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ARTICLE REVIEW

ORGANIZATIONAL CAPABILITIES OF FRUIT EXPORTING COMPANIES GEOGRAPHICALLY CONCENTRATED IN VALE DO RIO SÃO FRANCISCO

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ABSTRACT

Purpose: To analyze the dynamics of the organizational capacities of companies producing and exporting fresh fruit from the São Francisco River Valley in Brazil.
Methodology/approach: This is a qualitative case study, with production and exporting companies and the fruit-growing *cluster* as units of analysis. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with business, institutional and support industry actors, totaling 1182 minutes of recording.
Originality/Relevance: This research reveals unique findings about exporters of Brazilian agribusiness that is part of the exponent sector when it comes to international borders.
Key findings: The results reinforce the close relationship between the development of business resources and the resources of the cluster, while highlighting homogeneities and heterogeneities between the organizational capacities of companies.
Theoretical/methodological contributions: The scientific findings of this investigation intend to serve as the basis for the deepening of future research in the field of strategic administration and international businesses. In the short term, the results contribute to subsidize decision making in agribusiness exporting companies.

Keywords: Strategic resources, dynamic capabilities, cluster, exporting companies, ATLAS.ti.

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1 INTRODUÇÃO

The relevance of studies concerning geographic agglomerations has shown increasing interest among academics and professionals, starting from the research by Brusco (1982) and Pyke, Becattini, and Sengenberger (1990). These investigations were preceded by various theoretical contributions, encompassing knowledge from economics, organizational management, sociology, innovation, economic geography, and regional studies, among other areas (Hervas-Oliver & Albors-Garrigos, 2009; Fitjar & Huber, 2014; Henn, 2012; Lazzeretti, Sedita & Caloffi, 2013; Martin & Sunley, 2003; Porter, 1998).

However, the literature on clusters has still shown a lack concerning studies at the microeconomic level, that is, of companies as a unit of analysis within clusters (Hervas-Oliver et al., 2018). This observation has highlighted opportunities for studies dedicated to the analysis of the asymmetries of companies within the cluster (Hervas-Oliver et al., 2019; Hervas-Oliver et al., 2018; Hervas-Oliver, Lleo & Cervello, 2017; Belussi & Hervas-Oliver, 2018; Pinkse, Vernay & D'Ippolito, 2018).

Asymmetries are related in the literature to the perspective of heterogeneity, emphasized by the resource-based view (Barney, 1991). And, when incorporated by the cluster literature, it suggests that not all geographically concentrated companies gain in the same proportion. The understanding is that the asymmetries of companies within a cluster are related to differences in knowledge and performance, undoubtedly tied to distinct configurations of resources and capabilities, or even to absorptive capacities. This study contributes to the literature in the area by providing an empirical investigation with in-depth analysis of primary data on this issue.

The theoretical foundation involves the articulation between business resources and locational advantages, moving towards a premise that understanding the value creation process by geographically concentrated companies necessarily involves recognizing the co-evolution between companies and the cluster. That said, it should be noted that the objective of this study is to analyze the dynamics of organizational capabilities of fresh fruit-producing and exporting companies in the Vale do Rio São Francisco (VSF).

The cluster analyzed in this study is that of irrigated fruit production in the sub-middle region of the São Francisco River, which represents the economic and social development vitality of a historically disadvantaged Brazilian region, between the states of Pernambuco and Bahia. It is an important agricultural granary, directing its production both to the national and international market. Among exports, table grapes and mangoes stand out. Approximately 90% of Brazilian exports of these fruits originate from this region, constituting around 2% of global table grape trade and 9% of mangoes within the global supply chain (Food and Agriculture Organization of The United Nations, 2018).

2 THEORETICAL REFERENCE

The Resource-Based View indicates that the analysis of ways for strategic value creation by companies goes through understanding the heterogeneity and immobility of internal resources (Wernerfelt, 1984; Barney, 1991). An evolutionary perspective of this line of thought reinforces the need to comprehend resources through dynamic capabilities, seeking to understand, through socially embedded routines and processes, how companies achieve and sustain value generation over time (Alford & Duan, 2018; Cirjevskis, 2019; Fainshmidt,

Wenger, Pezeshkan & Mallon, 2019; Teece, Pisano & Shuen, 1997; Eisenhardt & Martin, 2000; Teece, 2007; Peteraf, Stefano & Verona, 2013). Dynamic capabilities are examined as a natural evolution of the internal resource perspective, with a focus on organizational capabilities in this study, linked to the administrative management of internal knowledge flows (Moreira, 2015).

Associated with dynamic capabilities, it is argued that locality can represent an important source of advantage in the international market (Dunning, 1988; Porter, 1998; 2000; Dunning & Lundan, 2010). Locality in this study is understood from the notion of a cluster, emphasizing the presence of a group of geographically proximate and interconnected companies that receive support from institutions associated with regional economic development (Porter, 2000; Malmberg & Maskell, 2002). Although part of the literature analyzing clusters has an economic focus on regional development, which could signal homogeneous conditions for business development, when also considering companies as the unit of analysis, the study acknowledges the asymmetries in the absorption of these resources or knowledge of the locality (Hervas-Oliver et al., 2019; Hervas-Oliver et al., 2018; Hervas-Oliver, Lleo & Cervello, 2017; Belussi and Hervas-Oliver, 2018; Pinkse, Vernay & D'Ippolito, 2018).

As evidenced in Figure 1, this study adopts the understanding that the development of the cluster and the companies are related, occurring concurrently, and the isolated analysis of any of these aspects is insufficient to comprehend the phenomenon (Fritsch, Kudic & Pyka, 2019; Hervas-Oliver & Boix-Domenech, 2012; Ter Wal, 2013; Moreira, Clemente & Pereira, 2021; Moreira, Chim-Miki & Oliveira, 2020). Thus, it is convenient to understand that the internal resources of companies help elucidate the dynamics of knowledge, while the available resources within the cluster to local firms contribute to explaining the dynamics of internal resources (Maskell & Malmberg, 1999; Hervas-Oliver & Albors-Garrigós, 2009; McCann & Folta, 2008). Within a specific geographical area, resources and capabilities act as endogenous forces that shape the evolutionary pattern of the local system (Belussi & Sedita, 2009).

The fact that companies are geographically close suggests that the sharing of knowledge resulting from the industrial atmosphere (Marshall, 1920) or local buzz (Bathelt, Malmberg & Maskell, 2004) causes them to come closer to each other, tending to exhibit similarities in resources, cost structure, mental models, and competitive behaviors (Pourder & St John, 1996), while at the same time differing from companies outside this concentration (Bathelt, Malmberg & Maskell, 2004; Molina-Morales & Martinéz-Fernandez, 2004; Moreira, Hervas-Oliver, Moraes & Laurentino, 2019).

Knowledge flows in this environment are dynamic due to multiple interdependencies, with their control being virtually impossible (Tallman et al., 2004). It's worth mentioning here that the competitive analysis of geographically concentrated companies will allow the identification of dynamic capabilities that will sometimes behave as "best practices," understanding that companies in the same sector may present similar processes and routines, which support the benchmarking practices (Eisenhardt & Martin, 2000); and at other times, they may take on idiosyncratic aspects that make them unique (Teece; Pisano & Shuen, 1997; Teece, 2007).

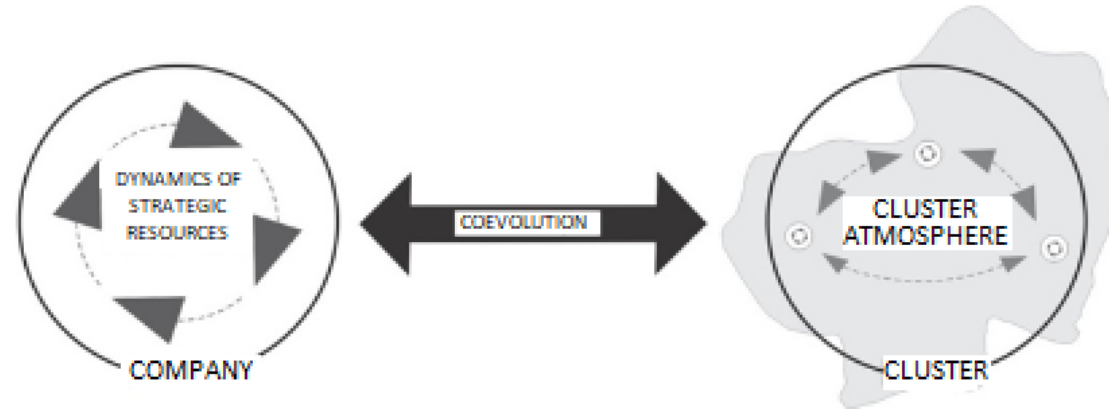

Figure 1. Cluster coevolution and geographically concentrated companies
Source: Prepared by the authors (2023).

In this regard, it is necessary to recognize that the similarities among cluster companies are influenced by different dynamics of internal resources, which ultimately preserve potential differences in the strategic behavior and performance of each company. Moreover, companies located within the same cluster will access available local knowledge in different ways, stemming from varying levels of absorptive capacity, highlighting processes of continuous learning through the combination and accumulation of knowledge (Hervas-Oliver & Albors-Garrigos, 2009; Moreira, Chim-Miki & Oliveira, 2020). Although knowledge is potentially transparent and mobile, not all components move among companies within the same cluster in the same proportion (Tallman et al., 2004), in other words, local knowledge isn't universally "free"; but it is limited by each company's ability to learn and leverage knowledge as an advantage (Hervas-Oliver & Boix-Domenech, 2012; Moreira, Chim-Miki & Oliveira, 2020). Consequently, it is even possible that some companies might not perceive advantages when participating in a certain agglomeration of firms (McCann & Folta, 2008).

3 METHOD

This is a qualitative case study (Merriam, 1998; Patton, 2002), containing a rich description of the studied phenomenon, in which patterns in the data were sought and the development of conceptual categories was undertaken to illustrate, confirm, or counter theoretical assumptions.

Initially, this research aimed to investigate fruit-producing and exporting companies located in the lower São Francisco River, but it became necessary to also consider the cluster level of analysis, based on the understanding that clusters and geographically concentrated companies co-evolve, that is, they are so intricately involved in a dynamic of local networks that selecting only one level as the unit of analysis would make the phenomenon narrow and simplified (Hervas-Oliver & Boix-Domenech, 2012; Ter Wal, 2013).

The selection of companies was initially based on the list of exporting companies made available by the Ministério do Desenvolvimento, Indústria e Comércio Exterior (Ministry of Development, Industry, and Foreign Trade) (MDIC), through the Secretariat of Foreign Trade (Secex), supplemented by the registration of grape and mango exporting companies provided by the Ministério da Agricultura, Pecuária e Abastecimento (Ministry of Agriculture, Livestock, and Supply) (MAPA). From these two lists, a network of contacts was established in order to gain access to the business subjects of the research. In addition to company executives, the understanding that companies and the cluster coevolve brought to light the need to seek access

to a set of cluster actors who had important information on understanding the phenomenon. The following organizations participated in the research:

Company	Export range (MDIC, 2014)	Contacts
Agrobrás – Agrícola Tropical do Brasil	Between US$1 and 10 million	http://www.agrobrassa.com.br/ silviorlmedeiros@uol.com.br
Argofruta Comercial Exportadora	Between US$ 10 and 50 million	www.argofruta.com feitosa@argofruta.com nelio@argofruta.com
COANA – Cooperativa Agrícola Nova Aliança	Between US$1 and 10 million	edi.ken@terra.com.br coana@coanabr.com.br www.coanabr.com.br/principal/ https://www.facebook.com/CoanaBR
CoopexVale – Cooperativa de Produtores e Exportadores do Vale do São Francisco	Between US$1 and 10 million	presidente@coopexvale.com.br coopexvale@uol.com.br www.coopexvale.com.br https://www.facebook.com/Coopexvale
Agropecuária Labrunier / Bravis Comercial Exportadora	Between US$ 10 and 50 million	www.grupojd.com.br flavio@labrunier.com.br
Queiroz Galvão Alimentos S.A.	Between US$ 10 and 50 million	http://portal.queirozgalvao.com/web/grupo/alimentos sergiolima@queirozgalvao.com
Univeg Expofruit Brasil	Between US$ 1 and 10 million	http://www.univeg.com/es/
UPA – Umbuzeiro Produções Agrícolas	Between US$ 10 and 50 million	caiobcoelho@uol.com.br diretoria@grupomavel.com.br
GVS Fruit Company Ltda	Between US$ 1 and 10 million	http://www.gvscompany.com.br/ vdsexport@uol.com.br luizcarlos@vdsexport.com.br claudio@vdsexport.com.br

Figure 2. Identification of the business actors interviewed
Source: Prepared by the authors (2023).

Data collection primarily occurred through semi-structured interviews. Thirteen interviews were conducted with executives from nine medium to large grape and mango exporting companies in the São Francisco Valley, based on the number of employees and the volume of fruits produced and exported; and another nine interviews that were carried out with key institutional and industry actors related to the cluster (support institutions and consultants), resulting in 1,182 minutes of recording. It is estimated, based on the interviews obtained, that the volume produced by the participating companies in this research accounted for over 50% of the total volume exported by the region, according to information available through the registry of grape and mango exporting companies provided by MAPA.

In addition to interviews, an analysis of public and private documents was conducted, and secondary data about the region were considered, particularly master's dissertations and doctoral theses developed within the context under study. Theoretical and methodological triangulation required constant reflexivity from the researchers, with saturation occurring as the constructs became more robust and stable (Merriam, 1998; Flick, Kardorff & Steinke, 2004).

The data analysis, arguably the most critical phase in the development of a qualitative

case study, underscores the need for scientific rigor and analytical depth (Patton, 2002; Flick, Kardorff & Steinke, 2004). In this research, the choice was made to employ content analysis (Bardin, 1977) using the qualitative software ATLAS.ti version 7.5.5, supported by Friese's guide (2012).

The use of ATLAS.ti enabled the systematization of categories and subcategories, illustrated through conceptual networks. The numbering appearing alongside quotations (segments coded in the analysis), for example, QU:31:41 represents the 41st coded segment in P-Doc 31; whereas the Codes (categories) reveal a numbering within brackets, for example, {32-7}, indicating that the code was used 32 times and has 7 links to other codes. Eventually, the sign (~) can be found, signifying the presence of a reflective comment from the participants derived from data analysis.

4 RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS

Organizational capabilities constitute a comprehensive category that help to understand the influence of internal resources on the value creation process of exporting companies in the São Francisco River Valley. These capabilities encompass administrative and management capacities for internationalization, as well as productive, quality, and fruit certification processes, post-harvest processes, among others. The subcategories associated with the central category "Organizational Capabilities" exhibit significant density. Some of them were used 32 times, in addition to presenting an intense index of relationships (links) with other codes (Figure 2).

Considering the study's objective to analyze the dynamics of organizational capabilities of fresh fruit-producing and exporting companies in the São Francisco River Valley, Figure 3 identifies enterprise resources (RE_) as integral components of organizational capabilities, reinforcing the simultaneous development of related cluster resources (Hervas-Oliver et al., 2019; Hervas-Oliver et al., 2018; Hervas-Oliver, Lleo & Cervello, 2017; Belussi and Hervas-Oliver, 2018; Hervas-Oliver & Boix-Domenech, 2012; Ter Wal, 2013). The related cluster resources are: production resources (natural resources; information, scientific, and technological infrastructure; physical and administrative infrastructure); supply resources and support industries (consultant activities); relationship resources with local institutions (support for PIF certification activities and international certifications and protocols); relationship resources at the horizontal level (dissemination of best practices with institutional support).

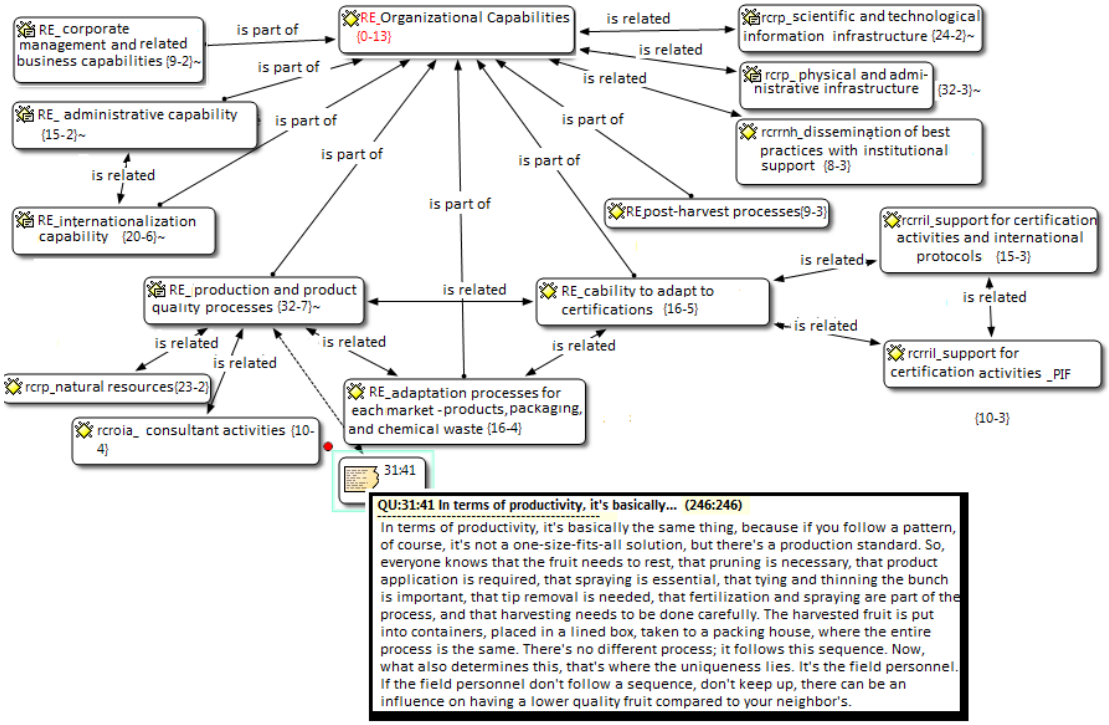

Figure 3. Organizational capabilities of VSF exporting companies.
Source: Prepared by the authors (2023).

Many of the analyzed exporting farms are part of larger business groups, whether these are of related diversification or not, making it possible to observe a significant exchange of resources and scope gains among the different businesses (Wernerfelt, 1984). The visits conducted by the researchers for the development of interviews generally occurred at the companies' headquarters, and, during the period that preceded the conversation with the executives, the researchers were able to observe informal dialogues and movement of individuals that revealed low barriers that define the resources of each company, for example, administrative aspects, often common to the other businesses within the corporate groups.

It was also noticed that it is common for farms to have more than one CNPJ (tax ID), indicating the presence of independent operational administrations. In the case of Company 01, its farms consist of several companies, each with its own manager, a responsible agronomist, but they are all managed under the same corporate office regarding administrative and commercial matters (Company 01_Interviewee2 - 12:9).

Among the researched cooperatives (Company 02 and Company 03), it was observed that the cooperative companies maintain independence in national operations, especially the commercialization stemming from the container market, which is carried out by each individual farm; but that work together in export operations, when they need a larger volume to meet specific demands managed by the cooperatives. Due to the diversity of markets, a pool was established, which serves as an average price of the grape sold to be passed on to producers (Company 02_Interviewee1 - 22:17).

The reports point to a conformity among VSF producers regarding cultural practices, especially concerning table grapes: "[...] it involves pruning, thinning, pinching, dropping, these are steps that must be taken with table grapes" (Company 04_Interviewee2 - 27:10). These routines are, therefore, similar, converging around key attributes (Porter & St. John, 1996) and being much more interchangeable than the theory of competitive advantage suggests

(Eisenhardt & Martin, 2000). This conformity is related to the pursuit of productivity, with an emphasis on disseminating best practices through consultants present in the region and the strong relationships among producers, in addition to the focus on certifications, which are fundamental requirements for export activities (Institution01PE_Interviewee2 - 6:2). Some companies manage to develop distinct techniques, but the cluster's own atmosphere takes care of spreading this knowledge (Bathelt, Malmberg & Maskell, 2004; Tallman et al., 2004), as becomes evident in the following passage:

> [...] we employ a variety of different techniques [for mango and grape exporting], I'm a very curious agronomist, and there are specific aspects of our company that involve techniques we use which other companies don't use initially, but end up copying, because nothing is created and remains solely with it, everything gets copied and disseminated as inspectors, consultants, and input suppliers visit the field, inspect, and eventually [...]. There are no secrets kept, it's very challenging, except for Coca-Cola, right? (Company05_Interviewee1 - 19:22).

The activity of irrigated fruit farming demands a lot of labor, as it is an artisanal job that requires care to ensure fruit quality. In the case of grapes, the routines involve individual cluster harvesting and quickly sending them to the packaging area, avoiding intense dehydration and maintaining postharvest quality. In the packing house, hygiene measures are essential, and the fruit proceeds to sorting, packaging, and arrangement on pallets, then moving on to cooling. After reaching the ideal temperature for each variety, the grapes are placed in cold storage rooms, where they await loading for buyers, intermediaries, and final consumers (Company 01_secondary data - 14:9). The differences between companies might lie in their efficiency in executing these stages, which also involves the intended quality standard.

For some years, the natural conditions of the São Francisco Valley allowed for two harvests per year, one in each semester. This occurred because the rainfall was more punctual and the exploited varieties were resistant. Recently, the occurrence of two annual harvests has decreased, strengthening production in the second semester, within a window that extends from August to November, with particular emphasis on the months of September and October. The development of new varieties has fueled hopes for strengthening production in the first semester (Company01_Interviewee1 - 13:21). Among the most common grape varieties that allow for two annual harvests, the Crimson (seedless) and the Italia (seeded) stand out. This last variety is generally intended for the national market, has low added value, requires smaller investments and allows for higher production volumes.

Internally, certain companies stand out due to the control mechanisms they have developed, which enable management with more information and productivity. Among the collected data, it's worth highlighting the internal procedures adopted by Company 06, a methodology developed by the technical consultant who is also a partner of one of the cooperative's farms:

> We have an internal quality control department at Coana, precisely with the mission of standardizing the criteria, so that there are no distortions. Everything is documented, the technical specifications of that standard, such as sugar content, acidity, berry diameter, bunch weight, shape, how many berries can have defects or scars, for instance, the percentage that is not allowed, type of packaging, how many additional kilograms need to be present due to grape dehydration during the transportation period. So, all these technical parameters are defined beforehand and made known to the producer. Thus, they adhere to these standards (Company 06_Interviewee1 - 22:19).

The peculiarity in the internal control processes of Coana is related to the Japanese culture of its owners, who ensure a commitment to a higher quality standard for the grapes they produce in the export standard, but are also related to the fact that one of the partners has technical knowledge in grape production, recognized among the prominent producers in the region for their developed technical consulting work. These capabilities have strong connections with value creation (Barney, 1991; Teece; Pisano & Shuen, 1997) and are partially replicated by other companies that receive technical support (Eisenhardt & Martin, 2000).

In addition to internal controls, companies undergo certifications that aim to establish fruit quality standards and enable access to specific buyer markets (Company 05_Interviewee2 - 20:12). These certifications, besides ensuring fruit quality, are often related to social and environmental aspects involved in the production process. The attainment of certifications by companies in the São Francisco Valley is associated with the support provided by local institutions.

Here, the understanding is that companies have internal departments that strongly focus on meeting the basic requirements of each certification, "[...] because if we don't have a department in the company that focuses on the requirements of each country, you end up sending the fruit outside the required residue limits and the fruit will be incinerated or directed to another market" (Company 05_Interviewee1 - 19:18). Each market has its own residue limits, prohibiting or accepting specific products. In the case of the European market, these limits can vary according to supermarket chains, with the German market being one of the most demanding (Company 04_Interviewee2 - 27:20).

Finally, and in line with Dunning and Lundan (2010), the production and post-harvest processes and routines of fruits intended for the international market are strongly guided by the requirements of the certificates demanded by the targeted markets, emerging here the dynamic capabilities, aiming to align their assets with the emerging capabilities of the locality.

5 FINAL CONSIDERATIONS

This research has successfully achieved its goal of analyzing the dynamics of organizational capabilities within fresh fruit-producing and exporting companies in the São Francisco River Valley (SFV), specifically identifying the capabilities present in the investigated organizations. Advances in the literature about dynamic capabilities allowed recognizing the existence of central divergences between the most cited authors in the area, and the possibility of a reconciliatory path, which is supported by the results of this study. Acknowledging that dynamic capabilities sometimes behave as best practices and at other times take on idiosyncratic aspects has allowed for a closer understanding of value creation by companies geographically concentrated in the São Francisco River Valley.

The results reinforce the importance of understanding the dynamics of business resources associated with the cluster, leading to the conclusion that using a singular unit of analysis would diminish the comprehension of the phenomenon. Business resources and cluster resources were reinforced and complemented in the studied reality of geographically concentrated companies, with the amalgamation of strategic resources and the absorptive capacity of each company serving as the guidepost for performance heterogeneity.

It was observed that the production elements among companies are oriented towards conformities through the basic requirements of the international market, which impose a minimum standard of quality to be pursued. Practices conforming to this standard are widely shared among producers due to the dependence on production volumes for the commercial

sector. Many of these shared actions result from the work of technical consultants, who act as catalysts for knowledge flows, playing a key role in the development of the studied agricultural cluster.

Studies on asymmetries in the absorptive capacity of companies within geographically concentrated environments should be encouraged, along with an understanding of the dynamics in knowledge flows that circulate within these environments, balancing between cooperation and competition. This work is of interest to regional development agencies, corporate managers, and academics from various fields of knowledge. The dissemination of the presented results reinforces the need for a systemic approach to the development of companies and the region. Further studies could involve analyzing each company's absorptive capacity in relation to cluster resources (local buzz) and gaining insights into the asymmetries.

Lastly, it is important to highlight that the primary limitation of this study is the restricted access to most companies in the region, along with the inability to generalize the results.

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