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Family Farming, Government and Corporations: A case study about the challenges of rural social enterprises innovations in Brazil

Abstract

This article scrutinises the challenges of adopting sustainable management models in family farming in Brazil. The study is based on the analysis of , of the Ecovida Network experience, a network of hundreds of family farmers in the South Region of Brazil. Researchers generally agree that contemporary agricultural activities are characterised by large agribusiness corporations that are capital-intensive,. However there are concerns about their environmental and social impact. In contrast to this model of agricultural modernization, it appears a new way of of family farming, based on small units of production in different communities ie emerging, that promotes a better way of ensuring a more equitable distribution of income among communities. These family farming initiatives have tried to convert their business models to operate in a more sustainable basis, and the agroecology paradigm appears as an important framework for the promotion of sustainable development in family farming. We conducted a qualitative study using semi-structured interviews with representatives and participants of Ecovida Network and the Brazilian government. The results indicate that many advances have been made by family farmers in Brazil, but the market opportunities opened up by the creation of public policies based on agroecology production by family farmers bring new challenges for the small farmers. The main challenges are to maintain the principles of solidarity and collaborative work and expanding support of civil society organizations and government to allow better access to technology, credit and markets for family farmers.

Key-words: Family Farming; Social Enterprises; Brazilian Farming; Cross-Sector Interactions.

1. Introduction

Many of the issues related to family farming are being debated and discussed in the contemporary societies, but the debate acquires new significance with the incursion of the environmental impact of transnational corporations in the agriculture. The discourse relates specifically to the food safety and the rights of local communities and the evaluation of public policies of the governments aimed at creating conducive environments and processes for sustainable development.

This study addresses family farming, and considers that the initiatives undertaken face challenges associated with acquiring seeds and raw materials produced by transnational

corporations, gaining access to technological developments and capital for investments. In Brazil, several factors influence this picture, involving a number of different interests of corporations. In the rural sector, some of the measures applied as an incentive to production include intensive agricultural mechanization with a higher use of fertilizers and pesticides, seeds selected in order to generate more productive and precocious plants and the planting of two annual harvests in some types of produce.

Political issues related to governmental investments for rural development and land property problems, as well as the relationship of the state with the organized social movements in rural areas and the presence of international corporations in this field, set the context and create challenges for the development of alternatives for family farming. Family farming in Brazil has undergone a paradigm shift and a new configuration, which intersects with environmental aspects and with the issue of food safety, generating challenges. In midst of these changes, the business model of family farming and decisions on rural development start to involve possible intersections with agribusiness, tourism and with the adoption of other forms of thinking about production, such as agroecology, for instance. Considered a process which includes changes in the social and cultural dimension, besides in production itself, the incorporation of agroecology in the debate on the agrarian issue in Brazil places in evidence an opposition to the proposals of agricultural modernization based only on technological advances created by transnational corporations, opening space within the political agenda for practices aimed at reconstituting rural labor and natural resources in the local communities.

Starting from these issues this work aims to identify the conditions for family farming that allow this type of activity to allow for a fair inclusion of small and poor farmers in the markets. In pursuance of this, this work analyses the case of the Rede de Agroecologia Ecolife (Ecolife Agroecological Network) as an example of an

organizationinvolved in supporting family farming and , analyzing its work configuration and the experiences and practices of the farmers, who have turned to organic production.

Ecovida is a Brazilian network which works with national and international institutions, private companies and the public sector and includes around one hundred and seventy municipalities, two hundred and two agricultural groups, twenty NGOs and ten consumer cooperatives which focus on responsible consumerism. It was formed by family farmers, organized in small local groups in Brazil. Non-governmental organizations serve as intermediaries, carrying out, amongst other functions, the link with public institutions and international entities which give financial support. The Network covers some 170 Brazilian municipalities within these states and 200 farming groups, 30 support organizations and approximately 2.400 families.

2. Theoretical Background

2.1 - A Conceptual Outline of Family Farming

In seeking to set out a conceptual outline of family farming, we find a number of different lines of thought, amongst which two stand out: that which considers modern family farming to be a new category, generated by the transformations experimented by capitalist societies; and that which defends the position that Brazilian family farming is an evolving concept, with significant historical roots (ALTAFIN, 2010).

The second school of thought is associated with the work of h Altafin (2010), who argues that the transformations undergone by the modern family farmer does not represent a definitive difference with previous forms, but, on the contrary, maintain a countryside tradition that strengthens the capacity for adapting to the new demands of society. This resonates with the work of Lamarche (1998) and Wanderley (1999) who stress that family

farming is a generic concept, incorporating multiple specific situations, with peasantry as one of these particular forms.

In the Brazilian case, Wanderley's (1999) view of a the modern family farmer, is shown below,

[...] still retains many of his peasant characteristics, both because he must still face the old issues, which were never resolved, as well as because, in a fragile state, within the conditions of Brazilian modernization, he must still count on, in most cases, his own strength (WANDERLEY, 1999:52).

The expression "family farming" still involves distinct viewpoints.. For this it becomes crucial to understand the different groups that integrate this category.

The flawed census relative to a strongly heterogeneous group of rural producers, named family farmers, was given a hurried interpretation and brought about a dispute which gains absurd proportions, inside and outside government. And it should be viewed with concern as it incites an imaginary and dualist division of the farmers, distorting data and assuming as equal very different forms of farming, which vary between those rural families who produce solely for their own use and the more efficient and technical properties, which today are in the majority, and which act in a commercial manner. With radically different economic aims, the only thing they all have in common is family management (STEPHANES, 2010).

The central concept which interprets these differences is that of the sociability of market economy, a social process which gradually transforms the families who produce for

their own sustainance, into entrepreneurs,who seek to achieve profits and economic sustainability.

The creation of an alternative model of agricultural development that encourages ecological, sustainable and socially just forms of farming is one of the immediate challenges of our generation. This is a proposal which demands a rethinking of models of development which harmonize the generation of wealth with other aims, which include environmental conservation. The issue, however, is not so simple, and presents a complexity inherent to the multiple interests at play. It involves the changing of patterns set by projects for the generation of wealth in the agricultural sphere, such as those disseminated by the model of “agricultural modernization”. (BORGES, 2009).

The model of “agricultural modernization” refers to the most intensive process of capitalist development in the rural sphere (WIJNANDS, VAN DER MEULEN and POPPE, 2006). The transformations which were pertinent to this pattern of economic growth in the rural sphere were strongly accelerated by the Brazilian State. This was achieved through a series of public sector policies and specific toolsof intervention e.g (credit, agricultural insurance, technical assistance, public research, investments in infrastructure, subsidized fuel prices), which had as their main objective to adjust the structure of national agricultural production to the economic growth planned by the government. Among the social effects of agricultural modernization in Brazil were: the reduction in the creation of farming jobs and the consequent rural exodus, a rising number of temporary jobs, an intensified rural poverty and a rise in land concentration in the country, among others (BEDUSCHI FILHO AND ABRAMOVAY, 2004).

The 1990s saw a diminished role of the Brazilian State “in regulating countryside competition (POCHMANN, 2008:149). As a consequence of this process, a diffusion of new management methods took place, geared towards parameters of competition, higher

mechanization and use of chemical products developed by national and transnational corporations of agribusiness field. Investments took place with international capital and agribusiness intensified, with a rise in productivity at the expense of jobs in the rural sphere.

2.2 - The Brazilian Government Policies for the Family Farming

An important change for the social recognition of family farming took place with the approval of Brazilian Law 11.326/2006, which defines Family Agriculture and the Family Rural Enterprises as an economic category. This law defined two crucial issues which could lead to high impact ramifications for Brazilian family farming: the concept of family farming and the redefinition of the foundations for a national family farming policy.

Thus, family farming includes those who work with agricultural or livestock farming and that, simultaneously, answer to the following criteria: have in the establishment (owned, rented, in partnership, loaned or used) an area of no more than four fiscal modules; use predominantly family labor in the economic activities of the enterprise; have a family income which originates from economic activities linked to the establishment itself and managerial activities carried out by family members. (DESER, 2006a). Another point that stands out is the clear distinction of the owner sector, of agribusiness and of rural employees and the non-restriction of agricultural and livestock farming activities, broadening the sphere to take in work in rural family businesses, such as agroindustrialization, craft work and rural tourism (DESER, 2006b).

These measures do not affect the importance of activities strictly linked to farming itself, on the contrary, the attention to the productive process of these activities is crucial, seeing as the sector answers, according to data from January/2009, for the production of 70% of food consumed by Brazilians and, at the same time, presents precarious living and work conditions in the rural sphere (MDA,2011).

In 2003, the creation of the Department of Family Agriculture, within the sphere of the Ministry for Agricultural Development, to focus on small rural properties, brought advances for the development of family-based agriculture. This department aimed to create tools capable of reorienting the productive practices and the styles of agriculture, cattle farming, fishing and aqua farming currently dominant. It also set as an objective the introduction of strategies which would lead to styles of development oriented towards the construction of productive processes which would be environmentally sustainable, economically profitable, socially inclusive, equitable and culturally acceptable (MDA, 2009).

The Department created the "National Program for the Support of Ecologically Based Agriculture within Family Production Units". According to Pochmann (2008), besides these measures, three public policies had a positive effect on raising income in rural areas. These are: changes in agrarian reform policies, including measures for reaching higher levels of efficacy and efficiency in development projects; the creation of specific credit lines within the National Program for the Strengthening of Family Agriculture (PRONAF) "which gained importance in the second half of the 1990's" and, lastly, "the programs for rural retirement and income guarantees for destitute families, such as the Continued Benefit Installment and the Bolsa Família, or Family Fund". Among the noted results, the most important is the reduction of the degree of absolute poverty. However, in the Brazilian rural sphere "almost 44% of families live in conditions of extreme poverty" (POCHMANN, 2008:156-157).

Family farming in Brazil has been undergoing a new configuration, which intersects with environmental aspects and with the issue of food safety, generating challenges for family farming operations. The approval of the Organic Law for Food Safety and Nutrition – LOSAN, issued by the Federal Government in 2006, defined the aim of promoting everyone's right to food, contemplating principals such as universality, equality, sustainability, social participation, decentralization and inter-sector aspects.

Another example of public policy which has shown good results is the Food Acquisition Program (PAA), one of the alternatives by which the family farmer can take part in the institutional commercialization market. The Program was created in 2003 under the National Supply Company (Conab) of the Ministry for Agricultural Development and establishes the acquisition of food produced by family farmers to provide those served by social programs of the Federal Government.

In midst of these changes, the business model of family farming and decisions on rural development start to involve possible intersections with agribusiness, tourism and with the adoption of other forms of thinking about production, such as agroecology, for instance. Considered a process which includes changes in the social and cultural dimension, besides in production itself, the incorporation of agroecology in the debate on the agrarian issue in Brazil places in evidence an opposition to the proposals of agricultural modernization based only on technological advances, opening space within the political and scientific agenda for practices aimed at reconstituting rural labor and natural resources. The opportunities in this field connect the debates on alternative forms of production which, in the 1990's, gained strength with the search for new perspectives for generating income in face of the structural lack of jobs occurring due to the restructuring of capitalism.

It can be noted that family farming in Brazil has been acquiring a new configuration, beginning to lose its image as a subsistence activity and even be seen as integrating the sphere of agribusiness (AGRICULTURA, 2010). Leaving increasingly behind its subsistence-activity image to integrate agribusiness, it gains associative, community and cooperative characteristics, organized in a network.

2. 3- New Productive Spaces for the Family Farming

A significant fact is the change in the composition of jobs, which took place from the end of the 1980's, with the growth of "the participation of dwellers in rural areas who carry out non-agricultural activities" (POCHMANN, 2008:154). This change signals a profile which tends to acquire the agricultural production aimed at specific and segmented markets and a new perception of the rural sphere by society, less and less as a strictly productive space. Its functions as environmental preservation, as creating a space favorable to leisure, as a means of contact with nature and as offering a different lifestyle to that characteristic of cities are more and more valued. As Abramovay affirms (2008:10) "there is no technical reason, in theory, to push away family farmers from the immense potential represented by quality markets and by the new functions – environmental preservation and leisure - that rural areas fulfill for society".

Key components in the development of family farming in Brazil, are the actions of the civil society and public powers .. Even in the most developed regions of the country, dependence on paid agricultural labor is systematically synonymous with bad living conditions. The difference between economic growth and development can be seen in access to land, to credit, to organization, to information, in short, the formation of social capital makes it possible for individuals to benefit, in the local sphere, from the economic results of the process in which they are direct protagonists, as modest as those results may be (ABRAMOVAY,2008).

Nowadays, a lot of initiatives and struggles of environmental and social movements try to create alternative models of development in the rural areas, highlighting the importance of small producers and local communities in a search of a real modernization process of agricultural production based in the social and environmental justice. Besides the broader participation of social actors as part of economic development projects in the rural sphere, it is necessary to discuss agroecological production and organic produce, which represent a

relevant intersection between recent environmental demands and the social recognition of family farming. Organic production is one of the denominations which make up the so-called sustainable agriculture movement, including natural, biodynamic and biological agriculture as well as, recently, agroecology.

2. 4- Family Farming and the Agroecology as Way to the Sustainable Development

Besides the broader participation of social actors as part of economic development projects in the rural sphere, it is necessary to discuss agroecological production and organic produce, which represent a relevant intersection between recent environmental demands and the social recognition of family farming. Organic production is one of the denominations which make up the so-called sustainable agriculture movement, including natural, biodynamic and biological agriculture as well as, recently, agroecology. The term organic agriculture initially acquired a broader status when, in 1972, IFOAM (International Federation of Organic Agriculture Movements) was created, a non governmental organization created and located in France, with established standards published in Basic Standards for Organic Production and Processing, which although private are accepted by the world-wide organic movement. (IPARDES, 2007:38).

The term “organic product”, however, has also been used by large-scale producers as a type of production which does not include the social and cultural dimensions proposed by the agroecological vision, including these pesticides and chemical products in general, such as hydroponics. The market, which shows promise for family farming, has generated dispute in political spheres, broadening the debate to take in other issues, such as product reliability, thus creating new regulations for commerce and market access. The definition of organic product in Brazil is regulated by law 10.831/03 of the Federal Government, which states the non-utilization of pesticides or chemical additives, according to prescribed dosage.

The terms Organic Agriculture and Ecological Agriculture are generally used as synonyms. However, there is a growing perception that uses “organic” as an adjective for the kind of agriculture that aims to produce “clean” food for a differentiated market, and “ecological” to describe a form of agricultural work which seeks to re-dimension the relationship between humans and nature and with each other, built on harmony and solidarity, and which sees the differentiated market as a consequence and not an end in itself.

The change to the agroecological system includes a scientific status which has also been substituting links of religious origins, historically present in the organization of rural workers, for a more technical viewpoint. Agroecological know-how and its application in production mean not only the substitution of forms of planting, but also a new style in the treatment of land, animals, in soil use and in the conservation of the environment, requiring, therefore, training and dissemination. According to the definition of the National Agroecological Articulation (ANA), an association which represents nationally farmers who adopt these practices, agroecology is an “innovative process based on optimization of the use of local resources in the construction of technical and social-organizational solutions in order to promote the economic efficiency and the ecological sustainability of agroecosystems” (ANA, 2009).

For Altieri (2004:18), agroecology is a new “approach that integrates the agronomic, ecological and socioeconomic principles with the comprehension and evaluation of the effect of technologies on agricultural systems and society as a whole”. One can state that agroecology is in a field of social struggles, presented as an opposition to agribusiness because the agroecological systems are not dependent on raw material industries, the income generated by production is retained by the communities and municipalities, besides that these are systems based on natural processes and, thus, help conserve the environment and biodiversity.

In the academic sphere, debates on the agrarian issue in Brazil, and especially on the incorporation of agroecology in this theme, show an opposition to the theoretical views of “agricultural modernization” and open up “a broad political and scientific agenda”, which has been resulting in processes of social, political, technological and environmental contestation and translates to a “heterogeneous group of practices aimed at reconstituting rural labor and natural resources” (NORDER, 2006:117). Norder points out that the theories of modernization “are based on the concept of the ‘integration’ or ‘submission’ of the rural world and its actors within the global structure of capitalism, [...] obscuring thus the nature and potential of individuals and /or collective strategies and answers.” (NORDER, 2006:108). The conceptual universe that treats “the know-how of the rural world as an obstacle” has unfolded in political actions which are present even within social movements. MST itself, up to 1986, published information in its manuals and organized training sessions which sought out mechanisms to ‘fight the habits generated by artisanal forms of labor’. These models were based on the development of collective forms which focused on an intensification of capital and a reduction of labor, which was precisely contrary to the reality of the settlements (NORDER, 2006:108-110).

One of the notions defended by the social movements linked to family farming is the creation of mechanisms and programs by the government to generate confidence so that the farmers feel it is worthwhile investing their meager resources in this type of production, abandoning the generalized practices of use of chemical products. For Abramovay (2008:08), “the construction of new markets”, both for the products that have so far been predominant, and for, above all, activities which have only just begun to be developed, is “the most important challenge in rural development. This construction will not result from the spontaneous action of private agents, but from the organization of the producers backed in a decisive manner by the social movements and by the government”.

The attempts to promote access to credit for the poor segment of the population has, however, been coming up against basic obstacles. In the case of PRONAF, when there is risk for the banking system and for the agricultural segment, selection criteria tend to eliminate those farmers incapable of offering guarantees, even if they can present economically viable projects. For Abramovay (2008:08), “the solution to this problem is not in the creation of a state-run credit system, marginal to the banking system and which suppresses the very notion of risk, but in the social organization which could pressure the banking system to the point that it concedes credit, such as favoring the emergence of collective forms of risk reduction such as guarantor funds or loan guarantees based on solidarity systems.” The author cited the example of the credit cooperatives, which have grown in the country, as an important means of balancing out the costs of banking transactions by local organizations.

The field of agroecological production characterizes, in this sense, refers to a specific market, in process of being formed and institutionalized in Brazil. With a strong environmental appeal and a growing social value, this perspective connects to national and international markets and has also caught the interest of great rural producers and transnational corporations. The opening up of new markets, the expectation of obtaining chances for exports and the certification and reliability of organic produce represents a challenge for the family farming way of organized the social life and the agricultural production and deserves to be analyzed as we aim in this paper.

3. Methodological Procedures

This study utilized a qualitative case study approach to collecting data and was carried out in 2008 and 2009. The case which was a focus of this study was the Rede Ecológica de Agroecologia, the Ecolife Agroecological Network, which encompasses twenty four centers in cities in Brazil's southern region. Two of the Network's centers were selected to carry out an

in-depth investigation. In this manner the research sought a longer permanence in the locations, with a higher comprehension of the farmers' surroundings, observing how the groups worked and the relations between farmers and the technicians from support organizations.

Our participation at the 6th National Encounter of the Ecovida Network assisted us in collecting t primary data. This was supported by relevant secondary and archival data. The field research and the in-depth key informant qualitative interviews were undertaken at the the following centers: Planalto Serrano (in the mountains) and Litoral Catarinense (on the coast), both in the state of Santa Catarina. These were chosen as they permitted comparison between several variables which distinguish them, allowing contact with two distinct realities, but within a same context of state public policies, which sets some influences and perspectives of development on an equal footing. Twenty one key informant interviews were carried out with eight farming families, affiliated with the network, and with other agents involved with the two centers chosen, besides network leaders.

With regards to the farmers the following points were used to structure the semi-structured interviews: motivations for the permanence or departure of farmers from the Ecovida Network and which factors influenced these processes; the existence or not of changes in daily social practices and in participation for the solution of local issues; problems, disagreements and conflicts noted and the farmers' position in relation to these.

With regards to the agents the study sought to to investigate the social practices that were inherent and promoted through the work of the Ecovida network, the organizational structure, decision-making spaces, the relation with social movements and network representation in public management forums. Macro-social issues were also raised, which could influence the interests and the participation of the farmers, and interviews carried out with representatives from the Municipal Department of Industry, Commerce and Tourism of

Urubici and Garopaba, the central municipalities in the two researched areas. With these it was possible to verify integrated actions of “environmental tourism” with local agroecological producers.

4. Findings

Ecovida emerged in 1998 as a result of historical local interventions carried out by non governmental organizations in the construction of an alternative to the agricultural model in use. It is made up of twenty four regional centers which include associations and cooperatives for commercialization. Ecovida’s actions are centered on the production and the commercialization of agroecological products, a term which adds to the organic product the ideals of social equality, solidarity, associativism, cultural value, autonomy of local communities, respect to ecosystems, among others, without being restricted simply to technical-productive aspects. Their key goals are:

Develop and multiply the agroecological initiatives; stimulate associative work in the production and consumption of ecological products; articulate and make available information between organizations and people; bring together, in solidarity, farmers and consumers; stimulate the exchange, the recovery and the value of popular know-how; and have a brand and a seal which express the process, the commitment and the quality (ECOVIDA, 2008).

Ecovida is made up of twenty four regional centers which include associations and cooperatives for commercialization, in the states of Santa Catarina, Paraná and Rio Grande do Sul. Ecovida’s actions are centered on the production and the commercialization of agroecological products, a term which adds to the organic product the ideals of social

equality, solidarity, associativism, cultural value, autonomy of local communities, respect to ecosystems, among others, without being restricted simply to technical-productive aspects.

The system of participative certification developed by the Ecovida is based on the involvement of the farmers in the process. One of the aims of this proposal is to guarantee the product's quality, from production to consumption, instead of focusing only on the final product. It was possible to detect at one of the researched centers, the Litoral Catarinense center, the use of certificates and the seal of approval as symbolic of belonging to the network, handed over with public recognition rituals. It can be observed that, for the farmers from this center, the significance of the certification and seal is not solely that of the condition for the sale of the product, but of the consolidation of changes they propose to make, when taking part in agroecology. They show pride in the effort to participate, to adopt conventional and accepted agroecological practices that allow them to certify their products. The scenario however was in direct contrast to the Planalto Serrano center, which makes no effort to make the certification and seal as symbolic for the development of identification with the network, placing more emphasis instead on their importance for commercialization.

The results clearly show that the certification of organic produce began to be a matter of interest to the state, initially due to the broadening of the market for this kind of product and later due to the need to guarantee credibility for exports. For the farmers, the theme also gained notoriety due to the perspective of trading in new retail spaces besides through direct sale, at street fairs and local markets. In the last years, the concept of certification itself has changed, and for now includes the idea of conformity with predicted standards, but not in a totally closed manner, suggesting continuous work directed towards guaranteeing the quality of products so as to maintain competitiveness.

To better understand this, it is necessary to clarify that currently two types of guarantee systems are applied: third party and participative certification. "The third party

guarantee system is certification by external audit [...] This third party is represented by certifying organizations that, with basis on an external inspection of the properties and on lab analyses, verify if production conforms to the set standards and testify quality by certification” (IPARDES, 2007:49). This distinction is summarized in figure 1.

Components of the Quality Guarantee System	Guarantee by Solidarity	Third Party Guarantee
Standards Verification methods - Inspection - Registers - Documentation Certifying organization - Functions are certification and technical advisory - Certification decisions - Technician Form of communicating quality	Construction under periodical revision process - No internal inspector - Carried out in a systematic manner - Decentralized - Integrated - Decentralized - Resident within the community Seal, reputation of producer and of technical advisors and influence from social evaluation components	Construction under periodical revision process - Existence of internal inspector - Carried out in a systematic manner - Decentralized - Separated - Centralized - External Seal, reputation of producer and certifying organization

Figure 1 – **Quality guarantee systems**

Source: IPARDES, 2007.

Certification and the guarantee seal add differentiation to the organic product and help gain access to certain markets, outside street fairs and the immediacy of the community of origin. Thus, they become key points in creating perspectives and for the farmer’s perception that it is worth adhering to this type of production. Together with the perspective of a broader market, it can be noted that legitimization of the product as ecological surpasses rational use and reaches a symbolic significance, representing the social concretization of a group which gains new value.

It was verified that the innovation of the process for certification and for obtaining the agroecological product seal relates mainly to the form in which it is developed by Ecovida, by promoting decentralized decision-making, giving the regional centers the responsibility for the process. The existence of an Ethics Council formed by the farmers themselves to visit, analyze and write approval or non approval reports for use of the seal generates conflicts and the need for assuming a position towards their peers. This aspect allows an effective participation, such as in the discussion of parameters for the inspection format, and brings the farmers new perceptions on power.. There is also a sense of responsibility which continues after inspection, as suggestions are given for the improvement of the productive process or for processing and, annually, monitoring visits are also carried out after certification.

The Ethics Council of xxx analyzes previously the certification papers and after the visit writes a report which can be of approval for the use of the seal or may contain suggestions for improvements throughout the productive or post-productive process. The following registers are required after certification: a report from each of the members of the Ethics Council who took part in the visit and a joint report from the Ethics Council, authorizing use of the seal (ECOVIDA, 2008). Annually, post-certification monitoring visits are also planned. During these monitoring visits, the Ethics Council must be presented the planning or conversion plan by the group or family, as an instrument of evaluation for continued use of the seal.

Another aspect which mobilizes network participation, within the same theme, is the need for greater intercession with the government and certifying companies, within the growing importance of organic agriculture in the country. The theme has been debated at deliberative events such as the national and regional encounters, and appears as an obligatory item on the agenda, unifying the network's identity through the value of creating more commercialization spaces. The discussion is based on the application of current federal

regulations for certification and use of the seal, which demands a form of institutionalization which finds different viewpoints within the network. Regulations were recently defined by a group set up by the Federal Government, in which Ecovida took part, creating rules both for the participative and third party systems. The necessary formalities for recognition of the seal generated a revision of the practices and of the centralization or decentralization of document emission, legitimizing the product as organic. In the practice adopted until now to gain certification, the Ecovida Participative Certification Association has juridical responsibility. This association answers for certification of agroecological produce, and its field of action covers the three states that take part in Ecovida.

One problem with the validity of the current certification and seal conceded by the Network is recognition by official organs – national and international -, affecting exports and Ecovida itself, because being regulated by law is an advance and a result of old struggles within the agroecological movement. However, the form in which this regulation process has begun to set out terms for certifying agencies could represent bureaucratic problems for Ecovida's manner of operating. In this sense, Serva and Andion (2004), in a study on collective certification processes in Brazil, reaffirm that “certification becomes a means and not an end [...] and creates opportunities for generating and disseminating knowledge, of exchanging experiences between producers, besides perfecting their capacity for leading an enterprise forwards by means of democratic practices” (SERVA and ANDION, 2004:08).

Commercialization is one of the key challenges for Ecovida, requiring, just as with the certification process, the involvement of the farmers, as joint participation is crucial in order to plan production collectively, since the small producers cannot supply the necessary quantities on their own. The challenges surrounding commercialization include, on one hand, guarantees for delivering the farmers' produce, and on the other, maintaining local retail points supplied with diversity, quantity and quality throughout the year. Among the group of

farmers researched, some of the gains obtained through participation in Ecovida have been wider opportunities for product outlets, guaranteeing delivery with the necessary care for durability and the commitment in relation to payment for sales. The farmers also report the creation of new forms of commercialization and the improvement of other channels already in use as achievements which several of those interviewed feel responsible for. At the two researched centers, trade takes place more commonly through street fairs and local markets.

At the two researched centers, trade takes place more commonly through street fairs and local markets, by means of programs sponsored by the Federal Government and through cooperatives. At the Planalto Serrano center, the proximity of the Ecoserra cooperative helps commercialization, taking into account the distances and the lack of appropriate vehicles for product transportation.

Another aspect which has involved several farmers and appears on the agenda at regional encounters, with a specific task force that meets on a monthly basis, is the creation of a new channel for trade, by means of trucking routes, named the “Southern circuit for food circulation of the Rede de Agroecologia Ecovida”. The proposal seeks to solve logistics issues affecting producers in the Urubici, Três Barras, Paulo Lopes and Garopaba areas, among the studied groups. The circuit has already been divided up into three routes which link ten Ecovida Network centers: Erechim–Curitiba: with an extension of 1,130 km and involving 200 farming families; Lages–Curitiba–São Paulo: with an extension of 2,100 km and involving 280 families, and Barra do Turvo–Curitiba: with an extension of 300 km and involving 80 families. There are also sub-routes that involve approximately 150 families (MAGNANTI, 2008).

This system forges stronger connections between the farmers, as the set up asks that families, by means of their associations and groups, also commit to purchasing products from other organizations in the circuit. This procedure is aimed at “the exchange of products

among regional centers, and the widening of the diversity of merchandise offered at different local markets: street fairs, agricultural families who are members of the Ecovida Network, institutional markets, among others”. The system also favors the reduction of transportation costs, as the trucks always travel loaded between stops. The mechanism of buying and selling between stops also allows for less monetary circulation, since in many cases merchandise is simply exchanged. Monetary resources are used in these situations simply to cover eventual differences of value in the transactions.

Some recently initiated projects within the researched groups have been mobilizing the families in a significant manner. Among these is a form of ‘ecological agrotourism’, named *Acolhida na Colônia*, originally idealized by the *Accueil Paysan* network (working farm vacations, active in France since 1987) which has as its proposal to bring value to countryside living. In Brazil, this exists since 1998. In Santa Catarina, the Planalto Serrano center of Ecovida was the first to join the project, which seeks to let the tourist relate to the families in their daily life. Prices are lower than those in ‘rural tourism’, which generally uses large farms. Within the ecological agrotourism modality, the proposal is to receive the tourist in modest surroundings, with the right to time spent chatting by the wood-burning stove and countryside walks.

The mayor of the city of Urubici initiated the project in the region, as part of a plan for encouraging local tourism, since together with the city of São Joaquim the area is a destination known for its natural beauty and for snow. Through the Department of Tourism, the mayor has been trying to invest in a form of tourism which integrates the region’s natural beauty with agroecological production.

Another project under development, also in the mountain region, is the planned extraction of forest products. Linked to the Slow Food Foundation, the Renascer group will be the first in a pilot project, named *Fortaleza do Pinhão de Santa Catarina*, which can be

replicated in other communities of the Santa Catarina range. Slow Food is a non profitable international association founded in 1989 as an answer to the standardizing effects of fast food; the frenetic rhythm of present-day life; the disappearance of regional culinary traditions; the decreasing interest of people towards their food, the origin and flavor of food products and in how our dietary choices may affect the world (Slow Food, 2010).

Work began in 2008 with the processing of pine nuts from the Paraná pine, and aims to collaborate with defense of the traditional ecosystem by means of campaigns to raise public awareness, in order to strengthen and qualify consumption of the pine nut and demonstrate the importance of preserving the forests of Araucária, the Paraná pine. The Slow Food Foundation will support the group's producers at a processing unit and in the production of traditional pine nut-based products to promote in local and national markets. Another possibility is to explore non-wood forest products (PFNM), a growing extractivist activity in the market, which, when well managed, causes less devastating impact and damage to the forest when compared to other activities, such as farming, mining, logging, unorganized civil construction and touristic practices without environmental direction. Ecovida associates have the opportunity to develop this type of sustainable exploitation.

Another productive space recently explored by this center is an agroindustry for the production of baked goods and fruit preserves. Houses which contains the bakery was completely refurbished, with an industrial kitchen and dining area where tourists, besides purchasing baked goods, can eat snacks.

On the Santa Catarina coast, a project which is showing innovating productive spaces is hand weaving in the Três Barras group. This involves the women, trained through courses to make tablecloths, bedspreads, blouses and other products. With financial support from a French company, they bought equipment and organized trips to get to know other similar

projects. The women involved are already obtaining good results in terms of product quality, but have not yet found satisfactory sales outlets.

Also relevant are new experiments in credit and financing which may represent a future innovation once they are incorporated in a broader fashion by the centers of the Rede Ecovida. Several aspects relating to financing of production and problems with banking, production and local community issues were also mentioned in the interviews.

5. Final Remarks

Based on the analysis of the Rede Ecovida case, it was verified that the experiences and practices of the family farmers that opted to join organic production, organized through the network, have been favorable for an ordered growth, encouraging social innovation to create more fair processes of social and environmental sustainable development .

The main foundations for growth and for the success of innovative practices in the network are: Cooperation, which relates to the active participation of the farmers as network members, evoking a “collaborative” relationship within a new organizational model; following environmental protection regulations and the guidelines for organic production as part of the identity of the Rede Ecovida; the belief in and development of environmental education and of an ecological awareness; the system of participative certification, developed by the Rede Ecovida, based on the involvement of the farmers in the process, placing responsibility and generating empowerment; the commitment and confidence in a network organization, honoring agreements and meeting collectively accepted deadlines; the security obtained by broadening commercialization channels and the commitment in relation to payments for sales; the trucking route-based commercialization channel – Southern circuit for food circulation; the interaction between network participants, with strong connections; and the search for the development of new products and productive spaces for the network.

The conditions for family farming that allow it to become a viable economic alternative for the insertion in productive chains with a higher added value are based on the development of collaborative relationships between producers, with the model of working within a network standing out as particularly favorable. For this a joint effort is necessary to articulate on an associativist, political and technical level, based on a new business model different from the traditional way of business developed by transnational corporations, which involves the expansion and the strengthening of a network identity, in search of environmental and financial sustainability. To understand these demands, seeking an approximation of the different experiences found in the country, is crucial in order to establish policies and mechanisms of support which take into consideration the true needs of the farmers in your way to built process of sustainable development.

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