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## Participatory and governance processes in food sovereignty and security during the COVID-19 pandemic in Commune 1 of Medellín, 2021

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### Abstract

**Objective:** To understand the participatory and governance processes surrounding food sovereignty and security that developed in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic in Commune 1 of the Popular District of Medellín, Colombia.

**Methods:** The study was participatory action research, through a dialogue of knowledge. A strategy aimed at community training and participation was developed, called the “School of Leaders and Managers of Food and Nutrition Sovereignty and Security”, comprised mostly of women. Grounded theory was used to analyze the qualitative data collected through 15 individual and 20 group interviews. The research process was carried out during 2021.

**Results:** Four phenomena were identified in this training and knowledge-sharing space: the first is the worsening of food insecurity in commune 1 due to the COVID-19 pandemic and the strategies to address it from predominantly welfare-based approaches, which have little impact on the social, economic, and cultural determinants necessary to guarantee the right to healthy food; the second is the inefficiency of institutional management in the face of the social needs of commune 1, which is immersed in a scenario of exclusion and failures to guarantee rights; The third outcome is the implementation of plans, programs, and projects that do not correspond to the territorial dynamics in which the problems manifest themselves. Finally, the influence of economic, social, and cultural determinants that influence the environment and limit the guarantee of the human right to food for the population of Commune 1 is evident.

**Conclusion:** It was recognized that community-based forms of organization represented the main mechanism for preventing the worsening of the food crisis resulting from the COVID-19 pandemic. Therefore, they represent a potential for addressing temporary and structural social and food crises.

-----**Keywords:** COVID-19, health inequities, food insecurity, community participation, government policy, nutrition programs

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# Los procesos participativos y de gobernanza en soberanía y seguridad alimentaria durante la pandemia de la COVID-19 en la comuna 1 de Medellín, 2021

## Resumen

**Objetivo:** Comprender los procesos participativos y de gobernanza alrededor de la soberanía y la seguridad alimentaria que se desarrollaron en el contexto de la pandemia de la COVID-19 en la comuna 1 Popular, del distrito de Medellín, Colombia.

**Métodos:** El tipo de estudio fue de investigación acción participativa, mediante un diálogo de saberes, para lo cual se conformó una estrategia encaminada a la formación y la participación comunitaria llamada “Escuela de Líderes Gestores de Soberanía y Seguridad Alimentaria y Nutricional”, integrada mayoritariamente por mujeres. Se acudió a la teoría fundamentada para el análisis de la información cualitativa recolectada mediante 15 entrevistas individuales y 20 grupales. El proceso investigativo se realizó durante el año 2021.

**Resultados:** En este espacio formativo y de diálogo de saberes se identificaron cuatro fenómenos: el primero es el recrudecimiento de la inseguridad alimentaria en la comuna 1 por la pandemia COVID-19 y las estrategias para abordarla desde enfoques eminentemente asistencialistas, que poco inciden en los determinantes sociales, económicos y culturales necesarios para garantizar el derecho a una alimentación saludable; el segundo es la ineficiencia de la gestión institucional frente a las necesidades sociales de la comuna 1, la cual se encuentra inmersa en un escenario de exclusión y falencias en la garantía de los derechos; el tercer resultado es la implementación de planes, programas y proyectos que no se corresponden con las dinámicas territoriales en las que se manifiestan las problemáticas y, finalmente, se presenta la influencia de los determinantes económicos, sociales y culturales que tienen injerencia en el entorno y los cuales limitan la garantía en el derecho humano a la alimentación de la población de la comuna 1.

**Conclusión:** Se reconoció que las formas de organización comunitarias representaron el principal mecanismo para evitar la agudización de la crisis alimentaria producto de la pandemia de la COVID-19. Por tanto, representan un potencial para afrontar las crisis sociales y alimentarias de tipo coyuntural y estructural.

-----*Palabras clave:* COVID-19, inequidades en salud, inseguridad alimentaria, participación de la comunidad, política gubernamental, programas de nutrición.

# Processos participativos e de governança em soberania e segurança alimentar durante a pandemia de COVID-19 na comuna 1 de Medellín, 2021

## Resumo

**Objetivo:** Compreender os processos participativos e de governança em torno da soberania e segurança alimentar que foram desenvolvidos no contexto da pandemia de COVID-19 na Comuna Popular 1, no distrito de Medellín, Colômbia.

**Métodos:** O estudo tratou-se de uma pesquisa-ação participativa, por meio de um diálogo de saberes, para o qual foi estabelecida uma estratégia voltada à formação e participação comunitária denominada “Escola de Líderes e Gestores de Soberania e Segurança Alimentar e Nutricional”, composta majoritariamente por mulheres. A teoria fundamentada foi usada para analisar as informações qualitativas coletadas por meio de 15 entrevistas individuais e 20 entrevistas em grupo. O processo investigativo foi realizado durante 2021.

**Resultados:** Neste espaço de formação e diálogo de conhecimento, foram identificados quatro fenômenos: o primeiro é o agravamento da insegurança alimentar na comuna 1 devido à pandemia da COVID-19 e as estratégias para enfrentá-la a partir de abordagens eminentemente assistencialistas, que têm pouco impacto nos determinantes sociais, econômicos e culturais necessários para garantir o direito à alimentação saudável; O segundo é a ineficiência da gestão institucional diante das necessidades sociais do município 1, que está imerso em um cenário de exclusão e falhas na garantia de direitos; O terceiro resultado é a implementação de planos, programas e projetos que não correspondem à dinâmica territorial em que os problemas se manifestam e, por fim, a influência de determinantes econômicos, sociais e culturais que impactam o meio ambiente e que limitam a garantia do direito humano à alimentação da população da Comuna 1.

**Conclusão:** Reconheceu-se que as formas de organização comunitária representaram o principal mecanismo de prevenção do agravamento da crise alimentar decorrente da pandemia da COVID-19. Portanto, elas representam um potencial para enfrentar crises sociais e alimentares atuais e estruturais.

-----*Palavras-chave:* COVID-19, desigualdades em saúde, insegurança alimentar, engajamento comunitário, política governamental, programas de nutrição.

## Introduction

According to the United Nations, developing countries were the most affected by the COVID-19 pandemic, and within these, historically excluded groups—such as those in the informal economy, women, people with disabilities, refugees, displaced persons, and stigmatized populations—were especially impacted [1].

The global food security situation is alarming. According to the Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO) of the United Nations, the number of people suffering from hunger in 2021 rose dramatically to 828 million—an increase of 46 million compared to 2020. Additionally, there was a total increase of 150 million people suffering from hunger since the start of the pandemic. These figures indicate a deviation from the goal of eradicating hunger and malnutrition in all its forms by the year 2030. According to the FAO, it is estimated that around 670 million people will still be affected by hunger in 2030, equivalent to 8% of the world population—a figure similar to that recorded in 2015, when the 2030 Agenda was launched [2].

Moreover, the gender gap in relation to food insecurity widened even further between 2020 and 2021, mainly due to growing disparities in Latin America and the Caribbean, as well as in Asia. In 2021, 31.9% of women worldwide experienced

In 2021, 31.9% of women globally were affected by moderate or severe food insecurity, in contrast to 27.6% of men during the same period [3].

Colombia has mirrored this global trend, with multiple communities resorting to symbolic actions to expose the severity of the food crisis exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic. Among these was the public display of red cloths on windows and doors, intended as a visible appeal for governmental food assistance [4]. According to the National

Administrative Department of Statistics (DANE), by May 2021, 2.6 million households, representing 34.5% of the national total, reported consuming only two meals per day [5].

In Medellín, data from the 2020 Quality of Life Survey, administered during the pandemic, indicated that 59.1% of households were experiencing food insecurity. This prevalence was significantly higher in Commune 1 (Popular), where it reached 74.0%, positioning it as the most food-insecure subterritory in the city. The area's population is predominantly engaged in informal labor markets, and a considerable share of households are headed by women [6]. Despite these structural vulnerabilities, the territory exhibits a robust history of grassroots organization and collective action, primarily led by women, Afro-descendant populations, and individuals displaced by armed conflict—groups that have

long contended with systemic exclusion and material deprivation.

The conceptual frameworks of food sovereignty and food and nutritional security underscore the imperative of community-based participation in the realization of the right to food. These paradigms emphasize that variables such as food production, availability, access, and culturally appropriate consumption constitute determinant factors of public health outcomes. Consequently, both frameworks advocate for the establishment of resilient, sustainable, and contextually adapted food systems, which are instrumental in preventing malnutrition and mitigating the burden of diet-related non-communicable diseases [7].

Against this backdrop, the present study aimed to analyze the participatory and governance mechanisms associated with food sovereignty and food security, as manifested during the COVID-19 pandemic in Commune 1 of Medellín. The study seeks to contribute to the consolidation of intersectoral collaboration toward the realization of the human right to adequate food within contexts of heightened structural vulnerability.

## Methodology

This study employed a Participatory Action Research (PAR) design, grounded in qualitative methodologies aligned with the principles of Community-Based Participatory Research (CBPR) and Grounded Theory [8]. According to Bradbury and Reason, PAR is “concerned with practical outcomes as well as new forms of understanding, for action

without reflection and understanding is blind, just as theory without action is meaningless” [9, p. 227]. Within this paradigm, knowledge is co-constructed through a dialectical process involving both researchers and participants, integrating cycles of reflection and action.

Guided by the PAR framework, the study followed the iterative phases proposed by the CBPR model [10], recognizing that these stages constitute a spiral process in which multiple strategies may overlap or recur over time:

1. *Contextual assessment:* During the pandemic-induced lockdown, researchers, in continuous dialogue with community members, conducted a situational analysis of local food and nutritional security conditions through semi-structured interviews. Conducted via telephone, the interviews served as the initial stage in forming the School of Leaders for Food Sovereignty and Nutritional Security (ELIGESSAN). This group subsequently engaged in a diploma program that combined synchronous virtual sessions with in-person meetings.
2. *Collaboration process:* In coordination with the participants, the research team analyzed the

dynamics of interaction among territorial actors through both virtual and in-person encounters.

**3. Intervention and research:** These sessions facilitated a knowledge dialogue between the research team and community members, focusing on critical frameworks such as the right to food, food sovereignty, and food security. Activities were implemented to recover traditional food practices and culinary knowledge, and to explore the specific challenges and training needs identified by local leaders. Additionally, the study examined the institutional, private-sector, and community-level responses during the COVID-19 emergency.

**4. Outcomes:** A collective project design process was conducted, aimed at materializing community-driven proposals as alternatives to the structural problems affecting them.

Participants were selected through non-probabilistic purposive sampling, using the snowball technique. Among those recruited, some engaged only in in-depth interviews, while others participated in the full process and became members of ELIGESSAN.

The study's naturalistic orientation required that all data be situated, contextually grounded, and co-constructed with participants [11]. Data collection and analysis were also interactive and iterative, meaning that interpretation occurred concurrently with the practical application of knowledge. Methods used included semi-structured interviews, focus groups, knowledge-sharing

workshops, social mapping exercises [12], and a structured online survey administered via Google Forms for participant characterization.

Interview guides were developed for both individual and group sessions. These sessions were audio-recorded and transcribed. For analysis, open coding was performed using Excel®, followed by the construction of axial and selective coding categories and subcategories within the same software. The interviews aligned with stages 1 and 2 of the participatory research process, with ELIGESSAN functioning as the central implementation strategy. Transcripts were marked using predefined conventions to identify participants' roles or group session types as follows: L for female or male leader; EC for social mapping encounter. The numerical suffix indicated the chronological order of the interviews.

Due to the constraints imposed by lockdown measures, the initial round of semi-structured interviews was conducted by telephone, each lasting approximately 45 minutes. The project was rapidly adapted to include 16 virtual sessions and 4 in-person meetings, engaging a total of 22 participants.

Participation in both individual and group sessions was formalized through a pre-registration form for ELIGESSAN. Table 1 presents key characteristics of the participants, including the nature of the organizations to which they belonged, the thematic areas in which they exercised leadership roles, the number of individuals involved in each thematic area they led, and finally, the participants' gender.

**Tabla 1.** Temas de desempeño y género de los participantes de la Escuela de Líderes Gestores de Soberanía y Seguridad Alimentaria y Nutricional, comuna 1, Medellín

Naturaleza de la organización	Temática de actuación	Número de participantes	Sexo	
			Femenino	Masculino
Gubernamental	Derechos humanos	1	1	
	Planificación del desarrollo comunitario	3	2	1
	Salud	1	1	
	Defensa de los derechos de las mujeres	1	1	
En el gobierno	Derechos humanos	2	2	
	Planificación del desarrollo comunitario	1	1	
	Conflicto y violencia	1	1	
	Defensa de los derechos de las mujeres	1	1	
	Programas de alimentación	1	1	

For the data analysis, the method of open, axial, and selective coding as proposed by Grounded Theory was applied. This approach relies on the constant comparative method, which entails the systematic collection, coding, and analysis of data (conducted using Excel®), comparing incidents, categories, hypotheses, and the emerging properties throughout the analytic process [13,14]. Through this process, thematic categories were identified from the perspective of governance, participation, food sovereignty, and food and nutritional security.

A particularly significant emergent category in the study was the identification of women as central agents and actors in governance and participatory processes related to food sovereignty and security. As such, special attention was given in the findings to highlighting female leadership within the territory.

Informed consent was obtained during in-person meetings, following an explanation of the study objectives and procedures to the participants. Authorization for audio recording of both individual and group interviews was also requested and granted.

The project received ethical approval from the Research Ethics Committee of the University Institute of Physical Education and Sport of the University of Antioquia, under Act No. 068 of 2020.

## Results

As a result of the selective coding process, the central phenomenon that emerged was the intensification of food insecurity in Commune 1, “Popular”. This phenomenon was explained through various analytical categories that describe how institutional responses to hunger and food and nutrition issues in the territory have been characterized by inefficient governance, assistentialist approaches, and short-term strategies. When compounded by the effects of the pandemic, these limitations contributed to the insufficient impact on the structural determinants that underlie the failure to guarantee the right to healthy food.

Nevertheless, within this context, processes of social participation and community governance emerged as mechanisms to address hunger. The following section is structured around the analytical categories that explain the central phenomenon, as illustrated in Figure 1.

## Socioeconomic and Cultural Determinants That Limit the Guarantee of the Human Right to Adequate Food

In the case of Commune 1 of Medellín, significant shortcomings in the guarantee of fundamental rights

have been identified. These are associated with the legacy of the Colombian armed conflict and the commune’s persistent social and economic inequality. As such, Popular is recognized as a host territory for victims of rural and intra-urban forced displacement, primarily composed of rural-origin and Afro-descendant populations. In recent years, it has also become one of the main destinations for Venezuelan migrants.

Participants described their territory as multicultural, using expressions such as: “There are Afro-descendant communities, people from the Pacific region, many from Urabá, from Chocó, and, well, people who came from Eastern Antioquia—territories with very distinct cultural particularities” (L07).

Unemployment, low-wage employment, and informality as the main source of income were identified by participants as the primary factors contributing to the precarious economic conditions that limit access to food. Particularly concerning is that the impact of the food crisis is most visible on children, older adults, and especially women, many of whom are heads of household and simultaneously assume leadership roles in their communities:

“[...] because we are community leaders and we don’t have a salary, and without a salary it’s very difficult [...] for example, the little packages sold for 1,000 pesos—if they were about to expire or spoil. A food item with mold is not the same as one that’s fresh; it doesn’t have the same nutritional value and could carry bacteria. We often have to rely on those products because many women simply can’t afford better options” (L06).

A population that survives largely on informal labor and subsistence strategies (“rebusque”) was left unprotected by the lockdown measures imposed by the State during the pandemic. As a result, many experienced a deepening of food insecurity, as explained by several women leaders:

“[...] food insecurity is definitely more visible now, because if, for example, providers were people who worked in nightclubs, they’re not working anymore; or people who survive by hustling are now completely helpless because of curfews—there’s no access to anything, only fines. So, if a household’s food depends on that, it simply doesn’t arrive, because there’s no way to work” (L08).

Furthermore, the food-related challenges in Commune 1 go beyond scarcity. They also concern the quality of food. Most residents cannot access nutrient-rich food necessary to maintain health and adequate nutritional status. With the pandemic and the subsequent lockdown, daily food practices shifted, accelerating the introduction of ultra-processed products. In many cases, this was due to food subsidies, which, for logistical ease,



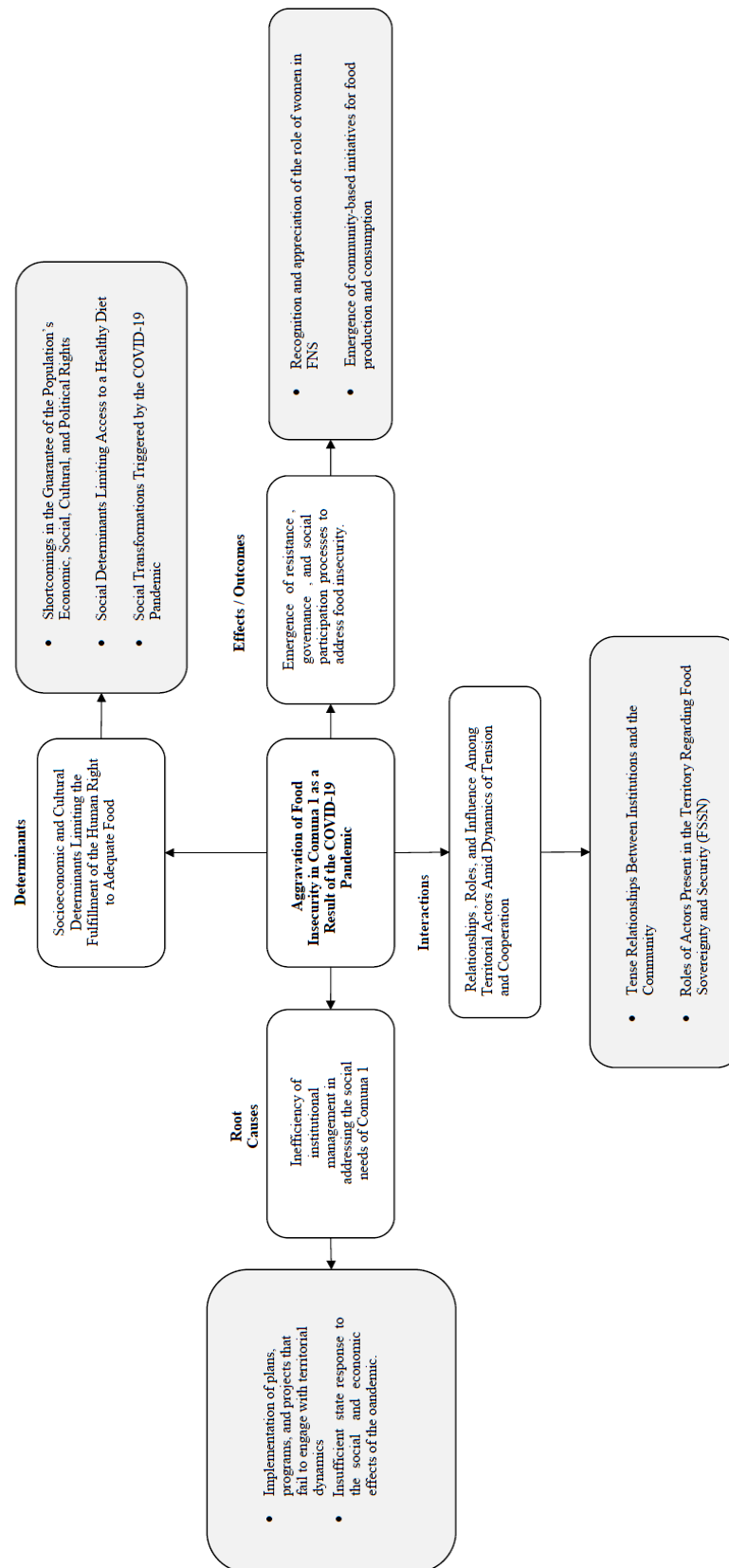


Figure 1. Central phenomenon and analytical categories resulting from data analysis in Commune 1, Medellín, 2021.

SSAN: Food Sovereignty and Nutritional Security.

consisted largely of industrialized foods. In other cases, the increased consumption of ultra-processed items was related to the need to stockpile food during extended quarantine periods.

## Institutional Inefficiency in Responding to the Social Needs of Commune 1.

The research identified significant deficiencies in government management during the pandemic in addressing the territory's social issues. These were primarily characterized by fragmentation and lack of coordination between institutional actions and the specific needs and characteristics of Commune 1.

### Implementation of Plans, Programs, and Projects

#### Misaligned with Territorial Dynamics

The execution of actions framed within public policy instruments has been characterized by community dissatisfaction, revealing inconsistencies between local territorial dynamics and the implementation of plans, programs, and projects. There is a clear tension between the residents' appropriation and lived experience of the territory and the municipal administration's conception of it, which often overlooks the existence of certain neighborhoods within the commune:

[...] there is a division that has never been fully acknowledged, and there are areas that, for the Planning Department, simply do not exist—and when a neighborhood is not officially recognized, it does not receive resources, right? When neighborhoods are officially acknowledged, they can request funding. We recognize the existence of all 21 neighborhoods, and we have persistently advocated for their inclusion in the development plan. Because if they're not included in the municipal or neighborhood-level development plans, it becomes very difficult for an organization or a women's group to obtain resources for their own development" (EC1).

Moreover, the gap between community expectations and institutional responses is linked to failures in the prioritization of beneficiaries, discontinuity in social processes, disregard for participatory mechanisms, and the territorial and administrative centralization of public programs and projects. In this regard, some women leaders in Commune 1 warn that, although assistentialist interventions have contributed to strengthening community management and participation processes, they also create dependency, discouraging agency and reinforcing a passive expectation for subsidies that hinders the development of community self-reliance.

## Insufficient state response to the social and economic effects of the pandemic

State management was perceived as inefficient and lacking transparency, leading the population to feel that they were not effectively engaged in the programs and projects being implemented, and perceiving these interventions as efforts aimed at fulfilling indicators or "repaying political favors." Regarding the State's actions in response to the pandemic, the population perceived them as disproportionate to the severity of the food crisis, due to the insufficient coverage of food packages to meet the needs of families experiencing food insecurity. There were also frequent complaints that the delivered products did not include fresh foods, such as fruits and vegetables: "for us leaders, it brings a huge problem, because just compare: there are almost 7,000 inhabitants, and 116 food packages that lasted two or three days at most, no more—they were small bags" (L02). Some participants also reported that the packages contained the same type and amount of food for both large families and those with fewer members. Likewise, they noted that the frequency of delivery was spaced out or irregular. This situation made large households more vulnerable to experiencing hunger for long periods. In addition to the economic and social problems, the lack of space for growing food—due to high population density—was considered by participants to be one of the key determinants limiting access to healthy diets. Although Commune 1 has a long-standing history of strategies and projects aimed at food cultivation, these have often been marked by insufficient institutional support.

## Emergence of resistance processes, governance, and social participation to address food insecurity

Institutional inefficiency has been a catalyst for the emergence of a series of community initiatives focused on social development. Among these, food has been prioritized and recognized as a fundamental issue in community management, both in terms of food access and consumption.

In this way, participatory processes have emerged and taken shape in initiatives such as the Ruta M Women's Collective, the support provided by the University of Antioquia, and dialogue spaces such as community roundtables. During the pandemic, this was one of the most prioritized areas of action, as evidenced in the following testimony: "We carried out mapping and walks to assess women's access to food; we also worked on peace actions with women, on how their mental health was being affected—many things were done" (L06).

## Recognition and appreciation of the role of women in food sovereignty and security

Women stand out for their active role in promoting community processes through actions that include such diverse aspects as housing improvement projects and the establishment of health centers. Examples include their participation in various community organizations where they manage resources through foundations and share their experiences with peers: “In Commune 1, a pilot project was conducted with Ruta M to explore how to manage resources in future projects to continue the work we had been doing; that’s what we were trained for. The project involved twelve women, and we invited people from the community to join the training” (L09). However, women leaders identified several barriers to fully exercising participation and governance processes. These range from issues affecting their physical and mental health, to economic limitations, a lack of transportation to connect different sectors of the commune, and the topographical conditions of the territory, which impose a greater physical toll on their bodies. Participants reported experiencing deteriorating health due to long hours of community work that require travel across the steep terrain of the commune. Additionally, the leaders carry out these community activities without receiving financial compensation, which limits not only the time they can dedicate to these efforts but also competes with time needed for their families.

## Emergence of community initiatives for food production and consumption

Solidarity emerged during the COVID-19 pandemic as a driving force to confront the resulting social and food crisis. In this context, initiatives were launched such as the strengthening of urban gardens and community kitchens, the implementation of strategies to improve food and nutrition education, and networking with public and private entities. Particularly noteworthy was the prominent role played by youth organizations in all of these processes.

In response to the insufficient and untimely government assistance during the pandemic, communities did not remain passive; instead, they promoted committees and organizational forms to respond to the hunger crisis. The groups that were formed took charge of requesting aid, coordinating donations, and distributing them among the most vulnerable populations. Through these initiatives, assistance reached those who truly depended on it for survival:

[...] when the pandemic began, this issue moved us deeply; so we started thinking about how we could generate strategies to ensure that the women who were part of the organizational processes we support-

ted could continue accessing this benefit, and what we did was to launch a campaign aimed at gathering solidarity-based resources from ordinary citizens. We also engaged with the donors who fund us and the organization in order to support families during the period of strict quarantine. So, the activities we carried out followed a dual approach: on one hand, channeling resources through the organization with the support of our donors, and on the other hand, drawing on the solidarity of individuals (L10).

Another set of initiatives was related to the development of strategies aimed at food and nutrition education. Likewise, there was a clear concern about raising community awareness regarding its role in promoting not only healthy eating practices but also responsible food consumption. This reflects that environmental sustainability is also among the community’s priorities and must be included in the territory’s political agenda.

## Relationships, roles, and influence among territorial actors amid dynamics of tension and cooperation

In Commune 1 of Medellín, the relationships between territorial actors—such as community organizations, social leaders, governmental institutions, and private companies—are woven within a context marked by dynamics of both tension and cooperation, which directly affect food security. In this context, collaborative efforts exist that support urban gardens, local supply networks, and school feeding programs, which demonstrate the commitment of some sectors to ensuring access to healthy and sufficient food. However, these initiatives also face tensions stemming from social inequality, resource shortages, and disputes over territorial control, which limit the impact of joint actions.

Within this scenario, the roles assumed by the different actors are crucial: while some lead processes of resistance and self-management, others act as institutional facilitators, creating spaces for dialogue and coordination that—though fragile—allow for progress toward greater social cohesion and food sustainability in the commune.

## Discussion

Regarding food insecurity, this research aligns with studies such as Rodríguez et al., which assert that the pandemic contributed to the rise in global hunger [15], particularly in low- and middle-income countries, where mobility restrictions and social distancing measures affected food availability and disrupted the supply chain [16]. In relation to food insecurity in these countries’ communities, Béné argues that it results from two



types of problems: first, structural issues, characterized by inadequate infrastructure, lack of access to resources and services, and challenges faced by small producers; and second, those caused by stress and the impact of adverse events that hinder the functioning of food systems [17]. This reality is reflected in Commune 1, which has long been characterized by more disadvantaged socioeconomic conditions compared to the city's average. Structural and historical determinants have exacerbated social inequity, which, combined with the COVID-19 pandemic, accelerated changes in food practices and deepened food insecurity. As Rodríguez et al. state, the indirect effects of the pandemic were evident in the reduced purchase of food, mainly due to job losses and decreased household income [18], a situation clearly observed in Commune 1.

Economic decisions, particularly those related to food consumption, fell largely on women, who took responsibility for ensuring the daily nourishment of household members by seeking lower prices, purchasing lower-quality food, and stretching meals—even if nutritional requirements were not met. A study conducted in two departments of Uruguay also reported similar findings regarding the role of women in caregiving and feeding responsibilities during the pandemic [19].

With regard to the state's response, the findings of this study reveal tensions in the relationship between the community and institutional actors, due to the assistentialist logic with which food policies have been implemented in the city of Medellín. This logic has been characterized as individualizing, particularizing, monetarist, and short-term oriented, within which the role of the state is reduced to “compensatory actions in response to extreme needs,” to the detriment of the guarantee of universal rights [20,21, p. 2]. According to Gil, in the context of food security in countries such as Venezuela, food distribution programs in schools, hospitals, and community kitchens were maintained, avoiding large gatherings. In addition, decentralized distribution of ready-to-eat meals to small groups was implemented, along with the provision of unprepared food and cash transfers, based on the reevaluation of the basic food basket and in accordance with the evolving situation [16].

A study on the realization of the right to food during the pandemic found that Medellín's 2020–2023 Municipal Development Plan included a diagnosis that recognized structural food issues in the city and referenced existing policies in the area. However, this policy management instrument proved ineffective due to budgetary limitations assigned to the intervention of these issues, which were even more restricted during the COVID-19 pandemic. This highlighted severe budgetary shortcomings and necessitated reactive, short-term measures. As a result, it was concluded that, in Medellín, “there was no clear and effective strategy to ensure

access to and availability of adequate food for the most vulnerable populations in the city during the mandatory preventive isolation” [22].

In this sense, food programs may be perceived as fragmented actions, where individuals evaluate public policies based on the tangible impacts experienced in their daily lives [20]. While such measures may alleviate certain aspects of food insecurity, they do not address the underlying structural issues.

Thus, it was evident that local decision-makers lacked the necessary tools to implement effective economic and public health measures [17]. This was especially reflected in countries with neoliberal economic models, where macroeconomic policies further exacerbated hunger, particularly among impoverished populations [23].

Regarding the resistance processes that emerged during the pandemic, the study by Béné explores the resilience of local food systems during the COVID-19 pandemic in middle-income countries. It also describes strategies implemented by actors such as women, smallholder farmers, and informal food vendors in response to the emergency, and stresses the importance of further exploration of these responses [17]. For instance, in Brazil, non-governmental organizations linked to social movements promoted solidarity kitchens as part of social mobilization efforts dating back to the 1990s, aimed at achieving zero hunger [23].

Despite the strategies implemented to mitigate the impact of the pandemic on the food situation, several studies reveal that consumption practices were affected, as economic decisions—primarily assumed by women—were focused on securing daily household meals by seeking lower prices, purchasing lower-quality foods, and stretching provisions even when nutritional requirements were not met [19]. In the case of Comuna 1 in Medellín, women led social initiatives during the pandemic, such as the establishment of community and home gardens, and the organization of solidarity committees for the collection and distribution of food and medicine. As Béné affirms, “building resilience in food systems involves developing capacities” [17] that ensure access to economic, technical, and informational resources, with the aim of strengthening relationships among actors within the food system.

Among the limitations of this study were difficulties in transportation for some participants to attend in-person meetings, due to economic constraints. Other barriers included limited internet connectivity and a lack of digital literacy. These difficulties were reflected in decreased attendance at virtual meetings and participant dropout. These issues were addressed by providing transportation subsidies funded by the project, as well as by offering support from the university team to help participants navigate technological tools. In conclusion, the promotion of governance processes and citizen par-

ticipation that contribute to network-based collaboration for the consolidation of a food system rooted in sovereignty, food security, and the guarantee of the human right to adequate food—during the pandemic in Comuna 1 of Medellín—can be understood through three key aspects: the worsening of food insecurity among vulnerable populations during COVID-19; the role of government institutions in addressing this emergency; and the emergence of female-led leadership processes in food and nutritional security.

In terms of the worsening of food insecurity, the pandemic created a scenario of deteriorating socioeconomic conditions that accelerated changes in food practices and deepened food-related problems. This was due to difficulties in accessing employment, disruptions in food supply to the territory, and other historical structural determinants such as social inequality, food culture dynamics, and urban violence, all of which act as barriers to the realization of the human right to food.

Regarding the relationship between the state and society, interviewees noted that these relationships often stem from the insufficient achievement of goals set by institutional programs or from the lack of spaces for civil society participation in plans designed by the state. This has excluded the possibility for community members to replicate, promote, or implement projects conceived at the local level that respond directly to the specific needs identified by residents in their own environments.

These difficulties have centered on the gap between community needs and the scope of governmental initiatives, as in some cases, the activities proposed by the municipal administration do not align with population dynamics. In other instances, strategies are mainly implemented with a welfare-based approach that frames assistance as “handouts” to the population, thereby disregarding the actions required to address the structural determinants of food and nutritional insecurity, such as poverty and deep social inequality. Finally, it becomes evident that it is necessary to promote political and civic engagement—namely, the active participation of citizens in decision-making processes—as this becomes a territorial-level tool for influencing public decisions, managing resources, building the civic agenda, and presenting possible solutions to issues that directly concern the community within public arenas.

One of the significant contributions of this study lies in its emphasis on governance processes and civic participation led by women, aimed at confronting the food crisis triggered by the pandemic. Women in Comuna 1 of Medellín assume multiple roles related to family care, the procurement of goods to meet basic unmet household needs, and participation in the management of resources for the development of projects that contribute to improving community well-being in the territories where they live.

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