

# The role of public administrations in promoting open municipal markets

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## Abstract

Agroecological transitions require steps to be taken to shorten food circuits that prioritize local food markets and their social dimension. Such a measure would include open municipal markets (OMMs) because of their role in promoting the social nature of the agroecological transitions. In rural areas, OMMs managed by public administrations are facing a major crisis. This paper aims to decipher the claims of the actors involved in the OMM crisis and to focus on strategies that could be taken by municipalities. Semistructured questionnaires, direct observations, and participative workshops with stallholders, consumers, local producers, and the researchers of the university were used to analyze social relationships within the framework of OMMs in the Province of Girona, Catalonia. The actors revealed a lack of connection between collectives and within the same group of stallholders. The absence of shared aspirations, along with the scant interest of public bodies in investing in the markets or recognizing their economic and social role, have all contributed to the current decline in OMMs. Open municipal markets are an active asset that are at risk of being abandoned in remote rural areas. If the actors in the market could collaborate, this would help to encourage the local economy and community cohesion and to actively promote the social dimension of the agroecological transitions.

## 1 | INTRODUCTION

Different concepts and interpretations of agroecology have circulated in recent years. Some authors have interpreted agroecology as a science; some as a social movement or an agricultural practice; others as a transdisciplinary, participatory, action-oriented approach; and yet others as a form of political action (Gallardo-López et al., 2018). In our case, we consider the social perspective of agroecology. This perspective focuses on the socially disruptive consequences of dominant models of the agri-food system and agroecol-

ogy's transformative potential for the entire agri-food system including open municipal markets (OMMs) (Otero-Rozas et al., 2019; Renting et al., 2003). Open municipal markets play a critical social role in the economic and environmental sustainability of agri-food systems, connecting producers and consumers. They minimize the social and geographical distance between communities of stallholders, producers, and consumers (Oteros-Rozas, et al., 2019). They can also be interpreted as multifunctional agora, where a shared community is created around food consumption. As commercial spaces, OMMs connect urban and rural knowledge and actors and social groups, while supplying citizens with fresh products and enabling and encouraging embeddedness within the territory.

**Abbreviations:** OMM, open municipal market; SWOT, strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, and threats.

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Current literature on food markets is mostly city centered (Tornaghi & Dehaene, 2020). In the rural context, farmers' or organic markets have been considered mainly from a tourist perspective (Everett, 2012). However, other perspectives have been explored. One of these is the social and the urban planning perspective, which focuses on social food movements within the framework of "public food market regeneration and/or gentrification" (Gonzalez & Waley, 2013; Parham, 2015; Winter, 2003). Where and how to reconnect consumers and producers in the context of the "city of proximity" model (Gottero, 2019) have also been factors in rethinking and debating the OMMs role and the urban–rural link.

By studying food policy connected to public food markets (Baics, 2016; Fava et al., 2010; Fava et al., 2016; Parham, 2015; Parham, 2019; Schmiechen & Carls, 1999; Tangires, 2003) and exploring markets' potential to create commercial and social fabric, urban historians have investigated the role of food markets as part of the city's public services' system. They demonstrate how public food markets and food distribution networks have historically played a fundamental role in connecting rural and urban areas and how the multifunctional roles of food markets as public services and urban spaces have contributed to the formation and development of cities (Parham, 2015).

A large amount of literature can be found on the public marketplace (Everts et al., 2021; Morales, 2011; van Eck et al., 2020) that explores the formal and informal social dimension of the OMMs. Within this literature, economists (Brown, 2002; Nicolosi et al., 2019) have studied consumer preferences in the context of public food markets, but research focusing on the relationships between consumers and vendors has been almost absent (Brown, 2002) on OMMs, which are sometimes defined as nonsedentary or weekly markets (Payne, 2002; Pyle, 1971; Saili et al., 2007). Consensus about the definition of OMMs is lacking. Tunbridge (1992) classified OMMs into four main market categories: festival, traditional, public, and farmers' markets. Later, Tiemann (2004) built on Tunbridge's classification by adopting a more social perspective and suggested two other key divisions: formal and informal. His definition includes indigenous and experience markets. The multiplicity of definitions and perspectives on the open-air market illustrates different possible research perspectives.

In our research, we begin to address these gaps in the literature by focusing on the food sector of weekly OMMs in rural areas in Catalonia, Spain, and exploring public engagement and the interplay between the markets' actors: consumers, vendors, and producers. We differentiate OMMs from other private-initiative markets such as food festivals and farmers' markets, which are special events rather than part of a town's weekly, permanent public service. In Spain, large cities such as Madrid, Barcelona, and Valencia have experienced pilot projects of OMMs for fostering zero-mile and ecological

- Open municipal markets are a social system that could improve the agroecological transition.
- Municipal market policies play a fundamental role in the social food transition.
- The consumer's perspective is fundamental for revitalizing open municipal markets.
- Agroecological transitions eases the paradoxes between economic–social logic and the environment.

products. These projects and public policies have interpreted the markets as a core entity for responsibility in the food transition. However, urban OMMs are still far from being "thermometers" that can be used to gauge the level reached by the agroecological transition and the city's well-being (Edmonds & Carsjens, 2021). In rural areas, the situation is different. Most local governments do not consider OMMs active infrastructure for supporting the socioeconomic dimensions of food transition and as places to construct a shared narrative on food, instead insisting on their importance in attracting tourists in search of food experiences.

Our study uses Morris's (1961) definition of municipal markets as "places, sites and so forth, owned by a city [...] that rents out space or stalls for the sale of food products under municipal supervision." Since ancient times, the market's commercial function has been synonymous with the city. In his classic book, Henri Pirenne (1927) attributed the revival of medieval cities to the reappearance of the merchant class. More recently, this process is interpreted differently. Bois (1989) argued that the revival came "from below," that is, local producers who channeled merchandise into the local market shaped the construction of medieval cities with urban spaces such as a square, an arcade, a street, or a crossroads around or near the local market. These two interpretations show not only the importance of the market in creating the physical and social city but also the power relationship between traders and public bodies. Moreover, covered public markets as a public service in Europe during the 19th and 20th centuries responded to the need to regulate the quality and price of food. With the introduction of new systems for producing, selling and conserving food during the mid-20th century, a greater level of general sanitary conditions and the changing role of women (Miller, 2015), the role of open markets changed in public policies (Fava, 2017; Fava, Guàrdia & Oyón, 2016). However, since then, the issue of food has gradually lost its central role and urban planners have paid less attention to these questions.

With over 650 OMMs and 60 active municipal market halls, our study area, Catalonia, Spain, is an exceptional example. Catalonia's markets merit study to explore their social role the

agroecological transition, their multifunctionality, and their capacity to construct a joint narrative among their actors. In our specific case study of the Ter Brugent Valley, which is a remote rural area in the Province of Girona in Catalonia, the market in Amer has been held every Wednesday since the Middle Ages (Casassas i Simó, 1978; Contreras & Casassas i Simó, 1980). Its commercial importance used to attract consumers from other valleys as well, but now every rural village has their own small weekly market and local food shops, which has changed the predominance of this OMM. Over the past 10 yr in rural areas of Catalonia, farmers' markets, specialized food fairs, and gastronomy fairs, which are mainly managed by the private sector, have grown in number, quantity, and extension. Unlike their private counterparts, OMMs are managed by municipalities and, as such, are dependent on the corresponding political context and the food policies that are implemented (Magnaghi, 2011).

Recently, neoliberal development policies have been applied without sensitivity to context in urban and rural areas. Consequently, social practices, such as shopping at the supermarket or online, are making the food territory increasingly similar (Gottero, 2019). This has complicated the survival of OMMs in rural contexts. Paradoxically, the main cities in Spain's local government have fostered the agroecological transitions more than in rural zones. For example, they have introduced municipal farmers' markets or promoted local-level food initiatives or food policies.

This paper aims to decipher which are the main actors of the OMMs and their different perspective about OMM crisis in rural areas and investigates how, through municipal-level policymaking, rural OMMs could play a prominent role in promoting the social–agroecological transitions.

## 2 | MATERIALS AND METHODS

Open municipal markets in Catalonia were analyzed in 2005 by the Catalan Government (Generalitat de Catalonia) in a white paper on nonsedentary commerce (Rodríguez, 2005) from an economic perspective. We used this study as the foundation for our case study. It helped us to trace the evolution of markets, as the municipalities have not kept records or updated this information.

The case study focuses on Girona Province, which has ~50 weekly OMMs varying in terms of location, demography, season, and the presence of tourism. The biggest open markets, with >150 stallholders, are on the Costa Brava, where tourism plays a significant role during the summer by swelling the population of those who shop for food and other household products at the markets. Medium-sized markets are found in denser, more populated cities along the main territorial routes. In rural areas, OMMs are usually smaller with <75 stallholders. In fact, most rural OMMs have <25 stallholders, and some

of them, with less than five stalls, are at risk of disappearing altogether (Figure 1).

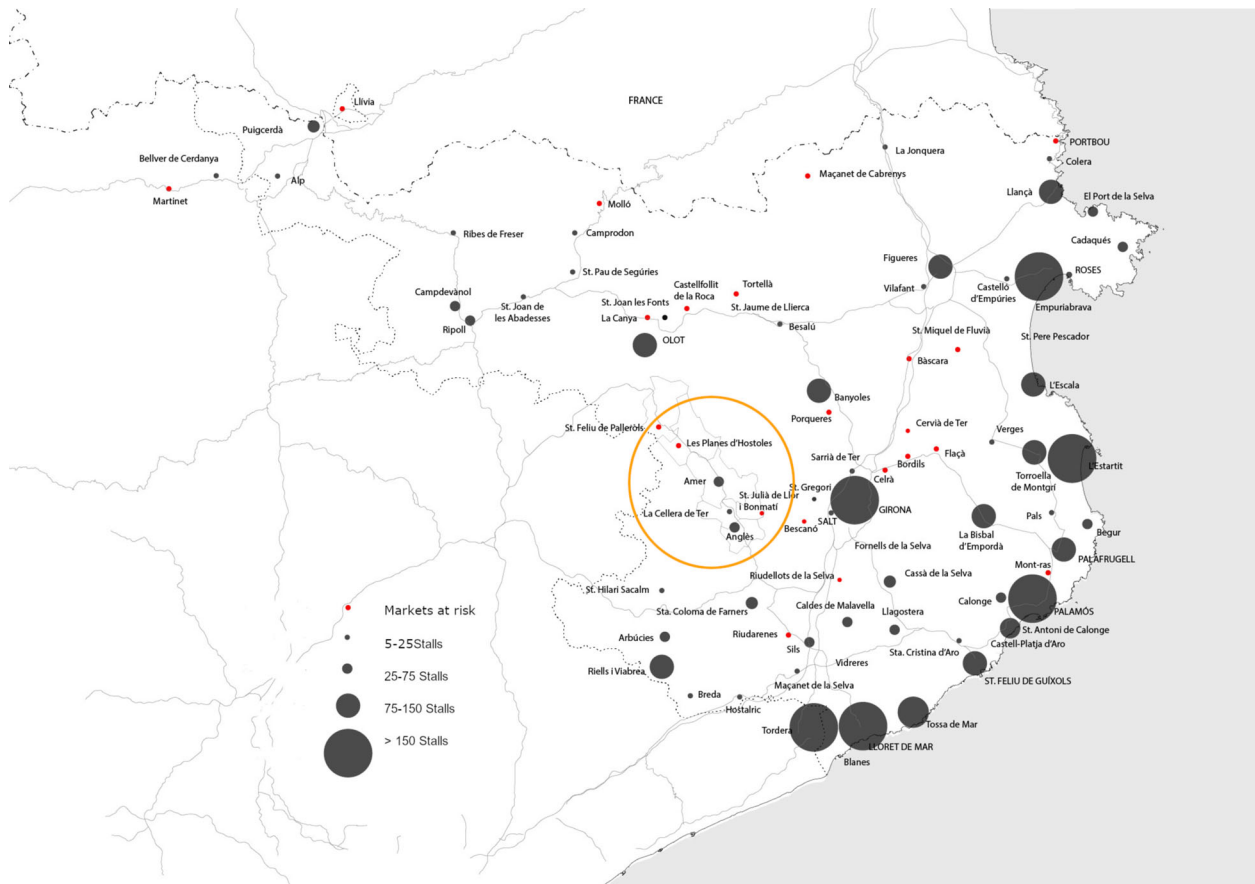
The study area was the Ter-Brugent Valley, a remote rural area encompassing six municipalities: Sant Feliu de Pallerols, les Planes d'Hostoles, Amer, la Cellera de Ter, Anglès, and Bonmatí. All six districts have OMMs with <25 stalls and one of them is at risk of closing down. These small towns are located along an old trade route and the (no-longer functioning) railway line between Olot and Girona (Figure 2). Since the mid-20th century, agriculture in the valley has been losing its primary role, and the small manufacturing industry was badly affected by the 2008 economic crisis. Now, most of the people living in this area are commuters, travelling each day to work in the bigger cities of Olot and Girona.

One of our main methodological references was Christina Nordin's seminal work, *Marchés commerçant clientele* (Nordin, 1993), which studied OMMs in the Paris region, the circuits of nonsedentary traders, and the economic, social, and recreational functions of the markets using direct observation and semistructured questionnaires (Nordin et al., 2016). We applied participatory action research methodologies to this approach to empower the markets' actors to perform strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, and threats (SWOT) analyses.

The first part of the study was basically descriptive, documenting the processes and the structure of the Ter-Brugent Valley OMM network. This was conducted through direct observations of what kinds of goods, food, clothing, or other products were sold in the markets. Researchers from the University of Girona Architecture and Territory Research Group 2016–2017 administered confidential and semistructured questionnaires to all food vendors at the markets (48 agri-food stallholders in total). The short questionnaire sought to document vendors' weekly routes and the sources of the food they sold by asking five fundamental questions: What kind of products do you sell? Do you buy in or produce your own products? Where are you from? Where do you live? Do you go to any other markets during the week? If so, which ones? Vendors' responses—including further in-depth information and explanations that the vendors may have offered—were subsequently transcribed. The data were then analyzed quantitatively and reported on maps.

The second part of the study took a critical perspective on OMMs and explored how active market actors have been in constructing the social meaning and narrative on food markets as a public space. To test municipal and food vendor engagement and support for OMMs and the conflictive power relationships with local food retail shops, we employed a four-helix approach for a collaborative workshop (European Committee of the Regions et al., 2016) based on a SWOT analysis.

Workshop participants were recruited by the research team and the public administration with the goal of obtaining an



**FIGURE 1** Open municipal markets (OMMs) in Girona Province according to the total number of stalls. The yellow circle shows OMMs in the Ter-Brugent Valley. In red are at-risk markets

adequate number of participants reflecting the diversity of OMM stakeholders. Considering the size of the municipalities and markets, the small number of participants (12 in total) showed that there was limited interest in the topic. On the positive side, the participants—public administrators, local food producers, stallholders, retailers, and project researchers—became actively involved in the workshop. In fact, the workshop acted as a meeting place for the participants who established new relationships and synergies, which was ultimately one of the goals of our project.

On 18 Dec. 2017, the participatory workshop “Agri-food markets and local trade in the Ter-Brugent” was held in the plenary hall of the Cellera de Ter Town Council. Beyond offering a space for meeting and exchanging ideas between the agents involved, the main objective of the workshop was to conduct a SWOT analysis that would allow for a debate on the present and future social cultural situation of agri-food markets and local trade in the Ter-Brugent area. Because of the small number of participants, we worked as one group. Two-step SWOT analysis methodology was applied to accelerate the transfer of research and innovation. First, we explained the results from the vendor questionnaire, and second, we asked the participants for their opinions on the Ter-Brugent OMMs’

strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, and threats. Finally, a discussion was held, as recommended in the methodology described by Santinia et al. (2016).

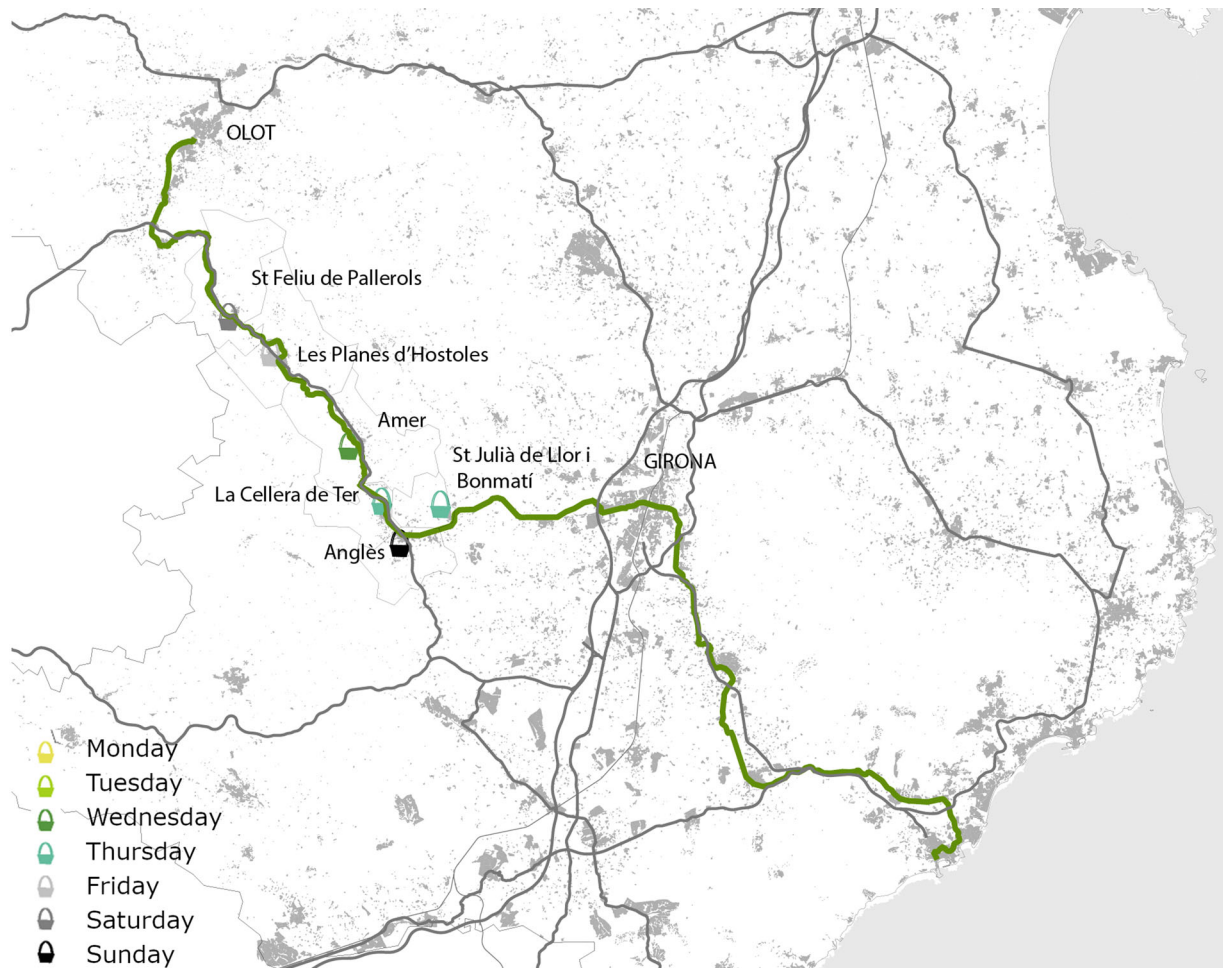
### 3 | RESULTS

#### 3.1 | Propensity of stalls to close down

Comparisons of the number of stalls registered in the Ter Brugent Valley and in the white paper (Rodríguez, 2005) highlighted the diminishing numbers of stalls. Between 2003 and 2017, over 10% of stalls (food, clothing, and other) closed permanently, with a decline in number from 91 in 2003 to 81 in 2017. At Amer, with the biggest market, nearly 50% of stalls had closed down. Nevertheless, some villages are going against this trend. For instance, Bonmatí has a new market, while Sant Feliu de Pallerols, which is close to the rural tourist area of the Vall d'en Bas, has increased its number of stalls by 50% (from 8 to 12) (Table 1).

In the past, the relationship between markets and inhabitants was meaningful and the size of a market was related





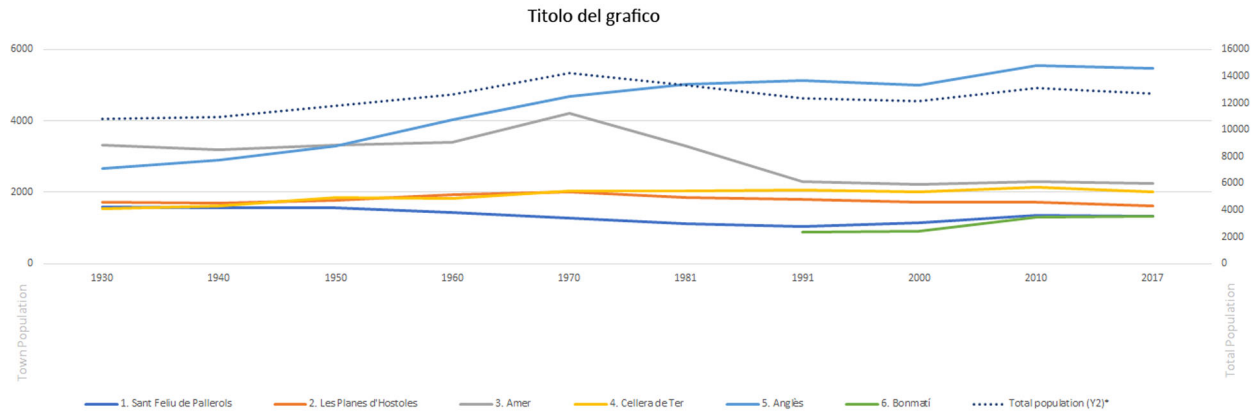
**FIGURE 2** Ter-Brugent open municipal markets and their relationship with the road system and the green walking–cycling path, which was previously a railway line

**TABLE 1** Variation in open municipal market stalls and their products between 2003 (Rodríguez, 2005) and 2017 in the Ter-Brugent Valley, Girona Province, Spain

Location	No. of stalls						Total (2003) 2017
	Fruit and vegetable	Meat	Dried fruit	Other food	Plant and flowers	Clothing	
Sant Feliu de Pallerols	3	1	1	2	1	4	(8) 12
Les Planes d'Hostoles	2	1	2	1	0	4	(10) 11
Amer	4	1	2	2	1	7	(30) 17
La Celler de Ter	4	0	1	2	1	7	(20) 15
Anglès	7	2	2	1	1	11	(33) 24
Bonmatí	1	0	1	0	0	0	(na) 2
Total	21	5	9	8	4	33	(91) 81

to the size of the population it supplied. An analysis of the Ter-Brugent Valley's demography between 1930 and 2017 (Figure 3) showed a population peak in the 1970s and a slow decline until 2017. The post-1970 population decline was unevenly distributed across towns. For example, the population of Amer dropped by 47% between 1970 and 2017, Sant

Feliu de Pallerols by 16% between 1930 and 2017, Les Planes d'Hostoles 19% between 1970 and 2017, and La Celler de Ter 6% from 2010 to 2017. However, the population of the town of Anglès, closer to Girona, increased because of its closeness to the provincial capital and the fact that it has become a dormitory town for Girona.



**FIGURE 3** f towns in the Ter-Brugent Valley, Girona Province, Spain, 1930–2017. Data retrieved by Idescat (Institut d'Estadística de Catalunya) and INE (National Statistics Institute-Spain)

Therefore, the decreasing number of stalls could be related to depopulation. However, the relationship between population size and market size may be distorted today. Although a market's size depended on the size of the population, to some extent, other factors may be involved such as morning-only opening hours that prevented workers from shopping at the markets, a lack of parking, and a lack of diversity in or quality of the products sold.

### 3.2 | Market: Vendor and producer–retailer stallholders

The results of the questionnaires showed that among food stallholders in the Ter-Brugent Valley OMMs (48 in total), only 15 stallholders were producer–retailers who produced the food they sold, representing only 34% of all stallholders. The percentage of producer–retailers ranged from 57% of market stallholders in La Celler de Ter to no stallholders in Bonmatí (Figure 4). The stallholders sold mostly fruits and vegetables, and sometimes honey and cheese (Figure 5).

The distance between where a product is produced and where it is sold is usually one of the concerns that consumers consider when they go shopping to the market (Nicolosi, Fava & Marciandò, 2019; Vermeir et al., 2020). The carbon footprint of food depends not only on how it is produced but also on the length of the journeys that producers or resellers must make to sell it. Questionnaire results showed that the producer–retailers' food journeys maintained the historic connection that the Ter-Brugent Valley has always had with the Maresme, a fertile plain near the Mediterranean coast that is used for agrarian production and is ~90 km away from the valley (Figures 6 and 7). The producer–retailers traveled to the Ter-Brugent Valley markets on only certain days of the week because they needed time to produce the food they sold.

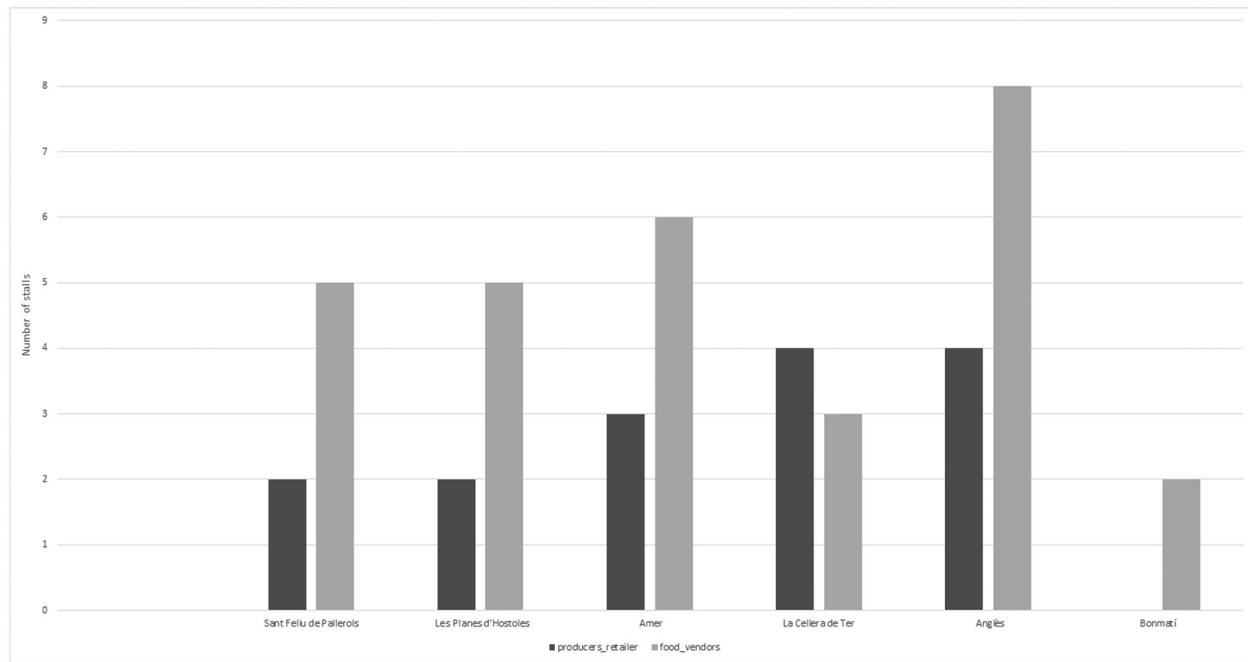
In contrast, the food vendors lived in different areas of the Province of Girona and bought their goods at large wholesale

markets such as Mercagirona or Mercabarna in the main cities of the province. Therefore, they travelled longer distances than the producer–retailers (Figure 7) and externalized the negative effects of long-distance transport and the industrial food they sold in the territory. These effects include the CO<sub>2</sub> footprint, loss of biodiversity, rural depopulation, and precarious work and social inequalities among other factors. The prices of their products did not include the cost of these externalities, which was assumed by the public sector and the citizens (Stell, 2020). For this reason, their merchandise was cheaper and more accessible than that of the producer–retailer or local food shop selling zero-mile products. The vendors attended six or seven markets a week (on different days) to obtain better profits. Although they had more customers, they offered a less personalized service and did not include local or organic products in their product mix. Most of the vendors were migrants or Roma, and for them, the market represented an economic resource rather than a personal commitment to the territory. In fact, we found it difficult to interview them because they were not only very busy but also concerned about how we would use the information.

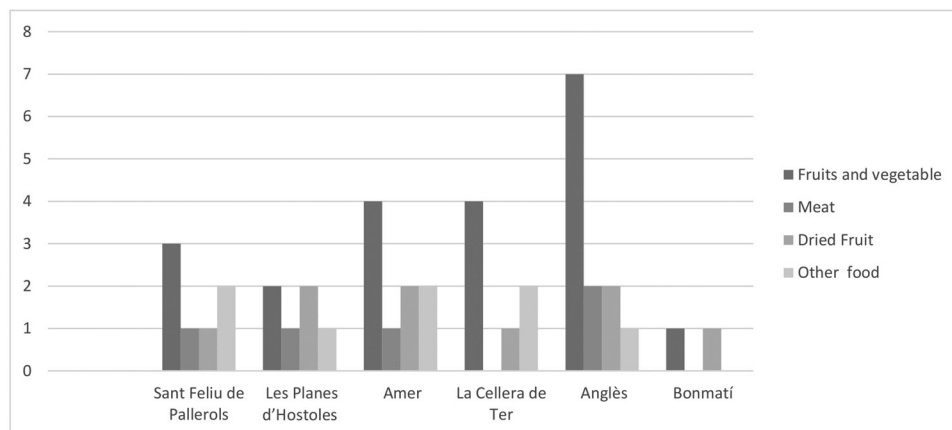
### 3.3 | Lack of public commitment, associationism, and circles of trust

The results of the SWOT analysis (Table 2), focusing on social factors that could improve the markets, showed the difficulties in creating a common vision for the role of OMMs as a place for food retail, social interaction, and embeddedness.

A comparison of public sector, consumers, local producers, local vendors, and university perspectives revealed a lack of working social relationships among the public sector, vendors, and producers. This lack of interaction was also reported within each sector. However, the four groups agreed on the assumption that the market functioned as an intermediary between territory and consumers, offered a customized



**FIGURE 4** Producer–retailers and food vendors at open municipal markets in the Ter-Brugent Valley, Girona Province, Spain



**FIGURE 5** Food products sold at open municipal markets in the Ter-Brugent Valley, Girona Province, Spain

service, and disseminated knowledge embedded in the territory about local production. In particular, the public administrators, who primarily highlighted the positive aspects of the markets, noted the usefulness of the market networks at various levels, which should provide an articulated system of market governance.

Participants also noted the markets' perpetual decline. Perceived indicators of the poor vitality of the markets included the lack of commercial mix because of the small number of stalls and the general ageing of traders and consumers. The decline was mainly attributed to a lack of initiative by merchants and the inability to adapt to consumers' demands—in particular, time schedules and product mixes—as opposed to

other commercial formulas offered by supermarkets and other food retail outlets.

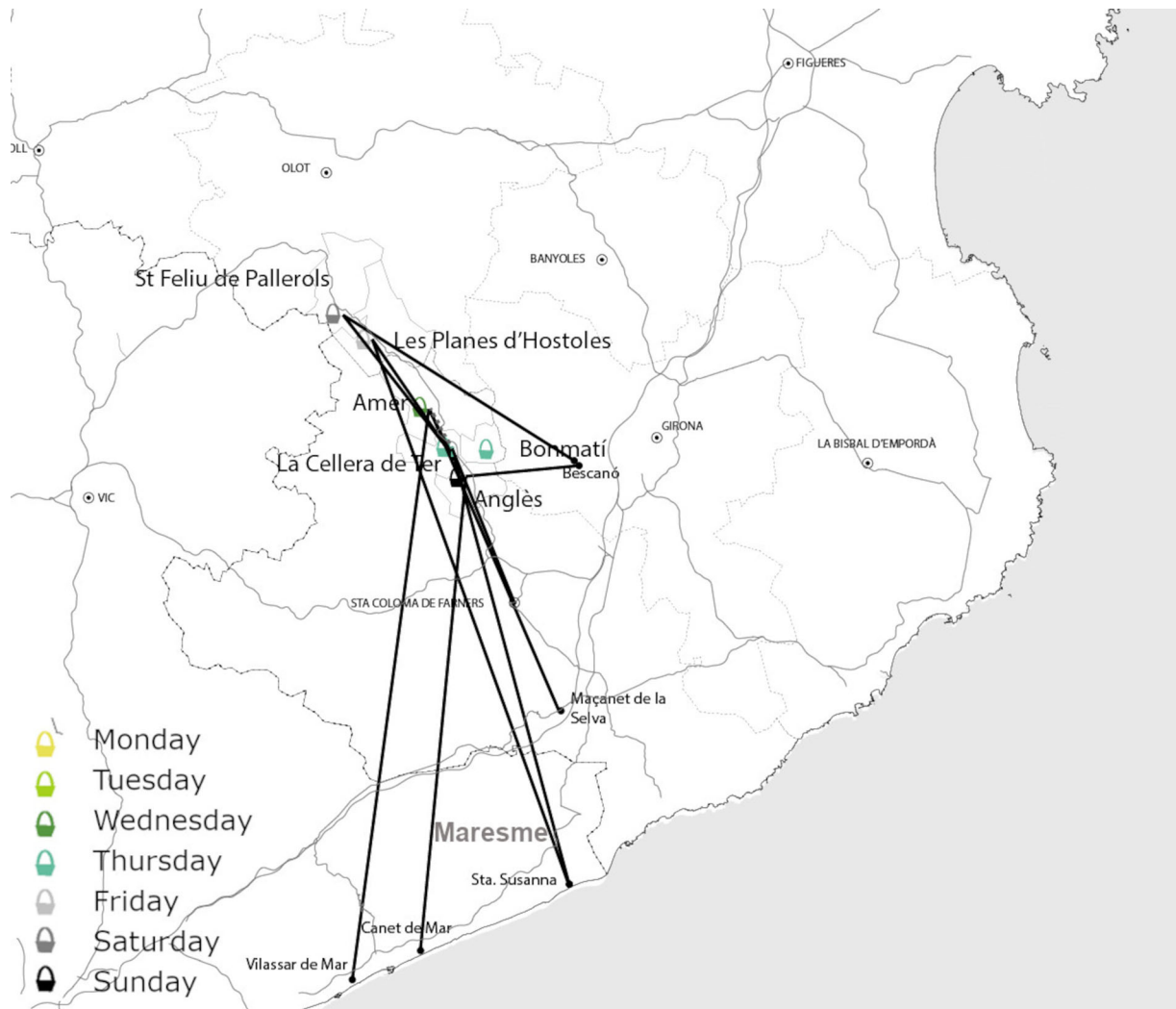
The market stallholders tended to emphasize negative aspects of the markets such as a lack of communication with public administrators or the presence of migrant vendors who did not respect the markets' municipal rules and were not committed to the territory as evidenced by, for example, not selling agroecological products. The stallholders pointed out that legislation and bureaucracy made obtaining a stallholder's permit difficult for them, but social services expedited this permit for specific groups such as migrants.

On the positive front, the stallholders agreed on the desirability of establishing a market brand and the need to set up

**TABLE 2** Strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, and threats (SWOT) analysis of social factors that could improve the open municipal markets in the Ter-Brugent Valley, Girona Province, Spain

Source	Participants supporting statement	Assessment
<b>Internal</b>		
<b>Strengths</b>		
	PS, LP, C	The market has the capacity to be the intermediary between the territory and the consumer, offering a personalized service and disseminating the knowledge of retailers about local products and the seasonality of these.
	PS	The physical proximity between local retailing and weekly markets contribute positively to the economic dynamism of both.
	PS, LV	The scarce infrastructure needed to sell to markets is one of the strengths, because they do not to face the high expenses and maintenance of commercial establishments.
	MV	When the market is in the center of town, there is presence of consumers.
<b>Weaknesses</b>		
	PS, C	The short times of opening in the morning is poorly adapted to working hours of the working population and the limited diversity of the products offered make markets unable to compete with the supermarket and 24-h shops.
	PS	The lack of a recognized "brand" that gives value to products of the markets and differentiate them from the products that can be found in others formats of selling.
	MV	The lack of vendor and local producers' associations causes a lack of unity and weakens the role of the weekly markets.
	MV	The immobility and the little culture of market cooperation means that there are few joint promotion initiatives.
	MV	The limitation of the number of stalls according to the type of merchandize makes it difficult for many producers to access the markets.
<b>External</b>		
<b>Opportunities</b>		
	PS, MV	The partnership between market vendors and the possibility to organize a Ter-Brugent Market Association would give more strength and more unity of action.
	PS	The possibility of drawing up the joint venture for the Ter-Brugent markets would facilitate the entry of local vendors or producers into the markets in the area.
	PS	The promotion of a local brands, with the corresponding stamps from local producers would contribute to differentiating the products of the markets from the products of large surfaces.
	U	Tourism and the hotel–restaurant–café sector can become customers in the weekly markets.
	U	The incorporation of policies to enhance the market as a space for socialization would help to bring a new consumer profile.
	U	The incorporation of new strategies and the updating markets can satisfy the new purchasing habits of consumers.
<b>Threats</b>		
	PS, MV	The aging of the population and the vendors of in the markets and the lack of interest in from the new generation in enterprise activities can inhibit new vendors.
	MV	Unlike local commerce, the weekly markets are unprotected by the administrations in charge. The lack of a reference person to whom to address causes means that the communication between traders and public administrations is nearly null.
	MV	The condition of "outdoor space" of the weekly markets favors the seasonality in the sales and this provokes a great difference between the months of cold and the months in which the exterior temperature is favorable.
	MV, C	The current legislation (regulations and concessions system) is one of the greatest threats to the weekly markets. The difficulty of entering markets by local vendors or producers discourages them and leaves large empty spaces without stalls in most markets, which generates an image of abandonment.
	U, C	The few local producers who stay at the markets do not adequately signpost their products, which, in turn, makes it even more difficult for consumers to evaluate them.
	U	Currently, many vendors in the weekly markets are supplied by wholesale markets (Mercabarna or Mercagirona), and this means that the food supply is the same as that of the supermarkets but at a less-competitive price.





**FIGURE 6** Producer–retailers’ journeys from production sites in the Maresme Plain on the Mediterranean coast to markets in the Ter-Brugent Valley, Girona Province, Spain, 1 h away by car (90 km)

a vendors’ association in the Ter-Brugent Valley. However, a lack of interest in vending as a form of long-term employment among younger generations made the latter project unviable. In addition, local stallholders assumed that migrants were not interested in participating in a possible stallholders’ association because their purpose was exclusively economic. The stallholders’ speech during the SWOT generally suggested a resistance to change or to collaborating on new projects.

The university researchers suggested that issues such as the quality of the products sold at the markets and the social nature of commerce could be improved with focused campaigns to enlarge the number of market actors engaging stallholders, local retailing shops, the municipality, and other public bodies at provincial and regional level. The new alliance would provide more muscle and more united action

to deal with local stalemates and return the public market to its role as a public asset.

## 4 | DISCUSSION

The results of the case study indicate how public food policies can promote OMMs and the agroecological transition and generate common narratives with market actors on the social role of OMMs in shortening food circuits.

### 4.1 | OMM and local food policies and social effect

European Union policies focus on food security, food accessibility, food sustainability, and the agroecological transition.

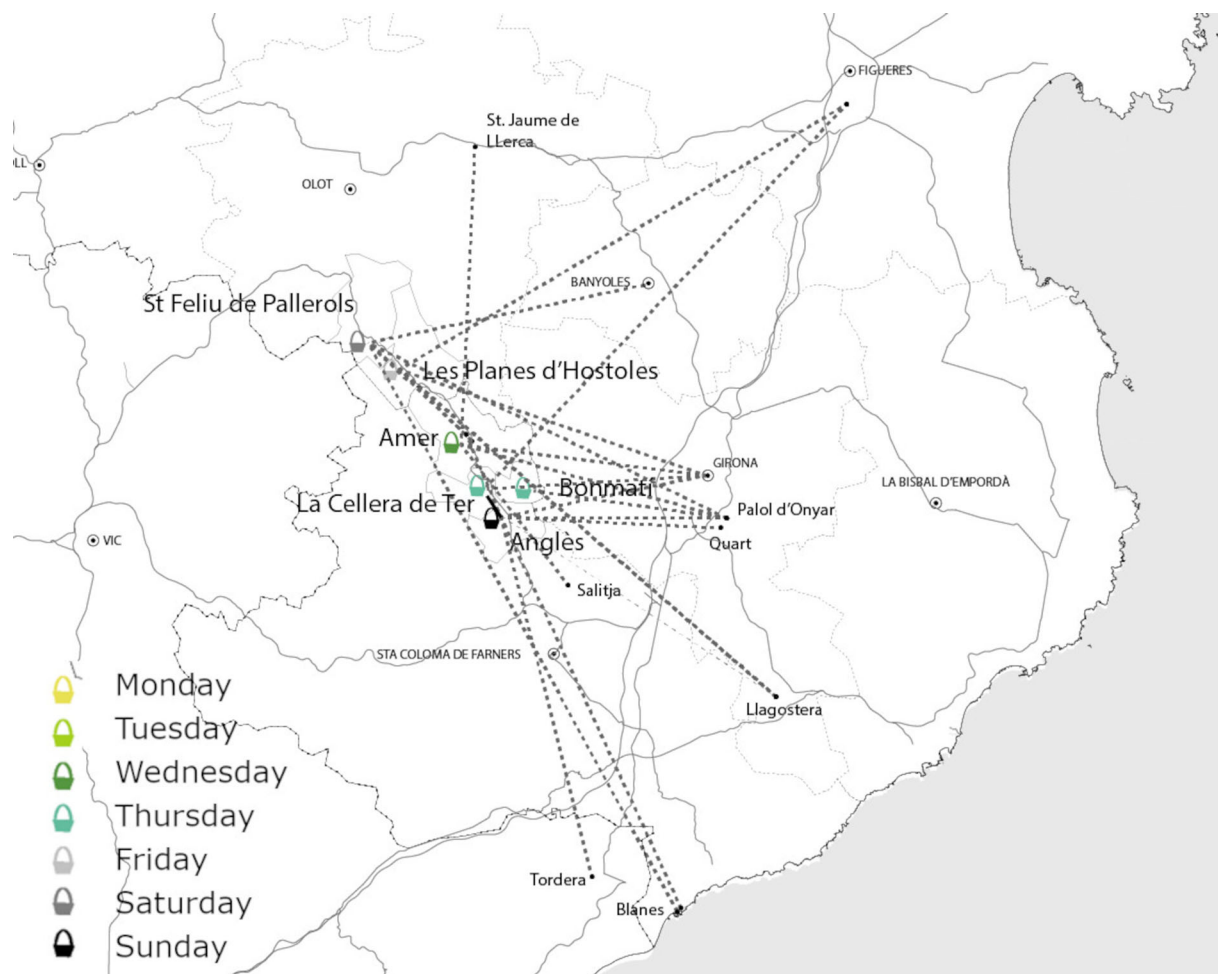


FIGURE 7 Food vendors' journeys to open municipal markets in the Ter-Brugent Valley, Girona Province, Spain

However, the results of this study show that in a remote rural zone of Catalonia, the role that OMM could assume in promoting agroecological transition seems to be underestimated. At the regional level in Catalonia, current legislation on trade, services, and fairs (BOE-A-2017-11320; Autonomous Community of Catalonia, 2017) focuses on “favoring social, environmental, economic, and institutional cohesion as the basis of a circular and sustainable economy model that allows for the efficient recovery of all resources, guarantees supply, diversity of supply and basic conditions for free and fair competition, and configures a model of towns, cities and neighborhoods that offers the same possibilities for all citizens and all social sectors.” This legislation connects society and the food supply in a cross-cutting vision. However, at the municipal level, the distribution of agroecological products through OMMs is not encouraged to the same degree, and the markets' potential multifunctional effects are unappreciated.

In a rural context, local commerce is considered the economic and social powerhouse of the municipality. In contrast, local policies consider OMMs such a minor activity on the local retailing scene that the markets are only managed by

regulations governing the occupation of public space. This situation is common in other European countries (Spilková & Perlín, 2013) where vendor groups do not have common aims. Moreover, although stallholders from migrant groups may gain consumers' trust because they sell a more accessible product, in our study area, they do not have the trust of other stallholders who consider them disloyal colleagues. This conflicting relationship between various groups makes marketplaces noninclusive places. This contrasts with other locations, for example France, where markets become places for the construction of a common narrative that can disseminate the concept of the agroecological transition to society (Recherche et Evaluation de Solutions Innovantes et Sociales, 2015).

The lack of active encouragement by public bodies and the impossibility of launching a formal association of local stallholders means there is an absence of unity that, in turn, weakens the potential public and social role of OMMs. However, with promotion through pilot projects at the municipal level, OMMs could become a structural social pillar for agroecological transitions if they stop being considered as

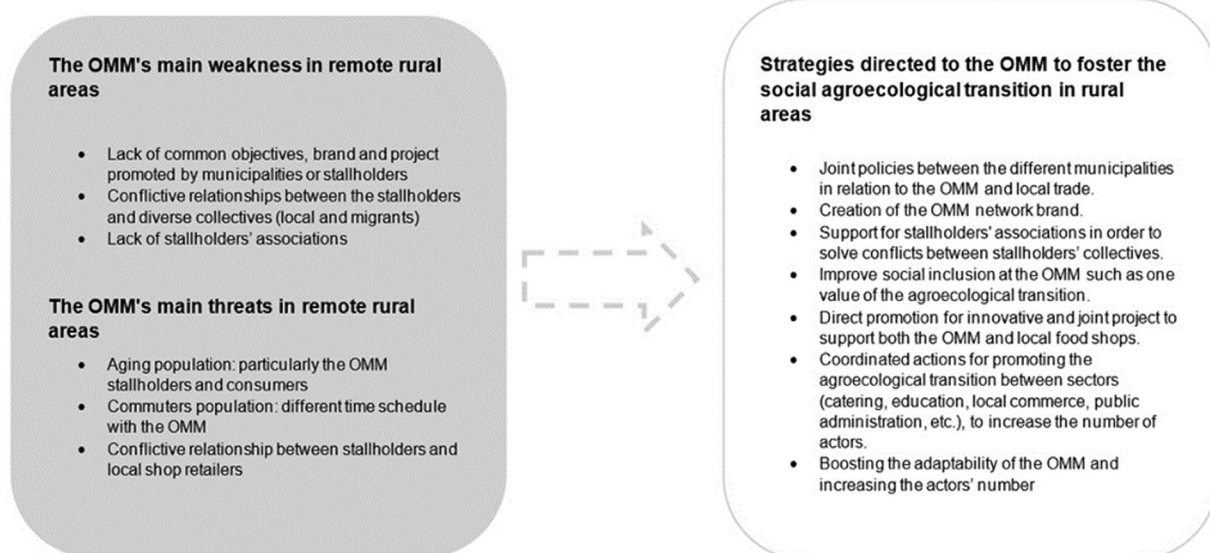


FIGURE 8 Strategies to foster social agroecological transition in rural areas through open municipal markets (OMMs)

merely alternative food networks or transitory special events and start being thought of as a means of fostering territorial embeddedness, social learning, and practicing innovation by constructing a territory of short distances. Shortening food circuits could increase food producers' profits while maintaining accessible prices for consumers (FAO, 2018) (Figure 8). Suggestions that emerged from the SWOT analysis focused on reinforcing the social network with proposals such as a network of vendors and producer–retailers, closer collaboration between municipalities, and greater cooperation between OMMs and local food retailers (Figure 8).

## 4.2 | The market—A third place?

A key question is the potential role of OMMs in rural development. Open municipal markets are claimed to be a public service supplying food in an urban, social space with a mission of promoting agroecological transition. However, it is a misconception to assume that OMMs are a public service if local food policies do not legitimate and support them (Marsden et al., 2000; Renting et al., 2003). Because of a neoliberal perspective and a city-focused vision, municipalities currently fail to recognize the full potential of OMMs. They value them not as an engine for rural development and the agroecological transition but more frequently as a tourism opportunity (Crespi-Vallbona et al., 2017).

Research in this field has noted the socially exclusionary nature of the regenerated food market and contrasted it with its inclusionary potential (Everts et al., 2021; Gonzalez & Waley, 2013). To transform the OMMs into "foodie" farmers" markets could be economically beneficial, but it means that the project diverges from a mission of promot-

ing agroecological transition in the long term. Instead, to realize the inclusionary potential of OMMs, the public sector must establish maximum prices to avoid gentrification. It must also consider factors such as location and opening times and ensure that changes to attract new customers are balanced with the needs of groups that could be disadvantaged by those changes.

In remote rural areas, public food markets are not frequently being regenerated or gentrified. More often, OMMs are at risk to be closed because of the aging population of stallholders, which may not be appealing and attracting to younger generations because of the vendor's lack of flexibility in terms of opening hours or market location. However, OMMs could still fulfill their potential as a third place (Kurland & Aleci, 2015; Marsden, 2012; Tiemann, 2004) between work and home with support from municipalities.

## 4.3 | Markets and flexible management

Flexibility and adaptation to consumer demand is a potential positive value of OMMs, but the tendency to preserve traditions makes it difficult for OMM sellers to consider innovation such as adaptability or flexibility to move or change quickly as positive values (Figure 8). Examples of entrenched ideas are that morning opening hours cannot be altered (for instance, to open in the afternoon) or that the location of the market could be strategically rethought.

Even if OMMs are no longer considered a panacea to solve all the environmental and social problems of conventional agriculture and food systems (Radcliffe et al., 2021), the postpandemic society could be another opportunity to revisit the situation. In fact, the increasing number of people living

and teleworking in rural areas could help to reverse the current decline. In this context, the rural population could create opportunities to encourage people to shop in OMMs. The more flexible working hours of teleworks can better accommodate the traditional morning opening hours of rural OMMs, which stallholders are reluctant to change, while teleworking isolation may drive workers to social interaction in the markets.

## 5 | CONCLUSION

This research broadens the discussion on OMMs' role in constructing a shared community of consumers and stallholders around food consumption and in improving the social agroecological transition in rural areas. The results show that OMMs are an active asset in Spain that are at risk of being lost in remote rural areas even though there is increasing interest in privately run farmers' markets or food fairs. The results also suggest that the challenge is to build collectives of consumers and food stallholders who have a common goal and are engaged in promoting agroecological transitions and embeddedness with the territory.

Unlike farmer's markets or organic markets, OMMs have been managed by the public administration that defines their role by structuring the norms and regulations. However, less attention has been paid to elaborating and communicating cultural meanings linked to the food. This paper explains that both consumers and stallholders tend to be an aging population with no expectation of generational change (Figure 8). This makes it even harder to promote plans for changes in OMMs in the future, as the response is not straightforward and rapid or economically clearly beneficial. In addition, there is some level of ambivalence in OMMs regarding the classical division between informal and formal markets or conventional agri-food distribution and alternative food networks because of the presence of both producer–retailers and food vendors. Producer–retailers may be motivated to sell at OMMs for the economic benefits and the social dimensions, for example, because they want to communicate their project and connections with the territory. In contrast, food vendors could be associated with the "conventional" food system, where economic factors are the main driver. These goals increase the challenge of establishing a community of sellers and a shared community of stall-holders and consumers and raise the issue of rapport between conventional agri-food distribution and the alternative food network objective and methods in the context of an inclusive agroecological transition.

For this reason, the municipality's role in managing the OMM transition is crucial to enhance the social dimension of agroecology and provide a space for food policies at local level. The public administration's responsibility includes not only the normative aspect to outline, for example, the propor-

tion of producer–retailers and food vendors or the quality and price of the food, but also public communication of the value embedded in buying in OMMs to mediate between the community of stall holders and the community of the consumers. This means balancing the idea that OMMs are a traditional place for economic exchanges with the idea that they also perform as an urban place, agora. The idea is to resocialize and recreate the space for the food environment and to improve innovation to reconnect food with the social, cultural, and production context (Kirwan, 2004; Oñederra-Aramendi et al., 2018) and to encourage embeddedness with the territory.

If the goal is agroecological transition, then reducing food movement, improving market locations, providing longer or different opening hours, and improving models of food governance to generate an associative structure are some of the initiatives for promoting the multitier effect of OMMs in rural areas. Food paradoxes in small rural towns include living close to productive areas but buying long-haul food, the lack of interactions with OMMs, or the lack of shared motivation between stall holders and consumers and the public administration. These aspects need to be examined more carefully to carry out analyses and make decisions that will determine the future of the territory and society, mitigating the contradictions between economic and social logic and the limits of the environment.

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## AUTHOR CONTRIBUTIONS

Nadia Fava: Conceptualization; Data curation; Formal analysis; Funding acquisition; Methodology; Writing – original draft. Marta Carrasco i Bonet: Formal analysis; Investigation; Visualization; Writing – original draft. Romà Garrido i Puig: Investigation; Data curation; Visualization; Project administration; Writing – original draft.

## CONFLICT OF INTEREST

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

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