2 ha per family.

Here, it is relevant to underline that the majority of members of BioVida are women and that this fact affects how they participate, how they focus the association's work and how this affects family farming activities for the whole household, as we will explain later. The board of the association is elected democratically in assembly and changes every 2–3 years, and from the assembly also emerge other sectoral operative committees, to work on specific topics.

3.2 | Methods

To gather field information, several methodological tools were combined during 2017, 2018, 2019 and 2022:

1. Three types of methodologically pre-established workshops, the 'identity tree', the 'time tunnel' and 'actor mapping', served to identify the main concerns of BioVida processes.
2. Five focus groups were held, the first three with members of BioVida to identify the main issues affecting their project and another two groups at the end of the study with SSE organizations and academics to check the implications of these issues and to check our results.
3. Eleven in-depth interviews were conducted, with members of the organization, technicians from the Servicios para el Desarrollo Alternativo (SEDAL) foundation, civil servants from the Municipality of Cayambe and activists of the solidarity economy, from which we extract quotations to illustrate some arguments.
4. Three different kinds of surveys were conducted; two of them were originally designed, implemented and processed by us, and for the third one, we processed the data gathered by the organization itself. The first survey was directed at 41 members of BioVida, identified in our data as 'Members' survey'. In order to calculate the number of interviews to be applied, the universe of members was taken as a reference, with a margin of error of 10% and a confidence level of 95%. This survey was of great value, although some answers might reflect members' self-perception more than truly objective measurements, but they still represent interesting data and in many cases are validated by the similar results of other studies in the region. The second survey, to 60 consumers of solidarity baskets and agroecological fairs, is identified in our data as 'Consumers' survey'. The third survey involved another 36 respondents among BioVida members, and it was conducted by the Ethical Committee of the *Sistema Participativo de Garantía Local* (SPGL—Local Participatory Guarantee System), with a pre-established and validated set of 80 questions for these kinds of processes.
5. The whole information-gathering process was accompanied by field observations in the different spaces of BioVida: agroecological fairs, plots of land and assemblies of the organization.
6. Finally, up to the moment of sending the last version of this manuscript, we have been in contact and been making regular visits to BioVida in Cayambe for other academic purposes, so we are aware of the latest developments.

4 | RESULTS: ANALYSIS FOR EACH LEVEL OF AUTONOMY

4.1 | Micro-level autonomy within the farm

The members of BioVida implement a system of integral plots that focus on five dimensions in the production process: environmental, economic, social, political and cultural. This integral character seeks social and environmental sustainability, which facilitates a regrounding of farming in nature and a greater demercantilization of productive practices. The traditional system of the *chakra andina* is not considered a mere factor of production but the symbolic, spiritual and cultural space that generates relations of caring for nature.

To strengthen agroecological production, BioVida recovers ancestral forms of production based on local knowledge. For example, families sow by the phases of the moon and conserve *creole* seeds. A decommodification of inputs is also sought. Both the families and the organization itself (through a community biofactory) produce their own bioinputs, such as *bokashi*, or processing animal dung to produce biofertilizers. They also promote the diversification of production, to which end they conserve and sow seeds of about 52 crop varieties, of which 15 are Andean natives (some in danger of extinction), and up to 72% of the seeds are conserved and resown in the same plot (see Table 1).

Seventy-two per cent of BioVida members obtain income solely from agroecological farming activities, while 28% of members also obtain income from other non-farm sources. This high percentage (72%) of members of BioVida (which are mainly women individually) with incomes exclusively generated on the farm is possible thanks to multifunctionality. This integrated plot system generates income from the production of bioinputs; the sale of smaller animals (poultry, rabbits and guinea pigs); breeding of larger animals and the sale of milk; communitarian tourism

TABLE 1 Some indicators related to micro-level autonomy.

Dimension and indicator	Figure (by variety or category)			Source
Percentage of families who process animal dung to create biofertilizers	95%			SPGL
Percentage of families who use their own fertilizers on their plot (for each variety)	Majado 82%			SPGL
	Compost 72%			
	Bokashi 94%			
	Humus 76%			
Percentage of families who use biofertilizers on their plot (for each variety)	Biol 72%			Members' survey
	Lime sulfur 71%			
	Liquid microorganisms 26%			
	Solid microorganisms 21%			
Percentage of seeds/seedlings produced on the plot	72%			Members' survey
Average of variety of crops on each farm:	53 varieties:			SPGL
Divided by category	15 native			Members' survey
	8 vegetable			
	13 fruit			
	17 medicinal			
Total number of crops among all members	130 types of crops			SPGL
				Members' survey
Percentage of families who use ancestral knowledge on the farm	Planting according to the moon 90%			Members' survey
	Soil conservation (intercropping, rotation, mulches and <i>guachos</i>) ^a 88%			
	Conservation of native seeds 90%			
Percentage of the household monetary income for each family member:	Men	Women	Children	Members' survey
Wage income	65%	5%	81%	
Agricultural-based income:	-	-	-	
Conventional agriculture	28%	0%	<0.1%	
Agroecological	2%	80%	<0.1%	
Others (including transfers from the state)	5%	15%	19%	
Percentage of families who have the following different activities on their farms (multifunctionality):	Small animals 85%			Members' survey
	Production bioinputs 51%			
	Gastronomy 46%			
	Breeding & milk 31%			
	Semi-processed 36%			
	Tourism 19%			
Medicinal plants 17%				

(Continues)

TABLE 1 (Continued)

Dimension and indicator	Figure (by variety or category)	Source
Percentage of own production that goes to	Self-consumption 36% Barter (non-monetary exchange) 11%	Members' survey

^aIntercropping (maize-beans, *meloco-oca*) helps the soil to retain moisture, and nutrients are shared among plants. Crop rotation lets the soil rest. *Guachos* are kinds of furrows in the soil that are carried out in semi-circular lines with the aim of retaining moisture in places where there is a slope. Mulches and coverings, particularly of straw and other plants, also help to keep in moisture and reduce wind erosion.

Source: own elaboration.

services; production of food (gastronomy); the sale of products with added value (flours and sweets); and, finally, the sale of medicinal plants and minor cures.

Of the total of household incomes (not only individual members of BioVida but also men and children within the household), 37% proceed directly from agroecology (mainly women earners). Another 36% of incomes proceed from working in the private sector (day labourers, mechanics, drivers, construction and cut flower companies, earned mainly by men); 15% from wage labour in the public sector; and 11% from other sources, such as public transfers like the *bono de desarrollo humano*. Thus, the family farming sector is a heterogeneous sector in which different livelihood strategies intersect, including pluri-activity. Here, we observe a very significant distinction; for the women (the direct members of BioVida), the main source of income is agroecology (up to 80% of their income), while for the men and children of the family (not direct members of BioVida), the main source of income is wage labour (up to 65%–81% of their income). Therefore, agroecology allows women to reach a certain level of inputs and labour autonomy but combined with the labour dependence of men, all together as a family strategy. It also helps to subsidize the low wages earned in flower plantations by meeting household food needs. In this regard, off-farm pluri-activity in these family farming households is mediated by gender and constitutes a process of constructing dependence on the part of men to securing as a household their long-term access to land. This, in turn, can be seen as a mechanism that allows these families to sustain as much autonomy as possible in a commodified rural world. However, this distinction in wage-labour importance along gender and age lines has significant implications in the construction of autonomy and the continuity of the BioVida project, as we discuss later.

There are also relevant links with gender roles and the work aimed at social reproduction, because women and men dedicate different amounts of time to productive or reproductive labour. According to our surveys, women dedicate, on average each week, 24 h to productive work, while men dedicate 32 h. On the other hand, women dedicate 32 h on average per week to non-paid work, while men dedicate only 12 h.

Another important aspect in building autonomy at the micro-level is generating non-monetary income, and on average, families use 36% of their production for their own consumption.⁴ This factor ensures subsistence and greater autonomy for families by fomenting a demercantilization of access to foodstuffs, a factor that goes together with food sovereignty.

4.2 | Autonomy through cooperation between family farmers

We have identified that families establish relations of cooperation between themselves in different spheres. First, with respect to water resources, the majority of the families have access to irrigation water through communitarian

⁴This figure is an estimate and represents a self-perception of the families that responded to our survey and is not necessarily an objective measurement. However, the figure is similar to calculations in other studies (Deaconu et al., 2021).

forms and participate in reforestation activities of water sources (channels and watersheds) or in elaborating action plans of the irrigating boards in the framework of communitarian participation (see Table 2).

Second, with respect to agricultural inputs, BioVida created a bioinputs factory to increase the families' autonomy from conventional markets. It is worth noting that a large part of the construction work was done by *mingas* (community-collective work) and, once it was running, the production of inputs was also done by *mingas*.

Third, with respect to work on the plots of land, 14% of this is done using reciprocal forms, particularly involving *mingas* and *prestamanos*, which demercantilizes labour relations. In spite of gradually losing ground, it can be stated that these collective actions have a notable presence and are outstanding in times of crisis, enabling greater resilience facing social and environmental changes, such as the Covid-19 pandemic or climate change (Córdoba et al., 2021). Additionally, they make it possible to extol social values and peasant and indigenous identity.

Fourth, to strengthen solidarity production, commercialization and consumption, alternative methodologies of inter-apprenticeship have been implemented, such as *campesino a campesino*. This process enables a horizontal process of integrating intangible knowledge:

TABLE 2 Some indicators related to autonomy through cooperation.

Dimension and indicator	Figure (by variety or category)	Source
Percentage of families who participate in activities for managing water	<i>Mingas</i> for conserving irrigation channels 97% Water management meetings 97% Participation in drawing up legal proposals 59%	SPGL
Families with SPGL	100% 92% green card ^a 8% yellow card	Members' survey
Percentage of unpaid forms of work carried out by each family	Family work 82% <i>Mingas</i> 11% <i>Prestamanos</i> ^b 3% <i>Al partir</i> ^c 3%	Members' survey
Percentage of families who do participate in the conservation of community and waste land	<i>Mingas</i> for looking after communal land 70% Cattle management 70%	Members' survey
Percentage of families who take part in <i>mingas</i> for the biofactory	100%	Members' survey
Place where savings are deposited	Conventional banking 10% Solidarity funding (own community bank) 45% SSE saving and credit cooperatives 45%	Members' survey
Percentage of credit sources	Conventional banking 13% Solidarity funding (own community bank) 49% SSE saving and credit cooperatives 38%	Members' survey

^aThe green card is given to families who have a score of over 80% in the SPGL assessment system and the yellow to those over 60% (BioVida).

^bThe system works as follows: a family that needs a task done asks other families to 'lend a hand' to help in that task. Once it is done, the first family will be in debt with the other families, and the 'favour' will be returned when those other families need support. On the day of the work, the requesting family makes food and drink available for sharing among participants.

^c*Al partir* is a form of production that consists of a family with an unused plot of land giving it to another family for planting. In general, the harvest is shared in equal measures between the owner of the land and the farmer, although there can be a range of agreements. The family that has offered the land can also give the other family the inputs required for production.

Source: Authors' own elaboration.

The methodology called *Campesino a Campesino*, where we recognize what we know and show what we do in our plots, the technician from Sedal contributes techniques and the vocabulary of the agroecological method, but there was one who was telling us what she knew with the support of the other promoters.

(Testimony BioVida)

The dialogue of knowledge strengthens a collective identity that is decisive for building autonomy, as it is a source of self-esteem for the women, who feel proud to be agroecological producers and defend the political proposal concerning food sovereignty.

Fifth, land ownership is both family and communal; three quarters of families live in communities where there is communal landownership. According to the surveys conducted, 41% of communal land is dedicated to preserving the moorland; 20% to conserving Andean landscapes; and 36% to pasturing bovine animals and sowing pasture for cattle. The majority of the families participate in *mingas* to maintain communal lands:

'We commonly practice community mingas. In this way we take care of the community roads, especially the roads of the path of the cultural heritage. We also do this to help or support a family when it needs this'

(Interview E1)

It should be noted that there is no community production. According to Martínez-Godoy (2016), the communities exercise a political and social control over the communal lands that enables families to access productive resources like irrigation water and land for animal pasturage.

One contribution of the CESI (or the SSE) to building autonomy is the emphasis on cooperation regarding solidarity finances. BioVida has a community bank attached to the organization under collective democratic management, which reinforces the socio-organizational process as a whole. Participation in the communitarian bank is optional for BioVida members, but actually, all of them participate. There are both an initial and periodic financial contribution from each participant, but they are almost symbolic since its amount is very low. Then, the majority of the credit and savings is managed through the communitarian bank, up to 45% of members' savings and 49% of their credit, which enhances the funds of the bank. Still, another high percentage of savings and credit is located within local saving and credit cooperatives, also linked to the SSE sphere (45% of the saving and 38% of the credit). The credits are given through 'cross-guarantees' (from both members and the community), and they are usually at a quite lower interest rate than conventional banks (around 12% compared to 24% of conventional banks). Beyond the percentages, and the total amount of savings in dollars (which is low), what is significant is that the majority of the credit requested from the communitarian bank is destined specifically for agroecological production. In this sense, the solidarity finances promoted by BioVida generate greater financial autonomy and provide support to the CESI. Besides, the local and democratic character reinforces the organization, where the main decisions are presented and taken in assembly, and which helps keeping a very low percentage of delays in payments due to close personal and trust relationships.

4.3 | Market autonomy

The CESI and solidarity markets promoted by BioVida fulfil the characteristics proposed for nested markets by van der Ploeg and colleagues. First, regarding specificity, there is a social definition of quality shared by the actors involved; for instance, consumers state that they appreciate BioVida products insofar as they proceed from family farmers and are chemical free. This trust and shared understanding are also fostered by the fact that

only members with the SPGL card certifying that they are agroecological producers can sell at these markets. To strengthen the specificity of both the product and the processes, BioVida promotes a SPGL that entails a rigorous evaluation with the active participation of producers and consumers (and the crucial technical and financial support of a partner NGO). It is important to clarify the difference between this SPGL and external certifiers (Third-Party Certification, TPC). For BioVida, TPC have a market logic: (1) They set prices according to supply and demand; (2) only the product is certified (organic or not organic); (3) the relationship between the member-producers and their environment is not considered, or the participation in associative processes; (4) costs are high since they have to cover the expenses of technicians, administration and reports; (5) the costs are set according to national and international market parameters and are transferred to consumers, making the product more expensive; and (6) the report is carried out by an external specialized technician and does not strengthen the organization. On the other hand, the SPGL (1) checks the whole plot and take into consideration all of the plot's sub-systems, including the human element; (2) the person's attitude to production is valued; (3) the member's participation in the organization is assessed; (4) continuous evaluations are carried out by the whole organization in order to verify that recommendations are being met; (5) the costs are low, adapted and accessible for producers; (6) SPGL implementation costs⁵ are set by an assembly, are covered by the producer and are not transferred to consumers; (7) checks are carried out by producers who have been trained as observers; and (8) the basis is established according to their own local standards that have been agreed previously; observers visit the plots and check that the 80 indicators are being met.

Thus, the SPGL helps to construct and sustain economic relations anchored on more horizontal social relations. The SPGL seeks to reinforce a broader set of relations, valued attitudes and indicators, instead of simply certificate the quality of specific products, which could achieve profit maximization. Moreover, these alternative methods and markets sponsored by BioVida achieve a significant level of loyalty from consumers. According to our surveys, these consumers' main reasons for purchasing in BioVida's alternative markets are health reasons; conscious support for family farmers; the products are of good quality and fairly priced; and because they belong to the solidarity economy (see Table 3).⁶

Second, regarding the connectedness and rootedness dimensions, these markets are spaces that are established in the territories, generating relations of collaboration, trust and mutual support between producers, consumers and other local actors where there is a prevalence of local circuits. The fairs are located in Cayambe and are held on Wednesdays, while the solidarity baskets are sold in Quito, and they represent a non-hierarchical socio-material network between producers and consumers. Additionally, BioVida's CESI only sells fresh and semi-processed produce made of ingredients produced by BioVida's members.

Third, the fairs and solidarity baskets are managed autonomously by the association, with participatory and democratic processes involving family households. At the close of the fair, an assembly is held to evaluate the day, establish responsibilities for the sale of products and clean the spaces. To ensure that the fairs work well, a committee has been formed specifically to manage them.

Fourth, the fairs generate relations of reciprocity and mutual support insofar as they incorporate non-monetary exchanges; for example, 10% of production is intended for barter. While this is not a high percentage, the relevance of barter lies in its strengthening relations of reciprocity and complementarity. Forty-seven per cent of the barter is between the members of BioVida themselves, 24% with other organizations and 25% with families of the communities and consumers. It is very common at the start or end of the fair for members of BioVida to go from stall to stall to *barter* their products:

⁵These 'SPGL implementation costs' are quite low (\$20 per plot per year) since all the work is done by the same members of BioVida, and besides, they have technical assistance from external NGOs. Thus, these costs represent a very small percentage of overall productions costs.

⁶Of course, capitalist firms also achieve a significant level of support and loyalty from other kind of consumers thanks to marketing campaigns, but both the means (marketing vs. social embedded engagement) and the reasons for that loyalty are different ('support family farmers'; 'fairly priced' and 'belonging to solidarity economy').

TABLE 3 Some indicators related to autonomy at the market level.

Dimension and indicator	Figure (by variety or category)			Source	
Percentage of sales by kind of alternative market	Agroecological fair 71%			Members' survey	
	Solidarity baskets 15%				
	From the plot 14%				
Percentage change in income of families between 2016 and 2019	Stayed the same, for 10% of families			Members' survey	
	Increase of 10%, for 20% of families				
	Increase of 20%, for 39% of families				
	Increase of 40%, for 12% of families				
Percentage of members who have income only from the agroecological farm (including multifunctionality)	72%			Members' survey	
Percentage of family expenses reinvested in alternative markets	44%			Members' survey	
Percentage of acquisition of some goods and services by kind of markets	Alternative	Conventional	Public	Members' survey	
	Beans, vegetables and fruit	100	-		-
	Processed products	1	99		-
	Flours, bread, cheese	68	32		-
	Treatments for mild illnesses	23	-		77
	Basic services	46	-		54
	Main reason for agroecological consumption among consumers (as a percentage)	Feel they are healthier 37%			Consumers' survey
To support small producers 22%					
Good quality and fair price 17%					
Because they belong to the solidarity economy 11%					
Average weekly spending by consumers at agroecological fairs	15% of consumers spend between \$0 and \$10			Consumers' survey	
	38% of consumers spend between \$11 and \$20				
	28% of consumers spend between \$21 and \$40				
	18% spend over \$40				
Average spending by consumers on fortnightly baskets	4% of consumers spend between \$1 and \$10			Consumers' survey	
	62% of consumers spend between \$11 and \$20				
	21% spend between \$21 and \$40				
	13% spend over \$40				

Source: Authors' own elaboration.

We have barter in the organization, when the fair ends we exchange the comrades' products, above all they are exchanged for products from the hot zone, they also sell at our fair, so we manage to exchange there; bartering is done between the coastal zone and the highland zone, we obtain products like papaya, silk bananas, oranges, yucas, while they take away tomatoes, paitaña onions, broccoli ... We have participated in Ibarra, we went there and bartered; likewise, we take products from here and we exchange them with comrades in Ibarra and Pimampiro.

(Interview E2, 2019)

Fifth, regarding relevance, these are markets that are not mainly directed by capital or towards obtaining profits. The products' prices and quantity are defined every 6 months at an assembly of the Association, to which consumers are invited. Prices are maintained for 6 months, and the regulations establish sanctions for people who do not follow the resolution. That is, prices are not subjected mainly to supply and demand and competitive logics, and fair prices for both sides are fostered, making it possible to generate redistributive processes, an element that characterizes the solidarity economy. Prices are subject to the reproduction of the solidarity project and not to the maximization of profits for any actor.

Despite many BioVida members do not manage an exact accountability of every cost, we could say that 'general production costs' of agroecological producers present a competitive advantage in so far these costs in monetary terms are lower because many of the inputs (seeds, fertilizers, labour, etc.) are achieved within the own farm thanks to some level of autonomy.⁷ This fact helps them to maintain prices attractive for consumers. However, this same fact, sometimes leads family farmers to underestimate the value of their own labour.

These commercialization mechanisms promoted by BioVida enable incomes to be increased, which is vital for the relevance characteristic of these markets. Following the survey of BioVida members, the agroecological produce income, in the 2016–2019 period, increased for the majority of the families.

With the elements indicated above, regarding transformativity, it can be said that the proposal of solidarity markets contributes to demercantilizing, redistributing and relocating economic relations, including also strategies of circularity and sufficiency (Villalba-Eguiluz et al., 2023; Villalba-Eguiluz & Pérez de Mendiguren, 2019), insofar as it foment: non-monetary exchanges like barter; territorializes the market, which goes hand-in-hand with the political struggle for access to the public space by the solidarity economy; and finally, it confronts conventional commercialization systems that promote unfair food chains in an asymmetrical way. Furthermore, food-related CESIs are a suitable alternative to fight against malnutrition (and therefore promote healthy and sustainable diets), which is a pandemic in the current context of food globalization (Latorre et al., 2022). They therefore seek to transform the wider society.

4.4 | Territorial autonomy

By means of the CESI, BioVida seeks to promote greater territorial articulation and develop greater capacities for managing and controlling productive resources in the territory (irrigation water, land, inputs, public spaces, etc.). To that end, it promotes a series of relations of inter-cooperation with multiple actors: (1) families of communities that have reciprocal and complementary relations for accessing goods and services; (2) ONG that provides technical and financial support; (3) together with six agroecological organizations, it promoted the *Red de Economía Solidaria y Soberanía Alimentaria del Pueblo Kayambi* (RESSAK—Network of Solidarity Economy and Food Sovereignty of the Kayambi People) to improve production and commercialization, and it participates in the *Mesa Cantonal por la Soberanía Alimentaria* (Cantonal Board for Food Sovereignty), whose main goal is to have an impact mainly on public policies in favour of agroecology, food sovereignty and solidarity economy; (4) it also belongs to the MESSE, the Agroecological Collective and the *Confederación de Campesinos Agroecológicos del Ecuador*, second-tier organizations or social movements which generate campaigns of solidarity consumption or defence of local seeds; (5) at the cantonal level, it belongs to the *Movimiento del Pueblo Kayambi* (MPK—Movement of the Kayambi People) and the *Confederación de Mujeres del Pueblo Kayambi* (Confederation of Women of the Kayambi People).

Just as a brief illustration, we can mention here two examples of how this inter-cooperation with other agents in the territory helps build autonomy and some of its limits. First, regarding collaboration with NGOs, we can mention SEDAL as its main partner from the beginning. This NGO raises and channels international funds towards the

⁷These costs are somehow reflected in the prices, despite not always representing the same margin because of the absence of precise accountability.

territory, which, although being of very small quantities, reinforce the activities of the organization. They have established alliances based on personal trust and political affinity and give technical, financial and political support to the whole process of the CESI. However, actually, BioVida is dependent to this support to correctly maintain the SPGL, for instance. Furthermore, there are also other NGOs in the territory who operate in a shorter period of time based on specific projects, instead of considering the local processes, that could also create conflicts and undermine the autonomy of the organizations.

Second, there is the case of RESSAK conceived initially as a network in 2012 but created legally later in 2014 as an organization oriented to foster SSE and food sovereignty in the territory, mainly through the promotion of commercialization and political incidence. It still exists nowadays as an organization, but a new instrument has been created as a network (*Consejo de Productoras Agroecológicas*). There is interest in strengthening this new network as a source of autonomy to create alternative markets and commercialization channels, but at the same time, limitations of previous experience remain because of the limited achievements and the practical shortcomings, representing a complex balance.

In the case of RESSAK, these shortcomings and limitations relate to a number of issues: (1) Difficulties in legal conditions led to an official recognition of RESSAK as a single organization, not as a network; (2) this legal form caused practical disruptions in the management of some common resources (a vehicle, a transference centre), because they were registered and managed under one single organization's name, not of all those within the intended network; (3) the maintenance of the network was very demanding in terms of monetary fees and dedicated time and effort to meetings; (4) there were rigidity in the quotas of certain products for the agroecological baskets and discrepancies about the distribution of responsibilities depending on the number of members of each organization within the network.

Finally, BioVida also maintains relations with public institutions: (6) with local governments of Cayambe and Pichincha and (7) with institutions at the national level (Ministry of Agriculture and Livestock, Institute of Popular and Solidarity Economy, Superintendence of Popular and Solidarity Economy). However, BioVida has low expectations from state institutions, considering that the national policies in favour of agroecology are inefficient, discontinuous and deterritorialized.

4.5 | Political autonomy

BioVida is committed to constructing a local political actor or social movement in the territory of Cayambe that defends agroecology and the SSE and therefore promotes several socio-organizational spaces of producers. From these autonomous collective spaces, it has promoted the construction and approval of public policies in favour of agroecology, such as 'Ordinance Regulating the Use of the Public Space for Commercialization of Healthy Products at Agroecological Fairs', which envisages mechanisms for strengthening the production, commercialization and consumption of products proceeding from agroecology and the solidarity economy.

At the political level, BioVida promotes a collective identity rooted in the processes of struggles that the indigenous peoples and peasants have historically developed in Cayambe in defence of land, water and other resources. BioVida favours principles of reciprocity and solidarity.

The strengthening of the organization is based on the following elements: horizontal and democratic participation of its members in decision-making; strengthening of capacities of socio-organizational and political management through training courses; development of a collective proposal and shared principles in its vision, mission and strategic planning; and equitable and egalitarian integration in the spaces of commercialization, access to credit and training.

Participation in the organization provides members with the following positive factors, among others: increasing their self-esteem as women and having a better understanding of their rights as persons, as women and as members

of indigenous peoples. In sum, they are very conscious of the importance of participating in agroecology as an alternative economic model that cares for nature and is sustained by peasant women:

Agroecology was born over 20 years ago, when we women saw the need, firstly, to organize ourselves, recognizing our rights as women, searching for spaces where we as women could raise our voice and say 'here we are, we exist', because of this high level of discrimination against indigenous women, against poor women, against illiterate women. It has been a struggle for us, in which we have had to resist [...] many authorities have doubted our power, doubted our resistance, but we have been there, steadfastly.

(Focus Group, 2018)

5 | DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS

We have analysed the processes of building autonomy by family farmers through the case study of the BioVida Association in Ecuador and its agroecology and solidarity economy practices.

At the micro-level, we find processes of demarketization of practices and labour relations, of preservation of non-monetary incomes and of decommodification of inputs and practices of multifunctionality and pluri-activity beyond agriculture within the plot. At the cooperation level, we find cooperation to gain access to resources like water or finance, cooperation to acknowledge local knowledge and collaborative labour relations. At the market level, we find that the CESI derived from agroecology and solidarity fairs meets the five characteristics and structuring features of nested markets and serves to improve income for family farmers. While at the territorial and political levels, we find a web of local relations among different actors and some influence on specific local policies but very limited overall impact facing powerful economic actors and macroeconomic tendencies.

Thus, the main achievements relate to fostering autonomy in the micro-level and cooperation level, and the main limitations remain in the territorial and political levels, while diverse dynamics occur in the market level affecting all the previous ones. In this sense, we can state that for the case of Cayambe, agroecology-based family farming is far from becoming the leading agent of territorial development. While BioVida might be seen as the result of processes of collective action involving innovation and trust-building promoted by family farmer actors and directed at reverting the territorial dynamics promoted by agribusiness, at the territorial level, agro-industrial productive logics predominate over peasant ones. Our data do not corroborate the prevalence of a general dynamic of territorial re-peasantization but rather of localized 'micro' mechanisms of resistance in order to deal with vulnerability and the inability to counter milk and flower agribusinesses as the principal agents of the territory's transformation. They therefore remain at the level of localized mechanisms of resistance but do not offer a general alternative for the territory. For example, the lack of a generational replacement in BioVida means that we cannot talk of re-peasantization as a sustainable process but more as a specific life cycle; moreover, our case shows a qualitative and gendered re-peasantization for a specific number of associated families led by women but not a quantitative one for the territory as a whole.

Several structural factors explain this outcome. First, there is a process of social differentiation and a significant degree of small-scale farming among family farmers. While there is a process of proletarianization and semi-proletarianization among family farmers, family farming has become the refuge of the oldest section of the population (Latorre et al., 2022; Martínez, 2021), including those who enter into post-productive trajectories such as agroecology.

Second, family agriculture's low level of retaining the family labour force (including agroecology) promotes a process of proletarianization of young people, who make up the labour force on the flower plantations or emigrate to nearby cities in search of non-agricultural work as Martínez Valle and Martínez-Godoy (2019) have stated. This is also confirmed by the following testimony from a young man, the son of a BioVida member:

I work in agroecology [...] My sister suffered an illness and that changed my point of view, and so I became involved in farming without chemicals. But I see other young people who are only looking to join the economy; I feel that there are no incentives, so if they are not keen, they do not come into agriculture. The economic angle doesn't make them want to; with flowers they will earn more, and vegetables don't provide much income. I, on the other hand, I have plants, but also hens and with the gastronomic side I can earn money, that is my advantage, and that is why I stay [...]. Young people don't like the countryside, and they don't have land; but I have land so I can farm, but they don't, and so they go to work for the flower plantations.

(Focus Group, 2019)

This excerpt shows how (agroecological-based) family farming is not sufficiently attractive for the new generations who prefer salaried jobs (Martínez-Godoy, 2016). In this regard, capitalist markets (in labour and consumption) tend to increasingly control the family farming means of living in the territory of Cayambe, which is mediated by gender, age and class.

Third, this proletarianization tendency is being timidly reverted with the emergence of family farmers who produce flowers (who have access to land and irrigation), where young people have an important role as mentioned above. However, the long-term effects of this trend remain to be seen, as many young people are becoming severely indebted without good prospects in the near future. Therefore, we could say that there is an inter-generational conflict that is mediated by gender (agroecology promoted by elderly adult women vs. modernization of flower production promoted by young people, above all males) in family farming due to the nature of the territorial dynamic in Cayambe. In this regard, the prevalence of low levels of education among younger members of family farmers (including agroecological ones) and other factors such as social differentiation and a lack of public policies in favour of (agroecological) family farming are some of the obstacles that prevent the development of a territorial model in Cayambe based on agroecology and associated with a skilled labour force to generate greater added value and innovation processes to improve the living conditions of farming households and retain the younger population.

Fourth, following Natarajan and Brickell (2022), a gender perspective in studying the autonomy process within the family farming household allows us to see how BioVida and its agroecological practices can be understood as 'survival work'. This means that some of these women became involved in agroecology because they were rejected (being adult women over 40) as wage-labourers by the flower agribusiness and/or because the working conditions to which they were subjected on the flower plantations did not allow them to meet their gendered care workload. As we have seen in the micro-level autonomy data, percentages of wage-labour income and hours dedicated to non-paid labour are different for women and men and complement each other in an asymmetric way. As we have shown in this paper, these day-to-day survival needs have, over time, allowed these women to rework immediately oppressive circumstances and build a broader project of some degree of autonomy at different levels. However, the limited autonomy built by these women through agroecology is co-constituted by the dependence process of male relatives in mainly agribusiness wage labour. Women's re-peasantization is connected to men's proletarianization. As mentioned above, the limited monetary income generated by women through agroecology means that the reproduction of their households requires the monetary income generated by men (and children) in the labour market (mainly in the flower agribusiness). Therefore, within BioVida, family farming households' autonomy and dependence are achieved simultaneously and are co-constitutive along gender and age lines. In this regard, peasant persistence is not fully autonomous from agribusiness. Agribusiness and family farming re-territorialization processes are co-constitutive, which limits the territorial autonomy capacity of the latter. In our case study, peasant territorialization based on agroecology is indeed in opposition to agribusiness, as some scholars suggest (Fernandes, 2008; Rosset & Martínez-Torres, 2012), but mainly at the discursive, ideological and philosophical levels. However, it does not seem to be such an antagonistic project to agribusiness in practice, where it is important to consider the intersectionality of other factors such as class, gender and age.

Fifth, this co-construction of autonomy and (inter-)dependency is linked to clear structural political economy limitations not only for agroecology but also when it comes to scaling up SSE initiatives (and peasant markets). These SSE initiatives and the CESI still fail to create more aggregated value for agroecology products. There is not enough production volume or suitable sales channels beyond fairs and baskets to scale these experiences. And public authorities do not offer adequate support, because the existing policies are scarce and more oriented towards popular and informal economy or newly created cooperatives and associations linked to public purchases than to pre-existing SSE social movements (Villalba-Eguiluz et al., 2020).

In synthesis, these structural factors impose highly complex challenges for agroecological massification as a strategy of territorial development (scaling out), as they are increasingly common in traditionally peasant lands. Nonetheless, these limitations observed in practice do not themselves invalidate the alternative proposal and its possibilities for expansion, because social actors continue to search for alternatives to development that could guarantee their *Buen Vivir*. Autonomy is constantly in dispute among different actors (Guimarães & Wanderley, 2022), and no one single path exists. As in other contexts, expressions of autonomy struggles can be very diverse and complex, ranging from poverty-driven survival strategies to politicized socio-territorial movements (Natarajan & Brickell, 2022; Sankey, 2022).

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DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

Research data are not shared.

CONFLICT OF INTEREST

All the authors declare that they do not have any conflicting interest.

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