

Covid-19 and food systems in the Agriculture Ministries' symbolic agendas of Brazil, Chile, and Colombia

Covid-19 e os sistemas alimentares nas agendas simbólicas dos Ministérios da Agricultura do Brasil, Chile e Colômbia

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Abstract: Several studies have argued that the COVID-19 pandemic could be a catalyst for building sustainable food systems. Among the actors involved in this debate, we emphasize the significance of agriculture ministries in shaping governmental agendas and policies. Starting from debates on agenda-setting, this article analyzes how the Covid-19 pandemic manifested itself in the symbolic agenda and the issues related to food systems prioritized by the agriculture ministries of Brazil, Chile and Colombia, reflecting on the contents of Facebook throughout 2020. In methodological terms, the article mapped the posts, selected those related to the Covid-19, analyzed and classified into categories. The results indicate that the ministries paid different attention to the pandemic, however, in all cases, the pandemic lost space on the symbolic agenda in the second half of 2020. Contrary to expectations of transformative change, the ministries' posts aimed to maintain existing dynamics in food systems.

Keywords: Covid-19 pandemic, food systems, agenda-setting, agriculture ministries, social media.

Resumo: Diversos estudos argumentam que a pandemia de COVID-19 poderia ser um catalisador para a construção de sistemas alimentares sustentáveis. Entre os atores envolvidos nesse debate, destaca-se a importância dos ministérios da agricultura na formação de agendas e políticas governamentais. Partindo dos debates sobre a definição de agendas, este artigo tem o objetivo de analisar como a pandemia de COVID-19 se manifestou na agenda simbólica e nas questões relacionadas aos sistemas alimentares priorizadas pelos ministérios da agricultura do Brasil, Chile e Colômbia, a partir dos conteúdos do Facebook publicados ao longo de 2020. Em termos metodológicos, propôs-se o mapeamento das postagens, seleção daquelas relacionadas à COVID-19, análise e classificação em categorias. Os resultados indicam que os ministérios dedicaram diferentes níveis de atenção à pandemia; no entanto, em todos os casos, a pandemia perdeu espaço na agenda simbólica no segundo semestre de 2020. Contrariando as expectativas de mudança transformadora, as postagens dos ministérios visavam manter as dinâmicas existentes nos sistemas alimentares.

Palavras-chave: pandemia de COVID-19, sistemas alimentares, definição de agendas, ministérios da agricultura, mídias sociais.

1. Introduction

In March 2020, the world was surprised by the Covid-19 pandemic. On March 11th, the World Health Organization officially declared a state of pandemic, influencing and impacting the agenda and decision-making of all countries. Concerns about the virus's spread, health system functionality, economic crisis, and food security became central to public and governmental



agendas (Comisión Económica para América Latina y el Caribe, 2020a, 2020b; World Health Organization, 2020; Zahariadis, 2016a; Cobb & Elder, 1971).

Several elements put food system dynamics under debate: the pandemic origins in animal husbandry (Segata et al., 2021; Lytras et al., 2021); unsustainable agricultural practices (Altieri & Nicholls, 2020; Gordon, 2020); logistics vulnerabilities, supermarket centrality, and local production needs (Preiss, 2020; Food and Agriculture Organization, 2020g); economic impacts on farmers and consumers (Food and Agriculture Organization, 2020f; Del Grossi, 2020); ultra-processed food consumption and the importance of healthy food (He et al., 2022); and increased poverty and food insecurity (Food and Agriculture Organization, 2022a). Various food system activities and dynamics entered the public agenda (Capela, 2018; Kingdon, 2006; Cobb & Elder, 1971) from production to consumption.

Many studies have reinforced the importance of transforming food systems towards healthier, more sustainable, and fairer practices, suggesting that the pandemic could be an important catalyst for this transformation (Food and Agriculture Organization, 2020a; High Level Panel of Experts on Food Security and Nutrition, 2020; International Panel of Experts on Sustainable Food Systems, 2020; Rastoin 2020). As Blay-Palmer et al. (2020) mention, "Change creates the conditions for transformation. We now have an opportunity – perhaps a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity – to learn from past weaknesses and create food systems that are more healthy, sustainable, equitable, and resilient." Similarly, FAO/Cepal (Food and Agriculture Organization, 2020b, p. 5) highlights that "It is worth taking this crisis as an unprecedented opportunity to rethink the way our food systems work and adopt recovery measures that allow us to move in the long term to more inclusive, sustainable, and resilient agricultural economies to disruptions."

Although the activities and dynamics of food systems are inter-sector and involve actions from various government agencies, agriculture ministries are central players in promoting healthier, more sustainable, and inclusive production and consumption practices, regulating supply dynamics, and ensuring food quality. Given the pandemic-driven food systems debates and the central role of agriculture ministries, this study explores how the pandemic entered the governmental agenda in this area. We are particularly interested in analyzing how much attention the pandemic occupied, the food systems issues addressed, and whether there were signs of transforming these systems towards more sustainable, healthy, and fair practices.

We hypothesize that although it drew attention, the different agriculture ministries gave varying attention to the pandemic throughout 2020, reflecting the Presidents' orientations and postures on the subject. We also hypothesize that even though the pandemic stimulated debates in academic studies and international organizations on food systems transformations, the themes addressed by the ministries of agriculture sought to maintain existing dynamics and processes.

To meet the proposed objectives, besides this introduction, the article is organized into four main sections. The Theoretical Foundation section delves into the key concepts of Agenda Setting and the relevant literature that underpin the research. The Methodology section outlines the methodological choices made in this study. The Results and Discussion section measures the attention given to the pandemic in the symbolic agenda of the three agriculture ministries and explores the themes or issues addressed in Covid-related posts and their interface with food systems' transformation toward more sustainable, healthy, and fair practices. The Conclusions section considers the results achieved, which partially confirm the hypotheses. This article confirms that the agriculture ministries' social media, as official communication channels with the general public, are crucial resources for analyzing symbolic and decision agendas.

2. Theoretical Foundation

This article engages with the extensive literature on agenda setting that has developed since the 1970s. Cobb & Elder (1971) innovated by placing the agenda debate in the public policy field and presenting the concepts of systemic agenda (public) and governmental agenda. According to them, the agenda refers “to a general set of political controversies that will be viewed as falling within the range of legitimate concerns meriting the attention of the polity.” The systemic agenda refers to the themes present in the public debate with a focus on public policies in general, always “abstract, more general, and broader in scope and domain than any given institutional (government) agenda” (Cobb & Elder, 1971, p. 905 and 906). The governmental agenda, in turn, “denotes a set of concrete items scheduled for active and serious considerations by a particular institutional decision-making body” and its composition “varies over periods” (Cobb & Elder 1971, p. 906).

In the 1980s, John Kingdon (2006, p. 222) distinguished between governmental agenda and decision agenda. The former was described as a “list of issues that are the subject of serious attention by government officials and their advisors”; the latter concerned the decision agenda, or the “list of issues within the governmental agenda forwarded for deliberation.” More recently, Chaqués-Bonafont et al. (2015) distinguished between symbolic and decision agendas within the governmental agenda. The symbolic agenda refers to the early moments of the “public policy production process” where “decision-makers can test arguments, feel the reaction and support or rejection of ideas; draw attention to and even construct problems that are not necessarily in the priorities of society or relevant actors at that given moment,” with lower institutional and political costs compared to later stages (Capella & Brasil, 2022, p. 4)¹. “The symbolic agenda, more fluid and with less institutional friction, refers to a set of data and indicators that indicate the intention, ideas, and values that decision makers seek to emphasize and highlight in their speeches and pronouncements. These priorities may or may not appear on the decision agenda and in the policy formulation process” (Andrade et al., 2021, p. 286). The decision agenda, on the other hand, refers to issues that have already been matured by governmental actors and “that involve decision costs for the actors involved” (Capella & Brasil, 2022, p. 3).

According to Zahariadis (2016b), analyzing the agenda in public policy makes various actions possible: (i) understanding social values in public debates (issues and problems that attract attention); (ii) observing the distances of concerns and priorities between governments and the public in democratic and non-democratic societies; (iii) highlighting power relations in public policy to the extent that the governmental agenda expresses the groups that can influence decision-making; (iv) anticipating policy decisions to the extent that the governmental agenda provides a view (albeit imperfect) of what policy options can be adopted; and (v) manifesting its influence on how voters think about the world, considering that the agenda presents, analyzes, and interprets information selectively. In other terms, “Understanding how the agenda is set, when and by whom, is a necessary step to comprehend how policy is made” (Zahariadis, 2016b, p. 4). Particularly concerning the symbolic agenda, Capella & Brasil (2022, p. 5) argue that analyzing the symbolic agenda makes it possible to visualize the discourses and narratives that aim to structure the decision agenda: “the discourses that make up the symbolic agenda are relevant and help define the terms of the debate, structuring the argumentation elements as relevant in the process of policy production as power, influence, interests, and bargaining”.

¹ Both Chaqués-Bonafont et al. (2015) and Capella & Brasil (2022) consider speeches by Heads of Government (inaugural or annual) as illustrative of the symbolic agenda, as they highlight various topics of interest to the population, directing public and governmental attention to specific issues.

Based on these contributions and considering that in their daily actions, the Ministries of Agriculture give differentiated attention to various issues, "deciding what is a problem to be prioritized" (Baumgartner & Jones, 2015), the present article analyzes how the Covid-19 pandemic manifested itself in the symbolic agenda and the issues and problems related to food systems prioritized by government bodies in confronting or reacting to the pandemic. For this exercise, the article analyzes the symbolic agenda of three South American ministries: the Ministry of Agriculture, Livestock and Food Supply (MAPA) of Brazil, the Ministry of Agriculture (Minagri) of Chile, and the Ministry of Agriculture and Rural Development (Minagricultura) of Colombia. The article reflects on the contents presented for debate on these ministries' social media throughout 2020.

As official communication channels, social media are an important source for analyzing the symbolic agenda. Chun & Luna Reyes (2012) note that "social media use in government is considered a technological innovation and a transforming agent in generating citizen engagement, from campaigns and grassroots-activism to shared governance, promoting democracy." Additionally, Bertot et al. (2010) highlight that social media involve the public in the governmental decision-making process, strengthening participation in policy development and implementation. They serve as tools for the co-production of public services, sharing data, and contributing to problem-solving and innovation, providing transparency and accountability. Social media allow Ministries of Agriculture to test adherence/rejection to certain propositions during the pandemic, pave the way for changes in the governmental and decision agenda, build narratives about political choices, and communicate decisions.

3. Methodology

This article is part of the Research Project "Red colaborativa Brasil-Chile de estudios de efectos de la COVID-19 en los sistemas agroalimentarios", developed in the period January 2022 to May 2023 by a group of Brazilian and Chilean researchers. This project sought to analyze the effects of the Covid-19 pandemic on different areas and sectors and explore governmental responses. In addition to this empirical delimitation, it is important to highlight that part of the Brazilian researchers had already been developing research on public policies for food and agriculture in Colombia, which, together with the entry of a Colombian researcher in the group, stimulated the inclusion of this country in the analysis. These elements converged to delimit Brazil, Chile, and Colombia as objects of study, contemplating a given diversity of South America.

We analyzed how each country's agriculture ministry addressed the pandemic, considering their specific areas of competence. These competencies, functions, or objectives of Agriculture Ministries hold important responsibilities for promoting or transforming food systems toward more sustainable, healthier, and inclusive practices and processes.

In 2020, the Ministry of Agriculture, Livestock and Food Supply (Mapa) of the Brazilian government was responsible for agricultural policy, livestock production, strategic stock control, food safety, research, rural development, and family farming policies (Brasil, 2019).

The Chilean Ministry of Agriculture's (Minagri) 2020 strategic objectives included strengthening rural development, improving inhabitants' quality of life, reducing territorial gaps, empowering small and medium farmers through associations, technical support, financing, enhancing product commercialization, recognizing natural resources for sustainable development, and promoting climate change adaptation strategies (Chile, 2020a).

In 2020, the Ministry of Agriculture and Rural Development (Minagricultura) of Colombia focused on policies related to rural, agricultural, livestock, fisheries, and forestry development;

rural development with a territorial approach, including social planning, income generation, and public goods management; attention to vulnerable populations; agricultural chains, technological innovation, health risk protection, financing; and the sustainable use of natural and water resources (Colombia, 2018).

The three countries' ministries mobilize social media (Twitter, Instagram, Youtube and Facebook) as official communication channels with the general public. In this work, we selected for analysis the posts made by the ministries on Facebook in the year 2020². We analyzed 1883 Facebook posts from 2020: 833 from MAPA-Brazil, 206 from Chile's Ministry of Agriculture, and 734 from Colombia's Ministry of Agriculture. The fact that the impacts on agriculture manifested themselves more abruptly in the first year of the pandemic (paralysis of economic activities, difficulties in product commercialization, sanitary safety of food, etc.) reinforces this cut, demanding the urgent introduction of the theme in the governmental and decisive agendas. Moreover, regarding Facebook selection, this was the social media most used in Brazil, Chile, Colombia, and the rest of the world in 2020 (and continues to be in 2024)³.

Based on these definitions, the authors mapped all the posts, selected all those that referred to the Covid-19 pandemic, and - using the methodological guidelines for analyzing the governmental and symbolic agenda (Capella & Brasil, 2022; Andrade et al., 2021; Brasil & Capella, 2019) and excel - analyzed (content analysis) and classified them into 18 categories based on the topics' grouping. These 18 categories were defined after the reading and analysis of the empirical material (all posts that referenced Covid). Table 1 below details the themes addressed in each category. It is important to clarify that in situations where there was doubt about the classification of specific posts in the categories, they were subjected to analysis by the authors as a whole. Analysis of the post was performed using Excel and NVivo software, mainly using descriptive statistics (frequency analysis).

Table 1 – Classification of agriculture ministries' posts into categories and topics addressed - Brazil, Chile, and Colombia, 2020.

Category	Topics
Personal Protection / Preventive Measures	Indications about different care measures, protection, social distancing, vaccinations, etc.
Farmers' Markets	Information on the location, development, or guidelines for the operation of farmers' markets, peasant-produced food, healthy and local consumption
Supply	Clarification on the reality of supply, strategies, and logistics to maintain supply, access, and availability
Agriculture Credit/Subsidy	Different strategies based on the modification and renegotiation of credit terms and the creation of subsidies
Import	News about import changes or eventualities
Export	News about achievements in exports

Source: Authors

² Although the covid-19 pandemic started in 2019, we decided to start the analysis in 2020, as the WHO itself became aware of the cases on December 31 of that year and declared a "Public Health Emergency of International Concern" on 30 January 2020. Furthermore, the first cases of Covid in the analyzed countries began to appear in mid-February and early March 2020.

³ See StatCounter GlobalStats (StatCounter, 2024). In December 2020, Facebook accounted for 68% of social media mobilized in Brazil. The Facebook page of the Ministry of MAPA-Brazil, in September 2024, had 370 thousand followers (for a total population of 212.6 million). In Chile, these numbers were 67% and 110 thousand followers (for a total population of 20 million). In Colombia, in turn, these numbers were 68% and 139 thousand followers (for a total population of 53 million).

Table 1 – Continued...

Category	Topics
Process Digitization	Logistical changes in some procedures with new virtual availability
Health inspection and surveillance	Hygiene plans for food, with good practices in sales spaces, processing, and food transportation
Sustainability	Recommendations for maintaining sustainable production
Food and Nutrition Security	Proposals, activities, or spaces that seek to realize the right to food, such as the distribution of food baskets
Family Farming/Small Producer/peasants ⁴	Policies, actions, and processes linked to this social category
Fighting fake news	Clarification about rumors and/or speculations
Tributes and Honors	Gestures of solidarity and recognition of professional categories
Health sector support	Reallocation of resources for health and replication of messages prepared by the Ministry of Health
Education	Courses, seminars, and spaces for training and knowledge exchange
Public Policies (PP) of social promotion and protection	Proposals, activities, or spaces that seek to protect the integrity of women and children and, in turn, family economies
Reopening	Activities or spaces that were closed and reopened to the public
Retrospective	Report or discussion of actions that were taken during the year, Covid implications, and new challenges

Source: Authors

Based on these methodological criteria, we analyzed the data, the results of which are presented below.

4. Results and Discussion

4.1 The Covid-19 pandemic in the symbolic agenda of the agriculture ministries of Brazil, Chile, and Colombia

The Covid-19 pandemic began to occupy the attention of the ministries of agriculture at different times. Although the Brazilian government declared a state of public health emergency of international importance as early as February 7th, 2020 (Brasil, 2020), the first relevant post from Mapa-Brazil only occurred on March 21st, when it warned that it was fake news that people over 60 years old who were walking on the streets would have their retirement suspended. Minagri-Chile began discussing the issue as early as February 7th, 2020 - even before the publication of the Decree of a Constitutional State of Exception of Catastrophe, due to public calamity, in the Territory of Chile (Chile, 2020b) on March 18th - when it announced a public-private dialogue table to analyze the effects of the pandemic outbreak in China on Chilean exports. On the other hand, Minagricultura-Colombia began to address the issue on February 29th, 2020, before the State Decree of Economic, Social, and Ecological Emergency throughout the national territory (Colombia, 2020a) was established on March 17th. At the

⁴ The three countries have already made progress in establishing institutional frameworks for recognizing and defining family farming. Despite these frameworks, it is still common (especially in Colombia) to use other definitions, such as small farmers and peasants. Thus, although from a sociological point of view they are different categories, for the purposes of analysis, we grouped together the posts that referred to these terms.

time, the Ministry republished an Executive campaign stating that the country was prepared to face the coronavirus and highlighting the importance of fighting fake news.

These differences continued throughout 2020, notably concerning the attention given to Covid-19 and the extent to which it focused on the symbolic agenda. In Figure 1 below, we observe that Mapa-Brazil posted an average of 16 times per week on Facebook in 2020 (Graph A), the most active among the three ministries. Only 12% of posts were Covid-19-related. The last two weeks of March (weeks 13 and 14), when economic paralysis began, had the highest focus on the theme with 10 and 11 posts, respectively. Graph B shows that pandemic issues concentrated 76% of the symbolic agenda (week 13, when it reached the highest percentage). Since week 20 (May 2020 - when the first wave of Covid-19 reached the number of about 6,500 weekly deaths in Brazil), pandemic-related issues occupied less than 20% of the symbolic agenda, losing even more steam as the end of the year approached.

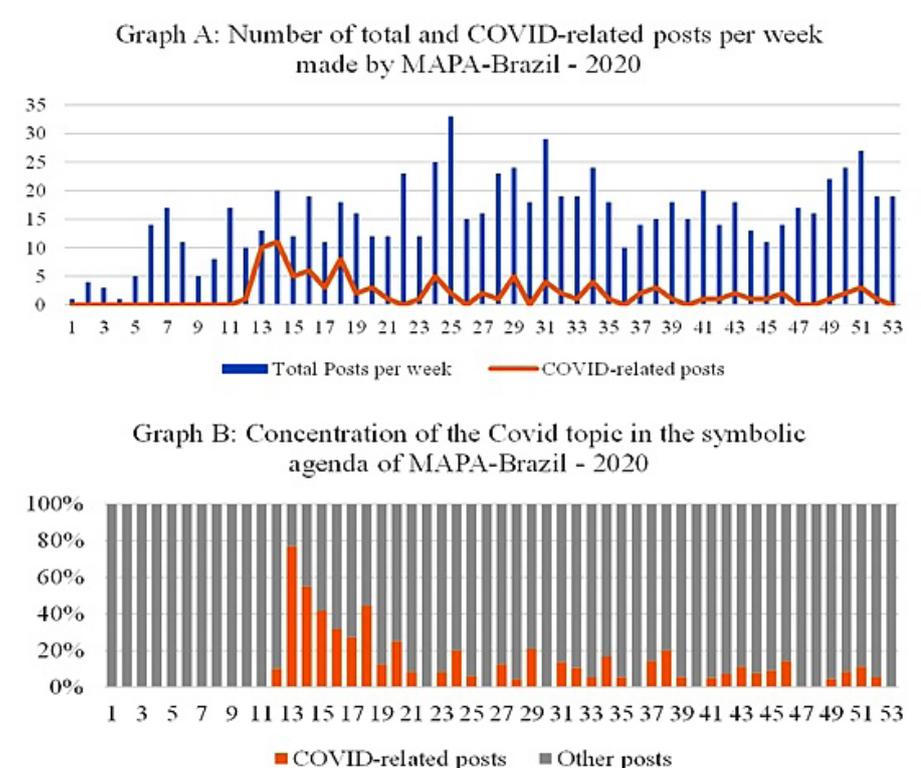


Figure 1: Number of total and Covid-19-related posts per week and topic concentration in the symbolic agenda of Mapa-Brazil. **Source:** Authors.

In Figure 2, we observe that Minagri-Chile made an average of three posts per week on Facebook throughout 2020 (Graph A). Among the three ministries analyzed, it mobilized Facebook the least in constructing the symbolic agenda. Similarly to Brazil, the highest absolute number of posts (eight posts in the week) about the pandemic occurred in week 12 (mid-March, following the publication of the State of Exception Decree). However, unlike Brazil, the theme focused more attention (30%) on the symbolic agenda (Graph B) throughout the analyzed period. From mid-March to mid-August, at various times, the pandemic concentrated 100% (even though the absolute number of posts was low) or at least more than 60% of the attention on the symbolic agenda of Minagri-Chile.

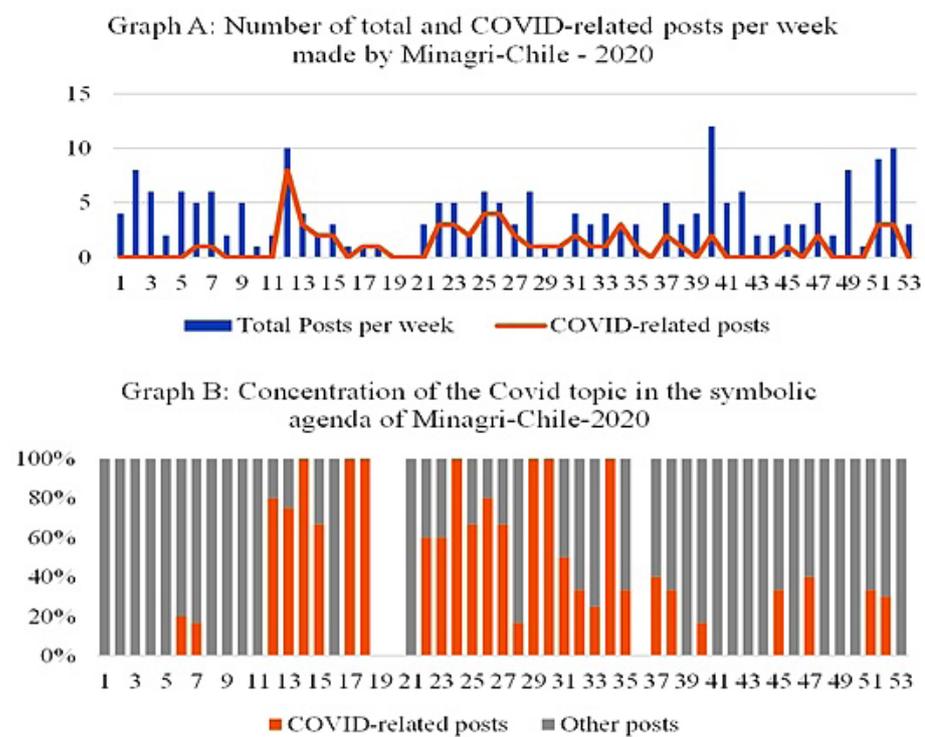


Figure 2: Number of total and COVID-related posts per week and concentration of the topic in the symbolic agenda of Minagri-Chile. **Source:** prepared by the authors.

In Figure 3, we see that Minagricultura-Colombia made an average of 14 posts per week on Facebook throughout 2020 (Graph A), similar to Mapa-Brazil. Of the total posts, 21% were devoted to Covid-19-related topics and issues. Along the same lines as the previous cases, Minagricultura-Colombia gave more attention to the pandemic starting in week 12 (mid-March), and for five weeks Covid-19 occupied almost 100% of the symbolic agenda for the Ministry (Graph B). However, from week 24 (early June) on, the pandemic issues lost ground, concentrating less than 20% of the symbolic Ministerial agenda, and for several weeks it was the subject of zero, one, or two posts.

When we analyze the three countries' ministries, we observe more similarities than differences. Regarding similarities, the pandemic occupied part of the symbolic agenda in all three countries starting mid-March and gradually lost momentum in the following months. This cooling off may be related to the assessments that, even as the pandemic continued and worsened (emergence of new variants, increase in the number of those affected, and deaths), the agri-food sector was more resilient than others. In July 2020, while urging caution for the months ahead, FAO/CEPAL (Food and Agriculture Organization, 2020c) assessed that food production had not been paralyzed and that workers, though struggling, were still in their workplaces, concluding that the impacts on primary production from the pandemic had not been critical. In August 2020, FAO/CEPAL (Food and Agriculture Organization, 2020d, p. 2) evaluated that

Before the pandemic, it was expected that Latin America and the Caribbean would become the world's leading food-producing region in the coming years, contributing 28% of the world's agricultural and fisheries products. This projection does not seem to have been affected by Covid-19. The commercialization of agricultural and fishing products produced in the region increased by 6% in the last six months compared to the same period of the previous year. (...) In other words, the agricultural sector has been more resilient than the other internationally traded goods up to this point. The agrifood sectors that have grown the most during the pandemic are soybeans, sugar, and its derivatives; the most affected were live animals, fruits, and vegetables. This statistic confirms that the food products most vulnerable to these crises are labor-intensive and perishable.

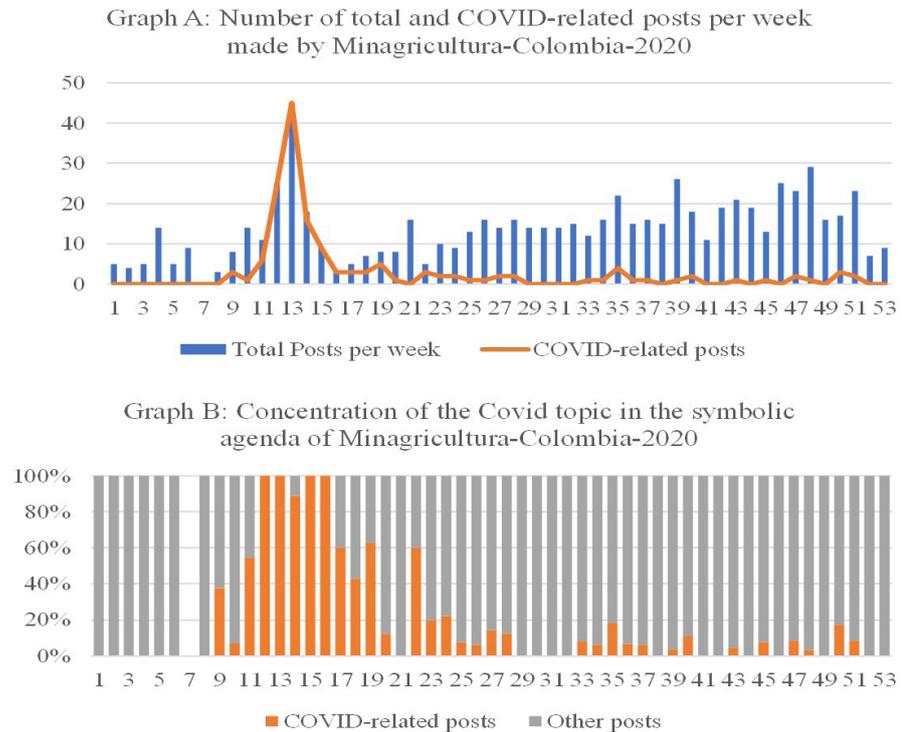


Figure 3: Number of total and COVID-related posts per week and topic concentration in the symbolic agenda of Minagricultura-Colombia. **Source:** Authors.

In October 2020, FAO/CEPAL (Food and Agriculture Organization, 2020e, p. 2) assessed that the pandemic had stimulated some innovations, such as “the use of technologies for knowledge dissemination (webinars) and product marketing (online trading), the latter crucial for shortening marketing circuits” and continued to reaffirm sectorial resilience, especially concerning the international food market,

which even grew during the pandemic by 8.3%, possibly because the demand of the main destinations - the United States, the European Union, and China - did not vary significantly. However, in the social sphere, the drastic reduction in employment and the consequent fall in household income are added to the rise in food prices. The regional Consumer Price Index (CPI) for food increased by 5.6% in one year, directly impacting household food access and quality (Food and Agriculture Organization, 2020e, p. 2).

Although food and nutrition security has worsened in South America (Food and Agriculture Organization, 2022b), Brazil (Rede Penssan, 2022), Chile (2022), and Colombia (Orjuela & Matamoros, 2022) due to the pandemic and context-specific elements, resilience and positive economic indicators of the agricultural sector (e.g., exports) have probably contributed to the reduced attention (in postings) to Covid-19 among agriculture ministries.

The differences between the three ministries of agriculture concern the concentration of the Covid issue in the symbolic agenda. While Minagri-Chile and Minagricultura-Colombia in some weeks focused 100% of their symbolic agenda on issues associated with Covid-19, only in two weeks (13 and 14) did Mapa-Brazil devote more than 50% of its attention to the topic (respectively 77% and 55%). These differences are probably associated with the orientations and postures of the Presidency of the Republic of Brazil concerning the pandemic, which had repercussions on the symbolic agenda of its ministries. As Meyer (2020, p. 10) comments, “Bolsonaro has been personally dismissive of the virus, and his government has been reluctant

to mount a strong policy response. He has had repeated conflicts with federal officials and state and local governments that have adopted strong policy responses." Similarly, Rennó et al. (2021, p. 2) point out that "Jair Bolsonaro downplayed the crisis, denied science, and dismantled health policies during the pandemic. The Brazilian President was not compelled to change his positions despite the seriousness of the pandemic in the country." While the President of Brazil adopted this position, the Presidents of Chile and Colombia quickly assumed the gravity of the situation. Accordingly, they began to promote confrontational actions in various sectors.

4.2 The pandemic and food system dynamics within agriculture ministries' symbolic agenda in Brazil, Chile, and Colombia

Since the 2000s, interest has increased surrounding systemic readings of agrifood dynamics and the use of the notion of food systems, understood as the interrelated set of activities and actors involved in the production, distribution, storage, processing, preparation, and consumption of food; in resource production (seeds, fertilizers, packaging, and related items) and waste management; and the creation and implementation of regulatory and governance activities and institutions (Bricas, 2017). In a system, it is understood that "food is connected to a variety of (policy) fields - including agriculture, environment, energy, health, education, infrastructure, and planning" (Gill et al., 2018, p. 4), allowing trade-offs, conflicts, and synergies between different dimensions, goals, projects, and activities to be highlighted (Food and Agriculture Organization, 2021).

These readings have highlighted equally systemic crises that permeate food systems, such as the permanence of hunger and malnutrition, the rise of obesity and overweight, and climate change, whose main drivers are "food and agriculture, transportation, urban design, and land use" (Swinburn et al., 2019). Indeed, "many influential studies have helped shape our understanding of the dangerous situation our food systems find themselves in, from the degradation of ecosystems to the fragility of farmers' livelihoods in many parts of the world; from the persistence of hunger and malnutrition to the rampant growth of obesity and diet-related diseases" (International Panel of Experts on Sustainable Food Systems, 2016, p. 6).

These analyses had already been placing the need to transform food systems toward more sustainable, healthy, and equitable practices on the public agenda, and this imperative, as stated in the introduction, gained momentum with the emergence of the Covid-19 pandemic. In an emblematic way, when following the impacts of the pandemic on Latin American food systems, FAO/Cepal (Food and Agriculture Organization, 2020a, p. 2) noted the resilience of the sector and the need to transform food systems. In their words:

(...) current agricultural production processes are not sustainable: they are responsible for 46% of the region's greenhouse gases and are critical agents in biodiversity loss. Furthermore, it is at least paradoxical that there are endemic problems of food security and nutrition and that the crisis has aggravated these. (...) recovery can be an opportunity to transform, that is, to make the adjustments agrifood systems require to develop resilience to future risks. The resilience of agrifood systems is developed by correcting the multiple social, economic, and territorial inequalities in rural areas and establishing a more sustainable relationship between humans and nature. Although the goals for immediate recovery and transformation of agrifood systems are not identical, the actions should start simultaneously to have, effectively, a recovery with transformation.

Given the existence of this debate in academic studies, international organizations and in the public agenda, we sought to analyze the issues at the interface with the pandemic addressed by agriculture ministries throughout 2020, and whether the posts signaled transformations in food systems. It is evident that one year analyzed in this study is insufficient to observe transformations in food systems, however the content and frequency of posts are good indicators of whether the transformation of food systems entered the discourses, narratives, images and symbolic agenda

constructed by the ministries. As mentioned in the introduction to this paper and highlighted by Kingdon (2006), crises are windows of opportunity to address new issues or emphasize certain issues. In other words, we will analyze here whether the pandemic brought the agenda of transforming food systems to the symbolic agenda of the studied ministries of agriculture.

It is important to clarify immediately that not all the posts linked to Covid-19 had a direct interface with food systems, such as the categories of reopening (de-confining) economic activities and spaces (public spaces, environmental parks, and the like); combating certain fake news; supporting the health sector (making resources available and supporting and replicating posts from the Health Ministry); and some personal protection or preventive measures concerning the pandemic (personal hygiene, confinement guidelines, social interactions and the like). In other words, at various times, the concerns and issues addressed by the agriculture ministries in the symbolic agenda went beyond their attributions and competencies, signaling efforts to build cohesion in the overall government agenda.

Figure 4 shows the categories addressed by Mapa-Brazil in the posts related to Covid-19. At the same time that we can observe the prevalence of topics related to food systems, we also notice a particular dispersion of attention in various issues. The five most frequent categories (occupying 57% of the attention) mobilized by Mapa-Brazil were: credit or subsidies for agriculture (payment installment extensions, facilitating administrative processes, availability of more financial resources, etc.); personal or preventive protection measures concerning the pandemic (guidance on food hygiene, workplace hygiene, and personal hygiene for workers); policies, actions, and processes related to family farming (extension and digitalization of processes, specific policies to support the social category); issues related to food inspection and sanitary surveillance (continuity of services, process extensions, recommendations for slaughterhouses, international trade guidelines); and process digitalization (steps or procedures of public policies).

In general, these five categories and the others mentioned actions for the continuity of ongoing food system dynamics and processes or actions to address the effects of the pandemic. Somewhat differently, one of the posts (in the sustainability category) mentioned that "one of the effects of the current pandemic will be to increase discussions about sustainability both in agreements and in the daily concerns of consumers" and that this concern should be incorporated in food production, including coffee, the subject of the post.

The other posts on Mapa-Brazil (without references to the pandemic) dealt with various topics, such as the valorization of grain and animal protein exports as an instrument for national economic recovery (a crisis already manifested in previous years and accentuated with the pandemic – Barros, 2022; Rossi & Mello, 2017); the importance of strengthening sustainable practices (stimulated through the Plan for Adaptation and Low Carbon Emission in Agriculture-ABC+) and good practices for organic food production and animal husbandry in order to expand and conquer new international markets; the contribution of Brazilian agriculture to feed the world, with emphasis on the importance of the agro-export sector; and the availability of credit and other instruments to increase production, support sustainable agricultural techniques, and strengthen Brazilian exports.

Besides specific actions linked to sustainable practices that were already underway (Chechi & Grisa, 2020), the pandemic, therefore, does not seem to have produced more significant tensions towards ongoing food system transformations. Contrarily, it is also noteworthy that, as highlighted by several papers (Grisa & Porto, 2023; Delgado & Zimmermann, 2023; Barbosa et al., 2021), since 2016 several political and institutional changes have even led to dismantling in policies for family farming, environmental concerns, and promoting food security and healthy food⁵.

⁵ For more information on food systems in Brazil and the performance of public policies, see: Grisa et al. (2023), Grisa & Porto (2023), Niederle & Wesz Junior (2020), and Preiss & Schneider (2020).

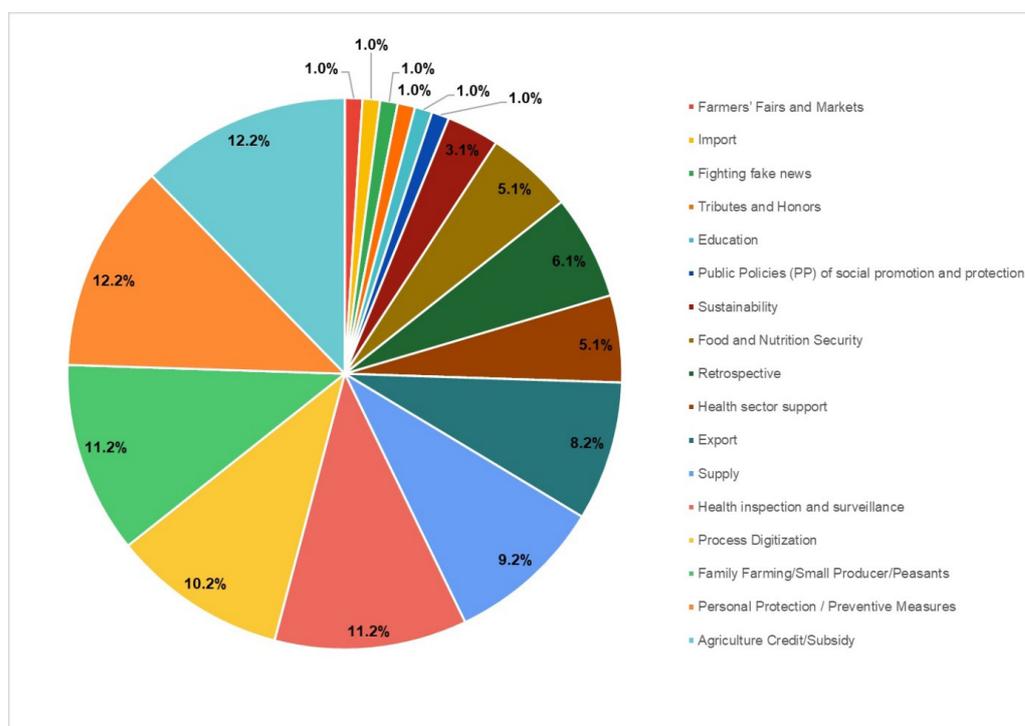


Figure 4: Categories (frequency and percentage) present in the posts related to Covid-19 made by Mapa-Brazil. **Source:** Authors.

Figure 5 presents the categories addressed by Minagri-Chile. While we note the mobilization of issues broader than food systems, we also note that three of these categories - actions related to guaranteeing food supply, personal or preventive protection measures, and public policies for promotion and social protection - concentrated more than 50% of the attention (53.3%) in posts regarding Covid-19. Among the actions related to the guarantee of food supply, we can highlight norms about activities and services considered essential; guidelines for the operation of supply chains, market vendors, supply centers, and the agricultural sector; price monitoring actions; and information about the continuity of activities in agriculture. Among the personal or preventive protection measures were guidelines for social distancing, personal care, confinement, and interaction on holidays. Public policies for social promotion and protection included actions and measures for parents with children under six, unemployment insurance, aid for the middle class, and economic revival actions. Besides these, the other two most frequent categories - which concentrated 21% of the attention - were food and nutritional security (pertinent seminars and events, food basket distribution, tips on preparing nutritious and healthy menus at affordable prices) and actions focused on reopening activities and spaces that had been closed due to the pandemic (deconfinement phases and measures, reopening of spaces).

The other posts from Minagri-Chile (without references to the pandemic) focused mainly on preventing and fighting forest fires, promoting cooperativism, holding the Chile Farming Expo and the Agro-Fisheries Census (in a virtual format), certain products' export dynamics, and, above all, monitoring the average prices of fruits and vegetables and promoting healthy eating. "Consume fruits and vegetables in your foods and reduce the consumption of bread and sugary drinks. By doing this, you will not only lose weight, but your body will be healthier, you will feel better and have more energy during the day", and "We want you to eat more sustainably: recipes for 20 traditional Chilean dishes" were some of the many posts regarding healthy eating.

Indeed, since 2008, the Health Ministry has been implementing several policies to combat overweight and obesity due to associated chronic diseases; in 2017, it published the National Nutrition and Food Policy (of an inclusive and intersectoral nature) intending to improve health status and quality of life for the national population in terms of food and nutrition (Néron & Mateluna, 2022). Although not very visible in the posts, Néron & Mateluna (2022) signal other changes that have been taking place in the agricultural sector in a way that intends to transform food systems. According to the authors, in 2011 and 2019, the very transformation of the name and arrangement of the Agriculture Ministry - which would become the Agriculture and Food Ministry - was on the decision-making agenda. The change was intended to bring all food chain sectors under the same institutional framework, from primary production to industrial processing, including all food items. However, political negotiation issues impeded the proposals' success⁶.

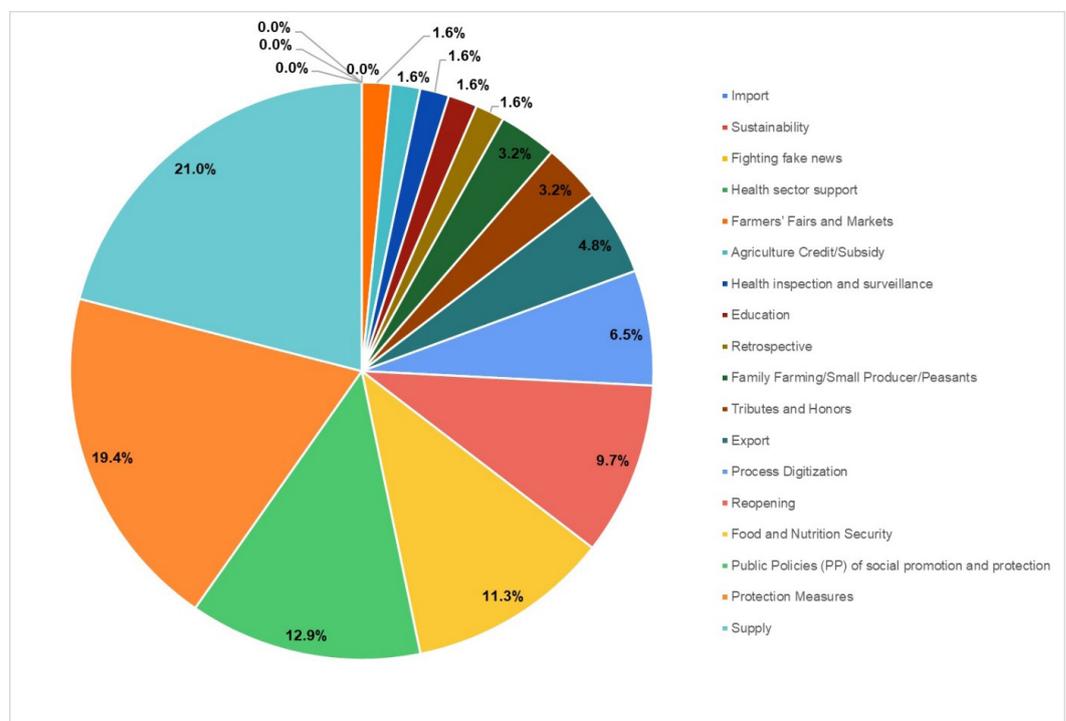


Figure 5: Categories (frequency and percentage) present in the posts regarding Covid-19 made by Minagri-Chile. **Source:** prepared by the authors.

Figure 6 presents the categories addressed by Minagricultura-Colombia. At the same time that we note the mobilization of broader issues than food systems, we also observe that, similar to Chile, some issues have focused more attention (48.9% overall) on the symbolic agenda, such as personal or preventive protection measures concerning Covid (information to avoid contagion, indications of symptoms, confinement, declaring essential activities, guidelines for hygiene care at work and with food); agricultural credit or subsidy measures (tariff and taxes reductions, credits with lower interest rates, transport support, debt renegotiation); and supply issues (food price and supply monitoring in markets and supply centers, and food sales and trade decentralization). The other two most frequent categories were actions for family

⁶ For more information on food systems in Chile and the performance of public policies, see: Naciones Unidas (2022) and Jensen (2021).

farming/small producers/peasants (recognition and valorization of peasants and actions for continuity in local food production and commercialization) and support to the health sector (notably reposts from the Ministry of Health).

The remaining Minagricultura-Colombia posts throughout 2020 (without references to the pandemic) publicized actions for specific products (coffee, cocoa, rice, potatoes, pineapples, avocados, etc.); highlighted national economic results, especially in terms of national production and exports; and publicized initiatives to minimize climatic events (e.g., droughts), promote perishable food transportation, animal health maintenance (foot and mouth disease), virtual business days, etc. Besides these, two other themes received great attention throughout the year: i) initiatives to value Colombian food, which started with the campaign “Ingredients from the Colombian Countryside - Agrochef Colombia” and transformed into the label “Taste of Colombia” as a way to boost markets and local consumption; and, ii) several actions for rural women (credit lines, land access, stemming violence, etc.). Both themes connect with the effort to value and promote family and peasant farming.

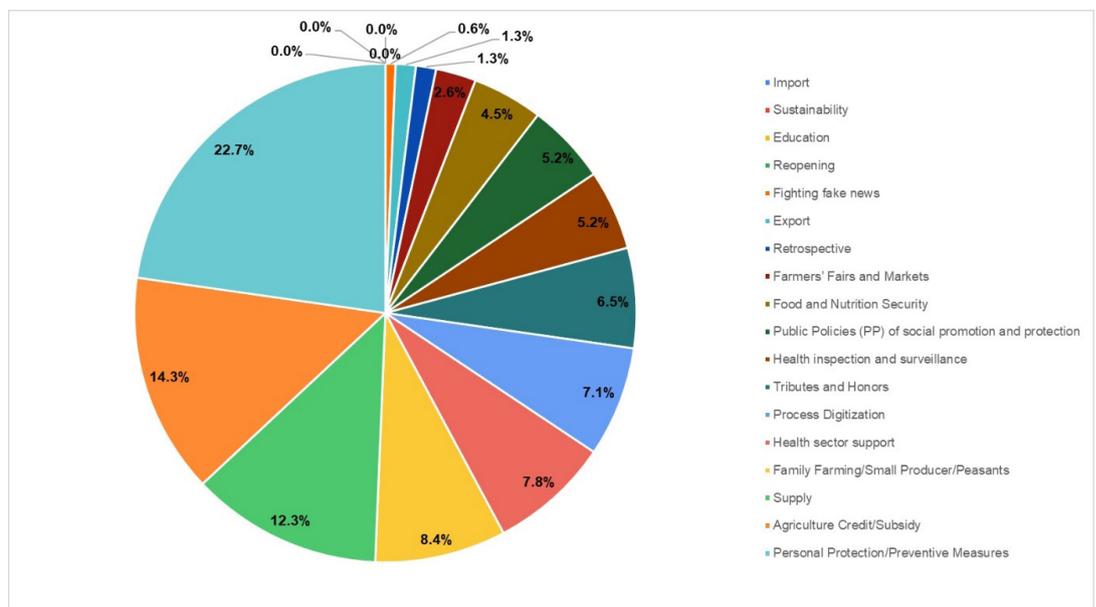


Figure 6: Categories (frequency and percentage) present in posts about Covid-19 made by Minagricultura-Colombia. **Source:** Authors.

In fact, since 2017, with the signing of the Peace Agreement in Colombia, several changes and actions have been carried out for family and peasant farming, such as the establishment of Law #2046 of August 6th, 2020, which provides that at least 30% of Colombian public food purchases come from one or several small agricultural producers and organizations whose systems belong to Peasant, Family and Community Farming. An important instrument of this law is the Mesa Técnica Nacional de Compras Públicas Locales de Alimentos (National Technical Table for Local Public Food Purchases). This coordinating body guarantees the participation of men and women from family farms and peasant organizations in negotiations with operators and public agencies (Colombia, 2020b). Thus, although we have not observed significant tensions towards the transformation of food systems underway in posts from Minagricultura-Colombia

about the pandemic, we have noted strategies aimed at building more inclusive dynamics for family and peasant farming and promoting national foods⁷.

Thus, although expectations (that the pandemic could boost new ideas, new discourses, images and actions related to the transformation of food systems), the continuity of actions already underway ended up prevailing in the symbolic agenda. This interpretation is reinforced by the fact that, as seen in the previous section, the pandemic itself was not the object of great attention by the ministries of agriculture, considering that the agriculture sector soon showed resilience and good indicators of recovery and economic performance. Thereby, as mentioned by IPES-Food (International Panel of Experts on Sustainable Food Systems, 2020), crises can also be used to accelerate business-as-usual. This does not mean ignoring that tensions and actions for changes in food systems are ongoing (as observed in other posts), but it serves to affirm that Covid, in terms of discourses and themes, has not provoked great transformations in the symbolic agenda.

5. Conclusions

Based on the debates about agenda setting and symbolic agenda, this paper analyzed the attention Brazil, Chile, and Colombia's Agriculture Ministries paid to Covid-19 issues, highlighting attention as a scarce resource. Governments select specific issues based on factors like self-interest, negotiations with allies, and societal pressure. In particular, the symbolic agenda is a fundamental step because, in this initial moment of the construction of public policies, policymakers can test arguments, topics to be prioritized, and support or rejection, moving towards selection decisions whose political costs can increase later.

Given this focus, we hypothesized that different agriculture ministries' attention to the pandemic in 2020 reflected their Presidents' orientations. Results showed Minagri-Chile and Minagricultura-Colombia, whose Presidents recognized the pandemic's seriousness, focused 100% of their symbolic agenda on Covid-19 for several weeks. In contrast, Mapa-Brazil, whose President downplayed the pandemic, only focused more than 50% of its attention on Covid-19 during weeks 13 and 14 (77% and 55%, respectively). On the other hand, we also observe important similarities between the countries. In all three, the pandemic occupied part of the symbolic agenda from mid-March on and lost strength in the following months, especially in the second half of 2020, considering the comparative resilience of the agrifood sector.

In a second step, the article explored the issues and problems related to the food systems prioritized by governmental agencies in the symbolic agenda (post published on official social media) in confronting or reacting to the pandemic. This goal is relevant because, as mentioned, the pandemic was interpreted by several authors and international organizations as a possible lever for necessary food system transformations towards more sustainable, healthy, and fair practices. Despite this interpretation in the public agenda, we start from the hypothesis that the topics addressed by the agriculture ministries sought to reproduce the continuity and normality of already established dynamics and processes.

Similar to the previous hypothesis, some of the results confirmed this hypothesis. Upon analyzing the posts that referred to Covid-19, we observed that, in general, they sought to continue ongoing processes and actions and to emphasize new strategies and resources for dealing with the pandemic and its repercussions. On the other hand, when we look at the set of

⁷ For more information on food systems in Colombia and the performance of public policies, see: Pineda et al. (2023), FAO, Unión Europea y Cirad (Food and Agriculture Organization, 2022b), Comisión Intersectorial de Seguridad Alimentaria y Nutricional (Comisión Intersectorial de Seguridad Alimentaria y Nutricional, 2021).

posts, we observe that in Mapa-Brazil, some concerns about the importance of strengthening sustainable practices emerged as demand from international markets; in Chile, concerns about promoting healthy food gained importance, given the malnutrition problems present in the country; and in Colombia, more inclusive actions gained relevance, especially the recognition, appreciation, and promotion of peasants and rural women. Even though more expressive tensions were not evidenced, these emphases on the symbolic agenda can contribute to building paths and decision agendas focused on constructing sustainable, healthy, and fair food systems.

Thus, in conclusion, we can affirm that, although the pandemic had repercussions on various elements related to food and food systems (as demonstrated in the introduction), it remained a marginal topic on the symbolic agenda of the ministries of agriculture and, at least in the analyzed official communication channel, did not stimulate debates on the importance of building sustainable, healthy and inclusive food systems. By addressing the involvement of ministries of agriculture in the pandemic and in the transformation of food systems, this article draws the attention of rural studies in order to analyze the role of these ministries in guiding issues, streamlining agendas and building paths for institutional changes/permanence - issues still little explored in the literature.

In terms of practical contributions to public policy, the results of this work can stimulate revisions in the symbolic and decision agenda of the agriculture ministries in order to face contemporary challenges. Moreover, while there is a growing movement for governments to build more sustainable food systems, such proposals pose challenges to the governmental agenda by demanding collaborative, transparent, inclusive, and inter-sector processes (Kugelberg et al., 2021). As Trübswasser et al. (2022, p. 2) commented, "Pursuing a food systems approach increases the potential for conflict as more stakeholders and ministries—and therefore more viewpoints, preferences, constraints, and potential entry points—become involved. (...) Developing a shared agenda between these multiple stakeholders is a vitally important part of navigating challenges and conflicts and is key to designing food systems policies that maximize shared benefits and minimize risks." Although this article explores the issues addressed by the Ministry of Agriculture, it is noteworthy that advancing food systems transformation would require articulation and cohesion of the governmental and decision agenda with other ministries and government areas.

In addition to these, the paper brings two more contributions. The paper contributes by bringing together areas of knowledge (public policy fields, rural sociology, and sociology of agriculture and food) with infrequent dialogues. There is little work that mobilizes the analytical approaches of the public policy field to analyze the political dynamics of food systems. In contrast, rural, agriculture and food are less addressed (compared to health, education, security, etc.) in that disciplinary field.

The paper contributes also to the debates on social media and agenda-setting. If the relationship between traditional media (newspaper, television, radio) with public and governmental agendas has been studied since the 1960s/70s, the relationship of the latter with social media is still a recent topic, lacking further analysis (Gilardi et al., 2022; Lewandowsky et al., 2020; Feezell, 2017). As Gilardi et al. (2022, p. 43) commented, social media "are a relevant channel for political communication"; "they expand the number and types of actors who can potentially shape the agenda"; and "using social media, political actors can potentially reach the broader public via traditional media." So, as seen here, agriculture ministries' social medias, as official communication channels with the general public, can be important resources to analyze the government agenda. These are everyday tools (especially in the cases of Brazil and Chile) to visualize, test and prioritize topics; build favorable scenarios for specific issues; and to communicate and legitimize the symbolic and decision agendas.

Authors' contributions

Catia Grisa: conception and design of the study, analysis and interpretation, writing of the manuscript, critical review. Fernanda Castilhos França de Vasconcellos: data collection, analysis and interpretation, writing of the manuscript, critical review; Ingrid de Paula Marques: data collection, analysis and interpretation, writing of the manuscript. Nicol Manuela García Gonzales: data collection, analysis and interpretation, writing of the manuscript. Isabela Zacher Narciso: data collection. All authors approved the final version of the manuscript.

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Conflicts of interest:

The authors declare no conflicts of interest.

Ethics approval:

This study did not require approval from an ethics committee as it involved only the analysis of publicly available content on the internet, without interaction with human participants or the use of sensitive data. All data used in the research were accessed in compliance with applicable ethical guidelines and legal standards.

Data availability:

The data that support the findings of this study are available from the corresponding author upon reasonable request.

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