

The background of the cover features a vibrant, stylized illustration of tropical foliage. Large, detailed leaves in various shades of green and teal are scattered across the frame, creating a lush, naturalistic feel. The overall color palette is dominated by greens and blues, with a soft gradient in the background.

INNOVATIVE PRACTICES IN RURAL GENDER TRANSFORMATION

Lessons from Brazil and Uruguay



Investing in rural people

The South-South and Triangular Cooperation and Knowledge Centre of the International Fund for Agricultural Development (IFAD), located in Brasilia, in collaboration with partner institutions, conducts studies on relevant rural development issues to the Latin America and the Caribbean context, with special attention to the poor and vulnerable people. As a global organization, with a unique mandate to promote the development of small-scale rural producers, IFAD seeks to encourage the sharing of knowledge, innovation and a commitment to invest in the rural population.

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Knowledge Centre
South-South and Triangular Cooperation
Latin America and the Caribbean

Innovative Practices in Rural Gender Transformation

Lessons from Brazil and Uruguay

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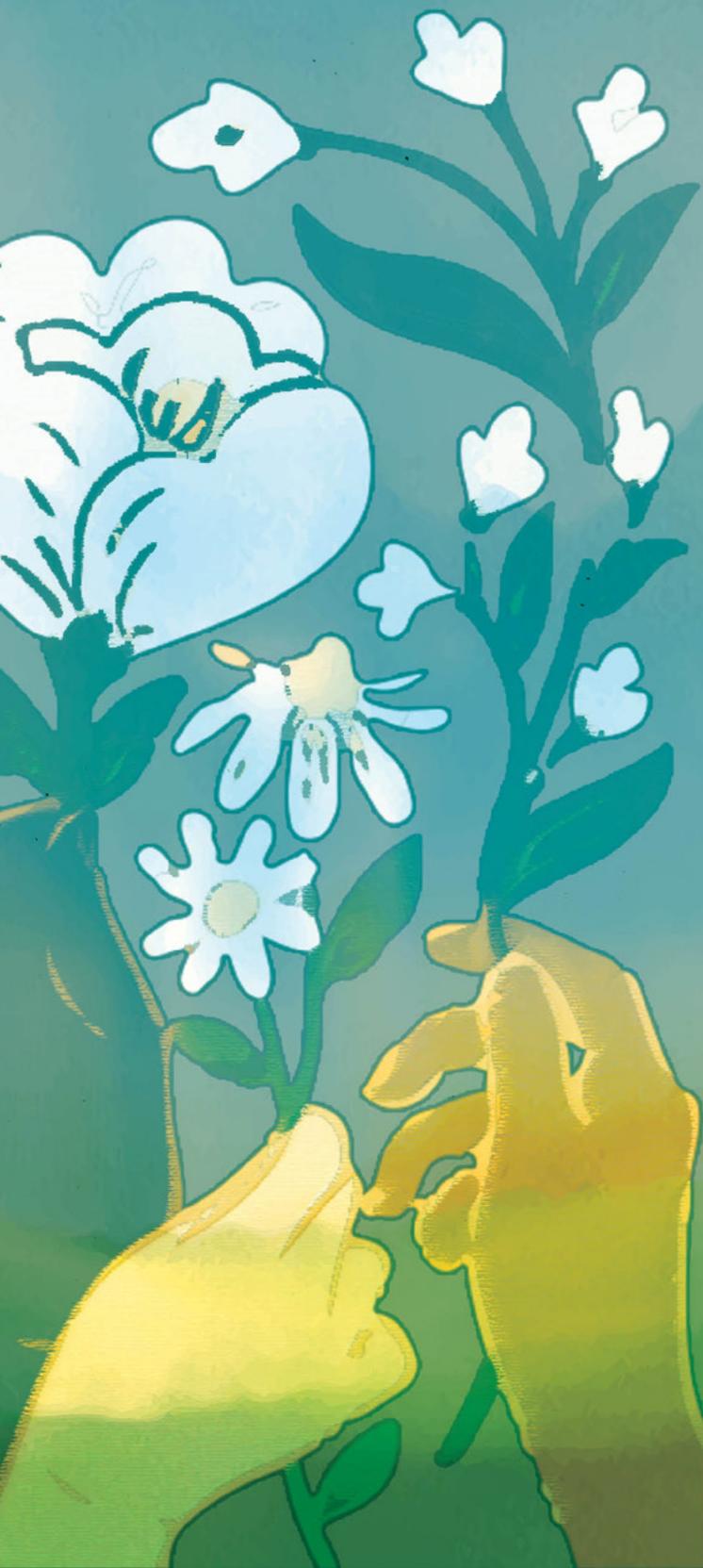
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OVERVIEW OF THE SELECTED PRACTICES

Project	Group or collective	Innovative practice and/or methodology	Number of participants
Project <i>Pro-Semiárido</i> (PSA) – Bahia, Brazil	Child care workers/ facilitators Group	Construction of a methodology for “child-care circles” with a strong gender transformative focus	598 local communities members of which 528 are women
Project “Viva o Semiárido” (PVSA) – Piauí, Brazil	Association of residents and small producers (AMPPEPI) - Popular Farmers’ Movement (MPA)	Women’s protagonism in agroecological production within backyard gardens with a wider array of technological innovations, such as the reuse of “grey water”	93 women
Project for the Sustainable Development of Cariri, Seridó and Curimataú (PROCASE) – Paraíba, Brazil	The Cariri Oriental Semiárido Network Collective – CASACO	CASACO focuses its work on the following lines of action: (i) capturing and storing rainwater; (ii) storage of native seeds (called “seeds of passion”); (iii) commercialization of products through the Agroecological Tent of Cariri; (iv) food service provided by the “Olaria” kitchen.	15 women
Project Dom Helder Camara (PDHC II) – Brazil	Afro-descendent association of the “ <i>Mearim</i> ” Community	The capacity to respond to the specific interests and demands of social groups that are normally seen to be “on the margin” (women, youth and afro-descendent communities). Empowerment of rural women and the strengthening of their organizing processes, especially through the adoption of agroecological logbooks.	17 families, 10 women
Project Paulo Freire – Ceará, Brazil	Maria Celeste Pereira da Silva (Mrs. Tiana) in the community of “ <i>Olho d’Água Velho</i> ”, Ipu municipality , Ceará	Integration of several strategies – agroecological practices, technologies for water use and storage and innovative commercialization practices.	A leader who influences and inspires 5 other women living in the same territory
Project Paulo Freire – Ceará, Brazil	The women’s group of the afro-descendent community “ <i>Jardim</i> ” in Quiterianópolis municipality - territory of Inhamuns, Ceará	Women’s key role in a productive project focused on two activities:- poultry-farming and honey; affirmation of ethnic identity as a crucial component in fortifying social organization, including women’s self-organizing efforts	7 women out of 40 families involved in the investment plans
Project Dom Tavora – Sergipe	Association of Embroiderers from the community Nova Brasília in Tobias Barreto	Reveals the importance of women’s involvement in what are seen to be “non-agricultural” activities (handicrafts); transmission of cultural knowledge and traditions between generations; use of forms of social communication (digital platforms) for commercialization purposes.	64 female artisans
The Pilot Project for Rural Inclusion (PPIR) – Uruguay	Group of “Women United from San Antonio” – MUSA	This initiative shows women leading a local land reform project with family integration and mechanization of the production processes. The following aspects are worthy of note: (i) the capacity of a women’s grassroots group to gain access to land through negotiations; (ii) the collaboration of family members (husbands and youth) in productive processes and in the construction of new forms of collective land management; (iii) use of agricultural equipment, such as tractors, to empower female leaders; (iv) construction of direct dialogue spaces with governmental authorities.	The group started out as 14 women and now is made up of 5 women and their family members.



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FOREWORD

The International Fund for Agricultural Development (IFAD) is the only UN agency with a specific mandate to eradicate poverty in rural areas. Today its projects span over 100 countries and reach nearly 500 million family farmers across the developing world. Although women are major contributors to agriculture and rural economies, they normally enjoy less access to resources and services including land, finance, training, inputs and equipment. In addition to their agricultural labour, they are usually burdened with domestic chores and caregiving tasks. Yet, they have enormous potential for innovation, sustainability and leadership of family development.

Today women are amongst the most affected by the COVID-19 pandemic, which has brought them additional household challenges and even prevented them from realizing their full production and income-growth potential. While rural women are not exempt from these challenges, they have been leading the recovery in their communities through innovative responses. We are proud to see that some of these responses have been supported by IFAD-financed investments that have increased rural women's resilience.

This publication showcases a few best practices in rural development led by rural women in Brazil and Uruguay, which have led to transformative and long-lasting results, even strengthening local public policies and economic growth. Using the latest resources in agroecological and inclusive production methods, and assisted by IFAD-supported projects, these women have become models in their communities and beyond. Empowered women are able to participate more actively in their communities and encourage inclusive local policies that further drive rural development.

IFAD is committed to continuing to promote gender empowerment and inclusion across its portfolio of projects. These best practices in women-led projects in Latin America not only contribute to higher levels of child nutrition and family earnings; they also directly contribute to families' wellbeing, as women are more likely than men to spend their income on food and education. During a time when we see regressive effects on gender equality, it is paramount to continue investing in projects that are gender-sensitive. What is good for gender equality is good for society and the economy.

Happy reading!

Rossana Polastri,

Regional Director, Latin America and the Caribbean Division (LAC)

June 2021

REGIONAL CONTEXT AND IFAD GENDER POLICIES



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I. Inequality Context: rural transformation and rural women in Latin America and the Caribbean (LAC)

The Latin American and Caribbean (LAC) region is experiencing an accelerated process of rural transformation, the challenge being to make this transformation inclusive, within the framework of growing social and territorial inequality. Within the isolated rural areas one can find a high load of family farming and within these, the most vulnerable social groups such as women, youth and indigenous populations suffering high levels of marginalization and poverty. Despite the advances in previous decades, there is an increase in food and nutritional insecurity and the consequences of climate change are significantly affecting several LAC countries. Once again, the rural areas and populations end up being the most highly excluded and vulnerable to these threats.

Although it is true that the levels of poverty and extreme poverty tend to decrease in the region in recent decades, the gaps between rural and urban areas continue to exist. In fact, between 22.4 and 21.8 was reached on the inequality index gap measurement between urban and rural poverty. Territorial inequality is clearly expressed in poor rural areas, whose territories tend to have somewhat similar characteristics, such as being smaller or less dense in population, having a higher proportion of indigenous or Afro-descendant population and a higher percentage of the population being younger than 15 years old. Faced with the impact of the COVID 19 pandemic, the drop in productivity or income could push them into poverty, and for those already caught within poverty traps, the impacts on production, food supply and income could push them further down the poverty traps vicious circle.

Rural women make up half of the rural population in LAC - approximately 58 million - and about 20% of them are indigenous women. They represent 20% of the agricultural workforce, and have significantly increased their role and significance as Economically Active Population (EAP) in rural areas by 47%. However, their quality of employment and employment levels are lower than their male counterparts. In addition, they have difficulties to access productive assets (especially land) and be fully recognized as farmers. Hence, rural women face a series of gaps and limitations: they have higher incidence rates of poverty and extreme poverty, lower incomes, higher illiteracy rates and unpaid domestic workloads¹.

In the case of young women, the high rates of adolescent pregnancy and early motherhood, together with the unpaid family workload - in the production space (farm, small-holder land for agricultural produce), domestic and family care - limits their educational and work trajectories. For indigenous and Afro-descendant women, in many cases they do not have an identification document, and since they do not have it, they cannot access basic societal services. Furthermore, the patrilineal societal formation amongst the majority of the indigenous peoples in LAC is a contributing factor to the unfavourable conditions for gender equity and women's empowerment.

Overall, this leads to limited access to health services and basic services for households (water, sanitation, electricity), digital services (internet), higher fertility rates, adolescent pregnancy, and discrimination in participation spaces due to the weight of traditional cultural norms.

All these factors add up to persistence of cultural norms, traditional roles and sexist stereotypes in rural areas, organizations and communities. It prevents women's empowerment and full participation in decisions that affect their fundamental rights. Overcoming these adverse situations requires recognizing the specific challenges of each context and the potential of rural women to better integrate themselves into the productive structure. It requires inclusion of women in decision-making mechanisms, for them to empower themselves, improve their quality of life and fully contribute to the sustainable development processes. It is key to building resilience against climate change and mitigating its effects, sustainable management of natural resources, and food and nutritional security.

1. In 2014, for every 100 men living in a poor households, there were 118 women in the same situation. It is evident that female rural poverty (according to the femininity poverty index) has deepened in recent years, going from 107.5 to 114.7 between 2002 and 2014 (FAO, 2013).

Family farming maintains a significant importance in the rural economy, contributing towards job creation and food production, as well as showing significant capacities to adapt to climate change, market globalization and rural transformation. However, the transformation of the rural environment in the region has a dual character. On the one hand, there is a very modern business-oriented type of agricultural activity and on the other hand, subsistence family farms are selling their surpluses. The gap between large-scale agriculture for export, with advanced technology and capital, and peasant agriculture, much more important in numerical terms, but with little access to resources, financing, goods and services, is widening every day. The integration of gender equality and empowerment of rural women in the framework of the United Nations Decade of Family Farming (2019-2028) and the contribution of IFAD in this framework is even more relevant.

Evidence indicates the need to understand the transformations of the rural areas that have occurred since the nineties in the region, which include, among other elements, the appearance of non-agricultural work as an important source of livelihood for rural households. There exists a strong separation between the place of residence and the place of work - one of them being non-rural -, as well as the appearance of productive chains that cross rural and urban areas - within the country and internationally. In addition, there are other indicators, such as the feminization of the countryside, its demographics with an aging population and abandonment, product of out-migration since the population is attracted to live in urban areas.

A commitment that seeks to Leave No One Behind (LNOB) must by necessity take into account the transformations and local characteristics as well as place special emphasis on those segments of the rural population that are most neglected: women, youth and indigenous peoples. It needs to be done from a perspective that does not consider them exclusively as beneficiaries of the policies, but rather elevates them to the category of partners on the ground and agents of change.

II. IFAD's policies and strategies for effecting gender transformation

Based on its Gender Policy and the Gender Action Plan for 2019-2025, IFAD's main objective is to address the root causes that generate and replicate economic, social, political and environmental inequities. The LAC region has made special efforts to strengthen the incorporation of the gender transformative approach in all interventions by creating opportunities for individuals and groups to challenge and change gender norms, promoting positions of social influence. The policy to close the inequality gaps between women, youth and men and the LNOB principles is contributing to the 2030 Agenda: SDG 1 "End Poverty", SDG 2 "Zero Hunger" and SDG 5 "Gender Equality".

The current crisis of the global pandemic of COVID 19 has affected all of humanity. In LAC it represents a great threat to the target group of the projects and programs financed (loans or donations). Particularly in the case of socially excluded populations, such as women, youth and indigenous peoples, due to the fact that they have fewer resources to satisfy their food needs adequately, buy inputs for production, and possess limited access to markets for the confinement measures that affect their mobility.

Faced with the pandemic, women have assumed greater responsibility for the health care of their children and family members, facing greater difficulties in articulating their productive, reproductive, and community role than men. Even before this global crisis, domestic violence had increased. Considering that it was already one of the most flagrant human rights violations, the situation has now worsened. Quarantine and isolation measures have created greater risks for women living in situations of domestic violence. In Latin America, on average 1 in 3 women has suffered physical or sexual violence in an intimate relationship throughout her life².

2. UN Women, 2020. The Shadow Pandemic: Violence against Women during COVID-19

In households where food security is precarious, women are more vulnerable than men to malnutrition, as they require a higher intake of vitamins and minerals in proportion to the total dietary energy intake than men. This makes women and older people more vulnerable to food shortages that could arise, due to the spread of COVID-19, with a negative impact on their nutritional status and overall health.

In the current cooperation cycle, IFAD is committed to meeting the following goals: i) 25% of all designs approved during IFAD 11 guide their actions to transform gender-based power dynamics, addressing the structural barriers that generate and reproduce gender inequalities in the rural world; ii) 90% of the projects that end during IFAD 11 shall achieve progress in gender mainstreaming and iii) 60% of the projects that end during IFAD 11 shall be fully gender mainstreamed and/or gender transformative.

Thus, IFAD 11 leans on a Gender Equality Strategy that includes specific actions, indicators and results in its theory of change, based on three key areas:

- i. Promotion of Economic Empowerment. Women, men, with an emphasis on young people, shall improve their productive, business and associative capacities, as well as benefit from investments adapted to their different needs and interests according to the selected value chain.
- ii. Provide participation in decision-making and representation processes. Women, men and young people have the same voice in decision-making processes in all links of the value chain of organizations of small rural producers.
- iii. Achieve a fair balance in workload and equity in economic benefits. Women, men and young people become aware of the roles they play within their families and in their communities, receive trainings and technical assistance, including mentoring to manage their farm as a family business based on a shared vision of the family.

IFAD makes the gender approach operational at the following levels:

Level 1 Internal: the effective and operational mainstreaming of the Gender Transformative approach in all stages of the project cycle, starting with positioning the focus on the COSOP, as well as on the concept note, in the design document, in the implementation, in the execution, evaluation and completion of projects.

Level 2 External: the strengthening of approaches, transformative synergies, policy dialogue, alliances, knowledge management and communication, and the integration of the transformative approach into national policy (Mainstreaming Gender Transformative Approaches 2019-2025).

It should be noted that it has been a challenge at project level to achieve behavioural changes in the process of challenging sociocultural contexts in the medium and long term, as well as to ensure the quality and sustainability of interventions, including the whole family and community. Therefore, IFAD has redoubled efforts to pilot, design and test different methodologies in its projects. This document is the result of the documentation of this experience in projects in Brazil and Uruguay and is intended to serve as an awareness raising and practical tool for implementation throughout the LAC region.

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CHAPTER 1

A Methodology for Child Care “Circles” In the Semiarid Biome of Bahia, Brazil

*“Porque todas as crianças têm que ter boa atenção
Toda nossa região tem criança de todo jeito
Nós como cirandeira tem que ter carinho e respeito
Pra saber lidar com elas
Porque nenhum é perfeito.
Eu gostei muito bem
Não tenho o que reclamar
Só tenho que agradecer a quem veio nos ensinar
Ser ciranda é muito bom eu gosto até demais
Trabalhar como ciranda
Sou Feliz até demais
Trabalhar com as crianças é o que quero muito mais.”*

*“Because all the children deserve to receive a lot of attention.
In this region, there are children of all sorts and types
We as child-care workers have to have lots of affection and respect
so that we are able to take good care of them
because nobody is perfect.
I liked the experience a lot...
there is no reason to complain
I only am able to thank those who came to teach us.
To be a child-care worker is a very gratifying experience
I like so very much to work as a child-care worker.
I am very happy with this experience and
it is what I hope to do more and more as time goes on.”*

Poem by Maria Araújo Child-care worker (“Cirandeira”) from the community of Pauzinhos in the Territory “Tomorrow”, which takes part in the Pro-Semiárido Project in Bahia

1. Introduction

In the context of the Project *Pro-Semiárido* (PSA), developed within the state of Bahia, an initiative involving the provision of child-care services through a unique methodological approach constitutes one of the highlights of PSA’s gender-responsive strategic actions. Child-care “circles” are established through a dynamic and engaging methodological approach that fortifies inter-generational relations, promotes the debate of gender equality within family and community networks and transmits positive messages about the semi-arid region and the sustainable practices that are carried out by different organizations and communities within this ecosystem. This proposal also has fortified leadership qualities, as people interested and committed to this action, most of them being young people between 17 and 33 years of age, are selected for trainings in this methodological approach and act as “child care workers” during project activities. Until the current moment, the training of “child care workers” in this particular methodology has benefitted 598 people in local communities (528 women and 70 men) through institutions contracted by the *Pro-Semiárido* Project - RUMOS, IRPAA and ARESOL. A total of 28 training courses for child care workers and 383 educational activities with children have

taken place. The presence of such “child care workers”, adept at implementing a unique approach to young children’s education, has been one of the factors that has contributed towards increasing the participation of women in the Project’s activities, since child care responsibilities (among other kinds of work tied to the domestic sphere) along with women’s involvement in productive tasks (agricultural or non-agricultural) severely restrict their participation in community-based endeavors. Within the context of the “Gender Working Group” of IFAD projects, which was created in March of 2018, this methodological approach has been shared with Gender Consultants from the other 5 projects in the Northeastern region and has been an object of rich debates, generating important discussions about the importance of measures such as these for facilitating women’s participation in a wide range of organizational activities at the local and regional levels, as well as easing the burdens associated with tasks that pertain to the domestic sphere.

The child-care “circles” represent an effective measure for promoting gender equality that has been seen to contribute enormously towards achieving the third component of IFAD’s gender strategy:³ reduction, redistribution and socialization of domestic tasks at the family and community level. It goes beyond the option

3. The commitment taken on by IFAD in its strategic plan (2016 – 2025) involve solidifying the impacts of strategies that aim towards greater gender equality and women’s empowerment, which implies a shift in focus. Within IFAD’s current institutional strategy for gender issues, the understanding is that projects should not only incorporate a gender focus through “mainstreaming”, reaching a significant proportion of women as direct beneficiaries, but also should carry out interventions that are “transformative” in nature, being closely aligned with the Goals for Sustainable Development: ODS 1 (“End of Poverty”) and ODS 5 (“Gender Equality”). Beyond that, they should generate innovations that can be easily replicated and adapted to different contexts and scales, being part of the key strategy for “scaling up.”

of forging recreational spaces for children so that they can merely be “entertained” during training activities and workshops for productive activities which seek to “include” women. The proposal thereby aims not only to “insert” women in social, economic and political processes of which they often are excluded, as an affirmative action, but also to reveal the importance of forms of work that involve taking care of the most vulnerable segments of the population (children, older people, etc.) with the over-arching goal of strengthening the social fabric of these rural communities and of the society as a whole. From the perspective of feminist economics⁴ (FOLBRE, 2006; CARRASCO, 2006, 2017), there is a notion that “care work” should be at the center of the sustainability of human life, given that work efforts dedicated towards the maintenance of livelihoods have not been validated within the calculating and mercantile logic of neoclassical economics. Within this perspective, the action of “Child-care circles” demonstrates to us that the act of caring for future generations should be a task that is divided up between all people at the level of the local communities, so that it ends up no longer being viewed as a personal responsibility of the families and comes to represent a collective activity taken on by diverse social actors.

The construction of this innovative methodology is based on three pillars: (i) the training of child-care workers who become local references for leadership; (ii) the construction of a multi-disciplinary curriculum in which contents are transmitted through dynamic methodological methods for children; (iii) forms of alleviating women’s work load through socializing child-care work and other domestic tasks. Such an innovative strategy has been suggested as a model to be incorporated in other IFAD project designs. It also can serve as a source of inspiration for the design and implementation of multi-dimensional public policies on a local, regional and state level, given that its inclusion in public policies, programs and projects represents an important step in the construction of gender equality and in the strengthening of women’s empowerment. Including such a strategic action in public policies is a concrete step towards inciting communities to take on tasks collectively that are traditionally relegated to the domestic sphere and naturalized as an intrinsic part of what we call “social reproduction.”

Elizabeth Siqueira, the gender specialist for the *Pro-Semiárido* Project claims that the “empowerment that grows on a community level contributes towards the promotion of interaction and mutual support systems between individuals, families, community-based groups and governmental and nongovernmental institutions. This cooperation that occurs through the exchange of information and experiences should take into account the diverse array of agents involved, in the perspective of constructing inter-sectorial networks that can influence public policy making.” (SIQUEIRA, 2014, p. 56)

A major goal involves including “child-care services” that adopt a multi-faceted approach in rural technical assistance and extension services that are offered by governmental agencies and NGOs. Since the 1940s, rural technical assistance in Brazil was built up on a foundation of sexual division of labor that reinforced the fragmentation between male and female farmers. On the one hand, the technical activities in the productive realm were developed in such a way that they attended to the needs of men in the rural communities, while women were designated for “traditional” activities that tend to be linked to the domestic sphere, such as the preparation of food and artisan craft activities. Although progress has been made towards overcoming these barriers, there is still a strong need to search for alternatives that stimulate women’s participation in decision-making about the use of assets, resources and inputs in the productive sphere. A measure such as the “child-care circles” can be very effective for meeting this goal. Beyond that, incorporating children in the structure of technical assistance services represents a commitment to a more thorough, deep-reaching approach that conceives the family as a unit and accepts the involvement of each family member in productive processes. The informal activities involving youth and children such as the child-care circles are revealing in that they demonstrate the value of segments that are often on the margins of projects and programs focused on agricultural development: women, youth and children.

4. “Feminist economics” can be defined as a novel approach to economic inquiry and policy analysis, which involves the critical study of economics from a feminist viewpoint. Feminist economists question the theoretical premise that economic activity is restricted merely to the production of goods and services within the formal markets and involves solely monetary transactions. They highlight the necessity of constructing a model of economic analysis that is sensitive to the realities experienced by women within their diverse cultural contexts. Much feminist economic research focuses on topics that have been neglected in the field, such as “care work.”

2. Child-care circles within the *Pro-Semiárido* Project: how this strategy interacts with other intersecting actions and approaches

“Child-care circles” are activities led by one or two child-care workers/ facilitators in a physical space ceded by the community, which range from a free space in the community-based association to a community leaders’ residence. The costs entailed in such an action within the project are the following: (i) a reserve of materials and resources for the activities; and (ii) the payment of the child-care workers’ services.

This innovative action of the “Child-care circles” was woven into the design of the *Pro-Semiárido* Project in 2014 and has been one of the special features of a strong institutional strategy focused on gender equality through gender mainstreaming and social inclusion. In order to understand the role of the child-care circles in the Project as a whole, I will lay out some defining elements and principles that are considered to be crucial to its construction.

The *Pro-Semiárido* Project in Bahia has a strong commitment to transforming gender relations and contributing towards the economic and social empowerment of rural women through an intense investment in the formation of women’s groups and in the fortifying of bonds between women who are rooted in many different territories, thereby constituting diverse networks. When it comes to women’s issues, an intersectional approach to power relations has been adopted, through a feminist analysis of the interaction between gender, race, ethnicity and generational inequalities. The double strategy aimed at specific affirmative actions that fortify women’s empowerment as political and economic agents, as well as gender mainstreaming, in such a way that the gender perspective is reflected in all actions within the Project’s components, has proven to be extremely effective.

A total of 141 capacity-building trainings and workshops with a gender perspective have been held during the course of the Project’s implementation, involving 2.807 participants. It is worth noting the primacy attributed to the construction of a training methodology that has a transformative approach to gender aimed at PMU staff and project beneficiaries during workshops and seminars that cover the following themes: women’s rights, agroecology, food security, public policies, as well as ethnic and racial dimensions of collective identities. A strong aspect of such capacity-building activities involves questioning the unequal division of tasks from a feminist standpoint and searching for effective solutions in the private sphere both within families as well as on the community level, an action which is strongly aligned with the Campaign for equal distribution of domestic tasks,⁵ undertaken by women’s organizations and networks in the Northeastern Region of Brazil. A Gender, race and ethnicity specialist has acted as focal point in the Project Management Units to aid the inclusion of gender equality actions within strategies in each one of the Project’s components. This professional works closely with technical assistance teams on a local and regional level to organize training programs with the project beneficiaries within a sequential scheme that contemplates moments specifically with groups of women, moments with groups of men and encounters with mixed groups.

This strong emphasis on educational aspects (sensitivity-raising, multi-disciplinary approach) has definitely influenced the Child-care circles and Child-care circle facilitators, as we will discover in the following section.



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5. This Campaign was one of the results of the collective construction of a Project known as “Technical assistance, Agroecology and Feminism”, with the support of UFRPE/MDA between 2014 and 2017, that united a wide range of women from many Northeastern states. During the pandemic, this Campaign was relaunched with a new tone and orientation due to the high level of domestic violence cases, and the need to call attention to women’s right to a sense of well-being, safety and quality of living, deeply related to gender dynamics.

3. The trainings of Child-care circle facilitators: a broad, over-reaching and inter-connected approach to education

In the selection process of the child-care facilitators,⁶ which was based on clear criteria, the deconstruction of gender roles proved to be a major challenge. The men who dared to take on this challenge and become “facilitators” in children’s education proved to be only 10%. Despite the sensitivity-raising that occurred about the importance of integrating men and women in this activity, many of the men who assumed this role felt out of place or were aware of the community’s judgmental opinions. Some female child-care workers explain that they have a greater capacity to participate in the activities, including the leadership of child-care circles in other communities, because they are single, which is also a reflection of gender relations. In other words, those women who are not yet married tend to have more freedom to move between spaces and become directly involved in processes beyond the boundaries of the community, whereas married women often face obstacles imposed by their husbands.

The educational training of facilitators was taken on by a qualified team of professionals from diverse areas: Pedagogy, the Arts, Social services, Anthropology and Sociology from two distinct institutions – RUMOS and ARESOL. Also, a strong partnership with the local University was forged so as to allow for the involvement of students in these “hands-on” experiences as a part of their internships. The training program took place within the period of November of 2018 to March of 2020 and involved directly 200 women, men and children. The municipalities were organized in 7 training centers where 48-hour workshops take place during 12 months, in two stages of 24 hours each, totaling 336 hours of activity. The multidisciplinary approach to themes that are inter-related and intertwined, such as “gender relations”, “peaceful and non-combative strategies for dealing with the hardships of the semiarid environment” and “childhood development”,

has helped to prepare the facilitators for carrying out their educational activities with the children. The facilitators use dynamic methods and instruments, such as storytelling, games and toy making. A “kit” of pedagogical materials -, made up of videos, CDs, books and memory games for raising sensitivity about a series of issues -, is organized so as to be used during the sessions with the children.

The dynamics lived out by the team that trained the child-care facilitators reveals some important elements of this process which should be highlighted. According to Tiala Albuquerque, one of the instructors from the organization RUMOS, the training program represents an opportunity for fortifying the women who take on the role of “child-care workers” in a political sense, so that they can leave the constraints of the domestic sphere and actively take part in public spaces, getting to know other social realities. She also speaks about the emotional aspect of this process of becoming leaders within processes of children development, which also represents a source of pride and internal strength. Socorro Freitas, another teacher from the Rumos Institute, points out other important aspects of this process of “becoming” a child-care worker. According to her, the women who have become involved in this process are quite courageous, since they took on the “cause”, even though they aren’t necessarily seen to have all the characteristics that are required for such a post. In this sense, she points out that many of these women who became child-care workers never had been “educators” or leaders of any kind before and didn’t feel prepared for the task at hand, but they “put their heart” into this process, opening themselves up to new experiences. Alexandrio Ferreira mentions the cultural aspect of this training program, which allowed for the exchange of traditional knowledge that was often “lying under the surface”, at the same time that it provided an opportunity to be exposed to the use of innovative technologies that provide for new sources of knowledge and forms of learning. Raimunda Pereira pointed out another strong feature of this training program for “potential educators”: such training programs brought new elements to their relationship with the Semiarid biome, bringing on a sense of pride in forms of territorial development, which is very much tied to the expression of their cultural identities.

6. The following child-care facilitators were interviewed during the course of this systematization: Aline de Jesus Santos Rocha, Simone Cerqueira da Silva Bispo, Regiane Santos da Silva

4. Experiences of “child-care circle facilitators”: their continual growth as community leaders

One of the important aspects of this methodology is the process of training women and men (most of whom are characterized as “youth”, between 18 and 33 years of age) to develop their leadership qualities through pedagogical methods that seek to fortify inter-generational links. When young men and women are encouraged to take on this role and are trained through a multi-disciplinary approach with an emphasis on dynamic pedagogical methods, they are also being encouraged to reach back into their family history and bring out the elements that were part of their heritage. In such a way, bonds are forged between the generations, because they are gaining access to memories lived out in their childhood with their elders, who represented, for most all of them, important role models. Beyond that, they are also learning to appreciate and value aspects of their upbringing which are often taken

for granted and which tend to be strongly cultivated even in the current context within the rural areas: the group games, songs and inventive story-telling that are signs of a cultural tradition strongly based on “oral transmission” and social interaction. With the boom in technologies that have clearly affected child-care tactics and approaches – even more so during the current period of the pandemic, which obligates the intensified use of on-line platforms and social networks for communication – there is a great need to take into account the simple, democratic and creative approaches to education that allow for trans-generational transmission of cultural traditions as well as a more thorough understanding of the social, political and environmental dimensions of the Semiarid biome.

Pride in one’s cultural roots is harder than one would think when the “urban area” is socially represented as the idyllic destination for forging autonomy and independence – a space that promotes hundreds of opportunities and possibilities. In contrast, historically the rural area of the semiarid biome in Bahia has been represented as a space devoid of opportunities, struck by the misfortune of a prolonged drought that deepens poverty and that needs to be “saved” from a state of utter despair. This representation



has gradually been dismantled through a collective process of questioning and creating new meanings for the underlying principles and values of the semi-arid region. In the political sphere, it is noteworthy that since 2007, a gradual transition has been taking place towards the adoption of a notion of “peaceful coexistence” with the conditions of the semi-arid landscape – a new concept that has oriented public policies designed towards promoting agricultural development as well as water storage and use in the face of the longest drought in Brazilian history. Important critics such as Josué de Castro (2003), supported a structural change in the model that dictates common notions of “development”, and Roberto Marinho da Silva (2006), outlined principles and values that should be part of a new model for development in the Semi-arid region based on the construction of a new “environmental rationality” and a new system of “ethics” for social relations.

Therefore, one of the greatest legacies of this Child-care methodology is its capacity to construct a multi-disciplinary curriculum that focuses on a variety of key issues, such as agroecology, health, environmental sustainability and gender, race and ethnicity, with a strong basis on the appreciation of the unique dimensions of the Semi-arid landscape. When child-care workers – most of whom are young women and men – are trained to carry out educational programs with young children, they are also being exposed to a new philosophy that orients their relationship with their immediate environment and the cultural values ingrained in family dynamics and traditions.

Many child-care workers become more intensely involved in organizational processes at a community level after their initial experience working with children’s education. This is also a reflection of the strong investment made by the *Pro-Semiárido* project in instances and management spaces within the community setting, such as Social Control Commissions and Financial management committees. Such instances have ensured that investments are demand driven, having proven to be crucial in addressing beneficiaries’ needs (collectively and individually), as well as in creating the right conditions for beneficiaries to express their concerns and priorities. A child-care worker from the land-settlement “*Lagoa de Dentro*”, Jarlisson Silva de Jesus, mentioned that, although he resides in a community that has a long tradition of organizing through the Association, after he began his involvement in this particular initiative he perceived the importance of the instances that were created through the Semi-arid Project, given the support that they provided. Since many

members of the Social Control Commissions have a great deal of experience with educational practices, they often provided valuable advice, giving feedback about methods for inciting the participation of children and aiding the organization of child-care circles during the workshops held by the “interest groups” formed within the Project around specific themes and productive activities (ex: crop production, animal husbandry and irrigation systems, such as water cisterns). Many of the child-care workers who were selected are already involved in “investment plans” in their communities, such as backyard gardens or water storage initiatives, which most definitely reinforced their involvement with child-care circles and helped them establish connections between different actions at a community and regional level.

It is important to highlight stories told by child-care workers themselves that clearly reveal different dimensions of this strategic action within the Pro-Semiárido Project. In this sense, Jarlisson’s experience as a child-care worker reveals the importance of strategically supporting communities’ efforts to invest in educational projects dedicated towards youth and children. He mentions that he lives in a land settlement that places a great





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importance on educational processes, not only within the formal school system (given that many youth go away to study in Universities and “EFAs” – Schools for family-based agriculture)⁷, but also in the training programs offered by social movements (CPT, MST as well as others). According to him, after much discussion, the community members decided that investing in the future of their children and grandchildren was a priority, given that the number of elders is very high. In that sense, the community decided to give financial support to its youth for their studies. For that reason, he reports that a decision was made by the community (in a meeting of the local association) that he should take on the role of “child-care worker”, given the fact that the training of leaders from a humane and social standpoint and the circulation of information within and between the communities is seen to be a high priority within this particular context. He claims that the value placed on education within the community setting influenced him positively, being a motivating factor in his decision to take on the role of “child-care worker” as well as reinforcing his active involvement in other community-based initiatives.

This particular scenario is a clear manifestation of the importance of prioritizing child-care services as a crucial part of the development of leadership skills within rural communities. Beyond that, it goes without saying that projects that create specific measures for lessening women’s workload, as well as transforming child-care into a collective responsibility – for all actors involved – are taking concrete steps towards adopting a gender-transformative approach. Child-care circles represent an approach to children’s education that further gender equality at a community level and thereby, such an innovation deserve to be replicated in other IFAD project designs.

7. The “family-based agriculture schools” (EFAs) are community-based schools that are managed by associations made up of community inhabitants and rural trade unions linked to the community. The methodology used in EFAs is the “pedagogy of alternation”, in which the students experience for some time the school atmosphere, and in another period of time, the community, in which they try to put into practice the lessons learned during their classes.

CHAPTER 2

Women organizing to establish backyard gardens in the state of Piauí, Brazil



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1. Introduction

This experience clearly shows the protagonism of female farmers in the construction of a productive endeavor with families in three rural territories of the Semiárido region of Piauí, involving the cultivation of a diversity of crops in backyard gardens associated with the use of technological innovations. 93 female farmers of the Association of “Residents and small producers from the state of Piauí” (AMPEPEPI)⁸ designed an investment plan in 2018 with the aid of the staff and technical assistance experts from the Project “*Viva o Semiárido*” that covers an expansive territory – three rural territories (Valley of Canindé, Valley of Itaim and Valley of Guaribas), five municipalities (Campo Grande, Francisco Santos, Geminiano, Jaicós and São João da Varjota) and ten communities (Land settlements *Boa Viagem, União, Chupeiro, Diogo, Milhãs, Paquetá, Santo Antônio, Santa Helena, Serra dos Morros and Urupeu*). This association, which encompasses a large amount of communities and municipalities, is part of the Popular Farmers’ movement in Brazil (MPA) and was

created with the objective of facilitating the financial administration of proposals and projects that aim to fortify its social organization. Beyond the territorial dimension of this project – that is, the fact that it involves families within a wide, over-reaching area – another prominent factor that should be taken into account in this particular experience is its capacity to take on many initiatives in the scope of one project, allowing for the integration between different kinds of productive activities. The project seeks to unite agroecological production in backyard gardens with technological innovations such as the “reuse of grey water”⁹ and the construction of a quick seed-breeding unit for the manioc root crop, which is one of the major staples of the Brazilian diet. The objective is to produce manioc seedlings for the 93 families quickly, that can then be transplanted to the backyard gardens. Manioc root was chosen as a priority because it is part of the history of these families, being connected to memories of moments of great abundance and collective efforts aimed at creating flours and other sub-products.

8. AMPEPEPI was created in 1999 with the purpose of improving the living conditions of the rural population. The Association has been deeply engaged in the implementation of three projects in partnership with the state government of Piauí, as well as aiding the construction of homes for families from the popular classes through the National Program for rural housing in partnership with the Ministry of Social Development.

9. These are waters that come from the sinks in kitchens and bathrooms, being reused after their use in the washing of clothes and in the cleaning of residences.

2. The components of the Investment Plan and its different stages

The first phases of this investment plan involved the construction of physical facilities with the collaboration of family members of the women beneficiaries, such as rustic poultry houses for chickens, fences and tanks for reuse of grey water. In the next phase, the technical assistance experts will be dedicated towards the coordination of trainings and courses. Also, there is a plan to distribute seeds and seedlings in the coming stage of the Project, in close alignment with the custom of donating and exchanging native seeds among the families in these territories - a long tradition and is strongly encouraged by the Popular Farmers' movement. The Popular Farmers' movement (MPA) has historically held events such as seed exchange festivities or a survey of seeds in the territories in diverse moments of its history as a social movement.

In the first stage of this particular project, the families involved with this productive project took part collectively in the construction of the infrastructure for each of the backyard gardens, through what they call "task forces": the families congregate in one of the houses to help with the installment of equipment and infrastructure, and the family that receives others is responsible for providing them with meals. The female members of MPA point out that this was the first project that they have managed which allows for acquiring infrastructure and equipment, an aspect which they view to be quite positive, as a first step in fortifying collective processes.

According to the technicians who give orientation and accompany this particular experience, one of the challenges for the implementation of the infrastructure which is necessary for the success of this initiative has been the difficulties in finding a skilled labor force that can collaborate in certain communities. Even so, the tradition of constructing work forces for collaborating with one another goes way back in the history of these communities and is a reflection of the strong bonds that unite family members in the community setting. Another challenge involves the coordination of activities (trainings and task forces) since the project covers a wide amount of territory and not all the communities are near one another, which can account for difficulties in transportation. Usually, the

educational activities take place in one central reference point – the home of one of the families located in a community that is between the others – so as to facilitate the participation of all involved.

In the case of this productive project focused on backyard gardens, it is important to highlight that it is an initiative that is carried out in conjunction with other productive projects in the name of AMPPEPI – honey production and sheep farming in the same territorial area. Beyond its emphasis on pluriactivity – a wide variety of activities being carried out within a defined space – the MPA as a social movement has endorsed women's key role in social development as part of its over-reaching gender policy. There is a gender collective at the national level which reinforces this issue internally, carrying out trainings and Seminars about gender equality, and it is important to point out that there also are collectives organized around other issues, such as education and food and nutritional security. The women involved in the "Collective for gender" identify themselves as "women of the "popular farmer's movement" (MPA) and have pride in their contribution to family-based sustainable agriculture. Leaders in the Popular Farmers' movement such as Maria Case affirm that the chapter of the movement in Piauí is well-renowned for the predominance of women in leadership positions. She claims that the method used by the movement for disseminating its experiences is the "pedagogy of example": by showing women's potential for taking on leadership roles, it is possible to influence other social movements and groups on a grassroots level.

It is important to point out that, although this investment plan is directed towards "families", women take on a leadership position in the management of the funds, in the logistics connected to its implementation and in the decisions about the activities that should take place in conjunction with technical assistance services. Many female leaders of MPA claim that the opportunity to work with an initiative focused on "backyard gardens" represented a chance to come up with collective solutions as women and integrate their efforts as a united front.

Beyond this investment plan, complementary actions, such as the use of the agroecological logbooks have reinforced women's role as food producers, "guardians" of "biodiversity" and economic agents. 37 women of this larger group involved with backyard gardens became part of this strategic action involving the use of agroecological

logbooks – which, according to Maria Francilda de Lima Coutinho, the professional who has given assistance to this group since the inception of PVSA, has helped to increase the rate and intensity of their involvement in spaces dedicated towards commercialization. Francilda claims that before the use of the agroecological logbooks, many of the food products went to waste, such as fruit that frequently rotted in the orchards rather than being transformed into other sub-products, such as jams, jellies or desserts.



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2. The importance of “backyard gardens”: their productive potential

The Project “*Viva o Semiárido*” has strongly invested in the construction of backyard gardens since its inception, given its deep understanding of the key importance of such spaces in the diversification of agricultural production. It is the only Project among all projects supported by IFAD in the Northeastern region that has employed a Consultant¹⁰ who works specifically with “Backyard gardens”, within the perspective of agroecology. This is a very positive step, but it is also important to point out the challenges involved with this process within the technical assistance services, given the fact that historically speaking, the crops that come from “backyard gardens” have not been considered so vital to the formal economy and for this reason, have often not been incorporated in the planning and implementation of programs and projects of intervention in rural communities.

According to the women who are part of this Backyard gardens’ Project,¹¹ the two other projects that the Association was able to get approved by the Pro-life Semiárido Project (PVSA) got off the ground more quickly – both focused on honey production and sheep cultivation. In their point of view, they had to put a lot of pressure on the authorities to get this particular project started, which most likely has to do with the fact that generally “backyard gardens” are not seen to be so central to rural development programs and policies.

To understand the importance of food production that originates from “backyard gardens” – for self-consumption, but also for exchange, donations and commercialization – it is important to illustrate the functions of such spaces and their contribution to agroecological practices. The diversification of different types of crops within these productive systems is one of its main characteristics, compared to other parts of the rural properties that present less variety. Backyard gardens in the rural areas

10. The consultant Julia Aires acted in the Project since its inception with the key role of assisting the work with backyard gardens within the rural communities with an agroecological approach. This professional closely accompanied the negotiations for approval and execution of the productive project associated with Backyard gardens that has been carried out by AMPEPPI.

11. The women who take part in this group and were interviewed during the course of this systematization are Antônia Cicera Soares de Sousa, Claudiva de Jesus Rodrigues, Sônia Maria da Costa Sousa and Salete Maria da Costa. Also, I carried out interviews with Maria José da Costa, an important leader within MPA (the Popular Farmers’ Movement) in the state of Piauí and Maria Francilda de Lima Coutinho, a trained professional from EMATER – the governmental institution for Technical Assistance and Rural Extension services –, who has played a key role in various actions, such as the work with agroecological logbooks.

represent a truly integrated “agroecosystem”, composed of social and environmental elements that are inseparable. These spaces vividly reflect different combinations of natural resources and inputs: fruits and vegetables of nutritional and medicinal value, plants with medicinal properties, types of wood, raw material for crafts and for the breeding of small animals. They represent ideal environments for the introduction of new species from the surrounding landscape, as well as permitting the experimentation of innovations in ways of producing and transmitting traditional knowledge to future generations, through a “learning by doing” approach. These spaces generally are where the transition to another mode of production, which can be called “agroecological”, occurs – a process which is most often undertaken by female farmers, who invest energy, time and resources in food production, much of which is for subsistence living and has a direct link with the quality of these families’ diets. Backyard gardens also are spaces that allow for exchanges of plants, seeds and seedlings between neighbors, as a way of fostering reciprocal relationships that nurture new forms of constructing knowledge, solidifying social bonds and caring collectively for the preservation of species as well as the multiple forms of biodiversity. The exchange of plants and foods, that organically surge in the heart of such communities, testify to the desire to share local resources and guarantee access to healthy food by all. One of the leaders of the “Popular farmers’ network”, Sônia Maria da Costa Sousa, clearly states the importance of the backyard gardens in her personal history and in the context of the rural communities as a whole: “The backyard gardens, in contrast with the large plots for planting staple crops, are generally areas where the first kinds of corn, pumpkins

and medicinal plants were planted and harvested. It is the place where you can first go to so as to harvest the vegetables and other crops that are needed for your daily subsistence and where you are able to experiment new techniques that help to improve productive practices. The good part is that it is possible to cultivate this space right by your house, which makes it easy to pick whatever you want when you need it.”

Another dimension of backyard gardens which is less frequently discussed involves the function of this space for leisure as well as social living and interactions. It is commonly known that women have historically been denied the right to have equal access to opportunities for leisure, recreation and the cultivation of social bonds, due to their heavy workload and social obligations, such as the common notion that their primary obligation as “wives”, “mothers” and “daughters” is to fulfill tasks in the domestic sphere. Time spent in the backyard gardens not only represent valuable moments to connect with the natural world, but also are opportunities to nurture new relationships with other generations within the family, as well as with neighbors, helping to consolidate community-based networks. The exchange of seedlings, seeds and plants between neighbors, all of which originate from the backyard gardens, help to strengthen the bonds between families on a territorial level, as well as contributing to the promotion of biodiversity and greater food and nutritional security. Therefore, it is important to approach the backyard gardens from a gender perspective, understanding their multiple functions, that go far beyond their merits as a productive sphere that generates economic benefits.



4. Signs of the evolution of backyard gardens and challenges for their development

If one was to take a photograph of the “backyard gardens” before the investments were made and if such a photo was to be compared with the situation of the current moment, it would be possible to visualize the evolution of this agroecosystem, especially in respect to the greater diversification in fruit trees, vegetables and other crops. Many families, under the leadership of women, already planted in their backyard gardens, as the production from backyard gardens is crucial for self-consumption, representing a major source of the food that is part of their daily meals. However, many families did not cultivate gardens with a large amount of diversity in the kinds of crops that were planted and harvested (medicinal plants, fruits, vegetables and greens) and also did not have the custom of selling the food produce that originated from their backyard gardens in local markets. This situation changed dramatically after the investment plan with backyard gardens, deeply associated with an inexpensive and simple irrigation system, was put into place. With the system of reuse of grey water, the duration of production has also been prolonged. In the past, the female farmers stopped producing crops altogether during the period without rains, relying only on the “rainy season” – which in the semiarid region is quite unstable – for intensifying their production. Now the rhythm of agricultural production has changed, becoming more stable throughout the whole year.

Within the semiarid region, one of the major challenges when it comes to sustaining backyard gardens is the systematic lack of access to water and forms of water storage. In this sense, women involved in this particular project were able to create a resilient and economically feasible solution: the “reuse of wastewater”, a technology which is extremely easy to manage and put into use, as well as having major advantages when it comes to sanitation measures - more specifically sewage disposal.

Such a system avoids the accumulation of wastewater” in open sewers, helping to contain soil and groundwater contamination. Beyond that, this kind of technology for capturing and storing water which would normally go to waste contributes towards increasing the content of organic matter and enabling greater water retention in the soil, which inevitably enhances food production. The women who are part of this initiative clearly highlight the benefits of the technological innovations that have been introduced in the course of its stages of implementation, such as this particular reuse water system, without which they would have a very limited amount of food production. As one of the leaders, Sônia Maria da Costa Sousa points out: “We hope to learn technologies that make our lives easier. Technology has that purpose. It is meant to lessen the burdens that come with living in a region that suffers from the lack of water because of the prolonged drought.” The community-based groups and organizations situated in the semiarid region, which have faced difficult living conditions due to a drought that was especially severe during the period of 2010 to 2016 but continues to impact the local populations, have been deeply engaged in the invention of technological solutions to solve this deeply-rooted, multi-dimensional problem using a number of approaches. Many of these innovative technologies, such as the reuse of “grey water”, were tested by a number of NGOs and other social institutions in dialogue with members of community-based groups over time, in such a way that they clearly reveal the positive impacts of rich dialogues between diverse social actors as well as intense hands-on experimentation in the field.

The large variety of production from these backyard gardens was clearly revealed through the use of agroecological logbooks¹² by 34 women from AMPPEPI during the period of September 2019 to February 2020. During this time period, 118 products were identified, 53 of which are classified as vegetables, 12 as being of animal origin and another 53 as products that underwent some forms of processing, in its initial stages. During the first six months of the registering of production, the economic impacts of the agroecological productive practices led by these female farmers became clearly evident: the income generated

12. The agroecological logbooks (AL) are used by women beneficiaries for registering their agricultural production, consumption, exchange and sales in local markets. Because of its simplicity, this instrument is easily assimilated by rural women, and has the capacity to give visibility to the economic aspects of their productive activities, as well as the non-economic aspects (forms of exchange of products at a community level; degree of consumption of such products by the families and their incorporation in family diets and health practices). This methodological instrument, which was created by the NGO “Center for Alternative Technologies” in MG and the Gender Working Group of the National Network for Agroecology, is part of an umbrella strategy to strengthen participatory M&E methods that take into consideration inputs from women beneficiaries. During 2019 and 2020, this strategic action was incorporated in a “Pilot program” coordinated by the Semear International Program (Brazil grant implemented by IICA) that attended to all IFAD projects in Brazil.

came to a total of USD\$ 16.913,99, given that 43,4% of this total amount refers to consumption, donations and exchange of products, and 56,6% refers to the products that were sold. Therefore, the total income generated by each woman in each one of these households, comes to USD\$83,27 per month. The use of the agroecological logbooks by 34 women, all of whom are actively involved in the Productive investment focused on backyard gardens, was instrumental in revealing the large amount of agricultural products that are produced under their leadership and that are consumed, traded, donated or sold. This methodological instrument is particularly important when it comes to raising awareness in the female beneficiaries themselves, their family members and also professionals who carry out technical assistance services about the social, political, economic and environmental benefits of agroecological production in spaces that often are not seen to be potentially “productive” within rural properties, such as backyard gardens. As one of the female community leaders who uses this methodological instrument pointed out, the instrument is useful in that it has the intention of not simply “registering” information, but also it aims to give greater visibility to practices led by women, in such a way that these practices can be viewed and approached in another light.

The women involved in AMPPEPI actively take part in commercialization practices that range from (i) door to door selling in communities, (ii) delivery upon requests for products, (iii) solidarity “baskets” that are offered in special occasions, such as Easter and Christmas festivities, (iv) insertion in public open marketplaces; (iv) involvement in Public selling programs, such as PAA.¹³

The agroecological products that women play a key role in producing – in different forms and stages of development – are commercialized in a variety of markets within short circuit marketing channels – which represent the most common forms of commercialization for rural women, due to the ease with which they can be included in such commercial spaces. Open marketplaces, many of which commercialize not only food products but a variety of other kinds of products, such as artisan crafts, are part of a long, historical tradition in the Northeastern region of Brazil and fulfill a variety of functions that go beyond their value as a space specifically dedicated towards financial transactions. They also possess a strong cultural dimension, being spaces that promote forms of social interaction between different social actors for exchange of valuable

information about the products that are on display and for strengthening bonds between producers from the rural areas and consumers from small or larger cities. Presence in the marketplaces demands some level of coordinated planning, since the women who go to such markets attempt to complement each other’s production, each one seeking to sell a different kind of product. Such a coordinated effort reinforces the diversity in productive processes.

During September and October of 2020, 12 women from the municipalities of Geminiano, Campo Grande and Francisco Santos sold a total of 4 types of fresh vegetables of fruits and one type of animal product within the public procurement policy (PAA). Besides 90 kilograms of pumpkin, 380 kg of manioc root, 20 kg of chicken, 110 kg of papaya and 30 kg of parsley, cilantro and scallions, 130 Kg of a type of dessert made from the papaya fruit was also commercialized, which reflects the importance of processing fruits in food preparation and commercialization. One of the main objectives of the “Investment Plan” has been to amplify the production of basic crops that are used in food preparation, allowing for the creation of a large array of semi-industrialized or processed foods. This is the case of manioc root, which provides raw material for a series of products, such as cakes, crackers, flours and others.

Another interesting initiative has been the activity “Christmas without pesticides”, dedicated towards selling agroecological products. These baskets contain a variety of specialized products and are constructed in dialogue with the consumers, who make their requests. Each municipality is responsible for a certain type of product, in accordance with its conditions, and with each passing year, the diversity of products that make up these baskets increases. According to one of the leaders, last Christmas a total of 30 products, including a wide variety of cakes, types of meat, eggs, fruit desserts and other products made up these baskets. This commercial initiative involves not only those that are directly involved in the Backyard Gardens’ project in particular, but all the families that are considered to be at the base of the Farmers’ Popular Movement.

The women in the Backyard gardens’ groups from two territories – Carnadai and Valley of Guaribas - also participate in a “marketplace” promoted by the Federal University of Piauí in the Campus of Picos. During the pandemic, it was transformed into an on-line marketplace,

13. PAA is a public policy that was created in 2003 with the main objective of promoting the commercialization of products from family-based agriculture in institutional outlets (public hospitals, popular restaurants, schools and retirement homes).

representing a crucial measure for commercializing the wide range of products produced by female farmers, that range from medicinal plants to processed products (desserts, cakes). It is important to reflect on how such economic practices change power dynamics within gender relations. Many women report that when they were able to contribute significantly with such sales, making a notable impact on the family income, there was a major shift in the family dynamics.

The female leaders who take part in this project of backyard gardens point out that during the pandemic, it was possible to activate PAA in two municipalities, involving a total of 150 female farmers - a solution that helped them to amplify their venues for commercialization, especially in the face of the suspension of markets due to strict regulations aimed at enforcing social isolation. It is evident that practices for commercialization that are articulated from the “home”, such as selling from the “house”, upon visits, or in visits made from “house to house” on a local level were intensified during the pandemic. Many of the women who are involved with the “backyard gardens” project declare that during the pandemic, the interest of consumers in healthy food increased dramatically, which in turn have reinforced processes of agroecological production and outflow. This represents a challenge for the women involved in the Popular Farmers’ movement, who seek to access diverse forms of social networks and increase their forms of communicating with possible clientele for selling their products. Many women have learned to use the “WhatsApp” application program as a vehicle for selling and delivering bread, cakes, cookies and other products.

Beyond these measures, the female farmers who actively take part in MPA and are part of the backyard gardens project also were actively involved in a campaign against hunger, helping to donate food to the peripheral parts of the cities (slums and other poor areas). This reflects an awareness that these are the social groups that are suffering most of all with food shortage. According to one of MPA’s major female leaders, since “we women are the ones that are most worried about the well-being of families”, a collective response is often constructed by women in such precarious, emergency situations.



The women involved in this group of backyard gardens express their desire to find solutions for gaps in their existing productive processes. One of their demands concerns the installment of irrigation kits, an element that was originally part of the investment plan, but that was eliminated during the adjustments made when the Project was being negotiated. A process of negotiation has been taking place for some time, aimed at finding alternatives for tapping into water sources, given that there are strategic spots in which the water can be found and accessed for use. The involvement of members of the members of AMPEPPI in negotiations with state deputies and other public officials so as to guarantee that a proposal concerning the irrigation system is implanted has been a major driving force of MPA’s interventions within the political arena.

Another demand involves holding specific trainings in agroecological productive practices, (such as the use of natural repellents, composting, etc.). Another concern of the Gender Collective within the Popular Farmer’s movement is the need to amplify their access to free marketplaces and to other specific public policies, such as PNAE.¹⁴

A strong characteristic of the gender collective within the MPA that is clearly revealed in this particular project dedicated towards backyard gardens is the ability of the women involved to strengthen their organizing efforts on the local and regional levels in coordination with forms of intervention in public policies. In such a way, they act on the local level, rooted in territorial dynamics, but they don’t ever lose sight of the bigger picture. The desire to “fight for their rights” is ingrained in each one of their organizational initiatives and projects, and will orient them in all future endeavors, for years to come.

14. PNAE – the National School Feeding Program – was created in 2009 with the main objective of boosting the local economy and opening up new markets for small farmers who do not fit into the model of conventional, large-scale agriculture. PNAE requires that a minimum of 30% of its financial resources destined to school lunches be acquired by small farmers and rural family-based enterprises.

CHAPTER 3

The CASACO association of leaders, community-based organizations and farmers in Paraiba, Brazil.

1. Introduction

The collective of women who take part in an Association made up of Leaders, Organizations and Farmers in the territory of Eastern Cariri within Paraíba is a potent organizational force that interacts closely with many other initiatives that have adopted strategies aimed at alleviating the impacts of a prolonged drought in accordance with the specific conditions of the semiarid region, as a biome.¹⁵ The Cariri Oriental Semiarid Network - CASACO is an association made up of 60 members that has a strong presence in 13 rural communities of 6 municipalities. It was created as a result of a process of intense networking with a large array of organizations and institutions and has organized itself around specific demands from certain social groups, such as women and youth. The diverse range of themes and issues that CASACO has taken on since it was formalized in 2008, its potential for networking with different social movements and its all-encompassing, inter-municipal form of action are trademarks that mark its presence in the Semiarid region of Paraíba. Beyond a doubt, this unique Association, which has a large degree of capillarity and is organized in a decentralized manner that brings out the strong leadership potential of its members, has a strong interaction with PROCASE,¹⁶ the project in the semiarid region of Paraíba supported by IFAD which financed a productive project between 2015 and 2020 with support for goat and sheep farming, technologies of water use and storage and diverse types of equipment aimed to support commercialization processes. We focus here on the role of women leaders – all of whom are part of CASACO - in a variety of innovative initiatives. Approximately 20 female farmers from the Territory of Eastern Cariri who work with sustainable agriculture have been actively involved in different stages of food production since 2003: on the one hand, planting, harvesting and processing products to be sold not only in the “Agroecological Tent” - the major reference point for the Association, in the municipality of Boqueirão -, but also in agroecological markets and fairs within the surrounding areas: Campina Grande and João Pessoa.

2. Solutions in the face of the precarious conditions of the semiarid region: Investment in local farmers as references for the experimentation of technologies

It would be impossible to discuss the importance of CASACO without citing its close relationship to the Semiarid Network (ASA)¹⁷ and its direct involvement with the construction of the Program “A million water cisterns” (P1MC)¹⁸ - a landmark when it comes to public policies that support viable solutions to the structural, deeply rooted problems caused by a chronic drought that has plagued the region for such a long period of time.



15. For this systematization, interviews were carried out with the following team members of PROCASE: Maria do Carmo Soares D'Oliveira, Nicholas Lucena Queiroz, Maria Aparecida Oliveira de Miranda Henriques. The following women, who are part of the CASACO group, or have participated in particular strategic actions over time, were also interviewed: Gracilene Macedo Braz, Francineide Barbosa de Oliveira (Fran), Maria Celia Araujo and Maria de Fátima Alves Borba.

16. PROCASE – The Project for Sustainable Development of Cariri, Seridó and Curimataú – is a result of the partnership between the Government of the state of Paraíba and IFAD – the International Fund for Agrarian Development, and acts in five rural territories - Cariri Ocidental, Cariri Oriental, Curimataú, Seridó e Médio Sertão -, benefitting 56 municipalities of the semiarid region. Its main goal is to contribute towards rural sustainable development, reducing the current levels of rural poverty and fortifying the actions of prevention and mitigation of desertification in the Project's area.

17. ASA is a network that defends a political project dedicated towards coexistence with the Semiarid region, formed by more than three thousand organizations of civil society – including rural trade unions, farmers' associations, cooperatives, NGOs etc. It connects organized institutions that act in the whole Semiarid region, defending the rights of communities in this region. The institutions that integrate ASA are organized in forums and networks in 10 states that make up the Brazilian Semiarid region (MG, BA, SE, AL, PE, PB, RN, CE, PI e MA).

18. Strategic actions aimed at Education and Social mobilization within the paradigm of “Coexistence with the Semiarid Biome” were incorporated into the public policy “One million Rural Cisterns (P1MC)” in 2001, which consequently became an intrinsic part of the governmental program “Zero Hunger” of the President Luís Inácio Lula da Silva (periods of 2003-2007 and 2008-2011).



Between 2003 and 2012, the Program of Application of Appropriate Technology to Communities (PATAC) helped execute the first edition of P1MC in 6 municipalities, while between 2009 and 2015, the same program was carried out in partnership with the Pastoral Service of Migrants in 8 municipalities. This management council that supervised the implementation of the P1MC program and began to organize its activities, constructing its action plan with a focus on ways to fortify the agroecological transition among the rural families, represents the seedling that slowly took form in 2008 and transformed into what is known today to be CASACO. As it began to expand the scope of its activities, the need to affirm its own identity as an autonomous organization became more evident, as well as the need to continue strengthening the actions of “Experimental farmers”,¹⁹ another crucial strategy for ASA since 2003. The strength and resilience of ASA as a network that stretches between 8 states in the Northeastern region of Brazil has to do with its decision to create territorial councils at a state-wide level that implement and supervise strategies and measures for agroecology and water use and storage, as well as its commitment to the creation of a network of “experimental farmers”, with the main purpose of experimenting and

exchanging technological and methodological innovations. CASACO not only considers itself as an organization that was created through its involvement with ASA in the construction and implementation of the Program “One million cisterns”, but in the current moment, it also sees itself as part of an over-reaching network dedicated towards constructing sustainable solutions for the semi-arid region, as well as participating actively in the state-wide coordination efforts.

As an association, CASACO has a broad range of goals that orient its concrete actions: (i) the construction and adaptation of social technologies for capturing and storing rainwater (cisterns, underground dams, solar desalination plants,²⁰ terraces, ecological pits and water reuse filters); (ii) agroecological production (vegetables, grains, fruits and animals); (iii) the storage of native seeds (called “seeds of passion”); (iv) the commercialization of products through the Agroecological Tent of Cariri; (v) the food service provided by the “Olaria” kitchen. CASACO has displayed a large degree of creativity in the use of technological innovations for capturing and storing water within the Semi-arid Region, which is highly vulnerable to periods of shortage of water, due to prolonged droughts.

19. The proposal of “Experimental farmers” is crucial for validating and systematizing experiences that are seen to be exemplary and that have served as a source of inspiration in diverse strategies and actions. ASA has used this concept through the years to incite exchanges and trainings between communities, publication of concrete results and production of other materials (ex: banners, pamphlets).

20. The solar desalinizers are designed to make use of saline waters from artesian wells unusable due to the high levels of salts. CASACO was involved in the construction of 70 units of desalinizers in the communities, where each unit generates an average of 15 liters of portable water per day. According to female leaders of CASACO, this social technology was developed through a project between CASACO and UEPB, with financial support from the Itau Foundation.

Beyond experimenting the feasible system for reutilizing the “grey water” that comes from sinks and showers that was financed by PROCASE between 2015 and 2020, CASACO also became engaged in the installment of solar desalination plants through financial resources gained from the Project “Ecological changes”, with support from the Itau Foundation. It is worth noting that these solar desalination plants are distinct from the water desalination plants that were installed by PROCASE in the territory of Eastern Cariri between 2018 and 2020. Out of the 19 water desalination plants which were implemented in this territory, 9 were implanted in areas in which CASACO carries out its actions, and they have proven to be one of PROCASE’s principal innovations, given that they aid both with human consumption and animal production for a very reasonable price, as well as being a simple and dynamic technological system. There are also beneficial aspects when it comes to evaluating women’s participation, given that women represent 62% of the titled beneficiaries of water desalination plants, as well as being deeply engaged in the management councils and in the on-the-ground operations of these technological innovations.

According to one of the leaders of CASACO, Maria Celia Araujo, these different kinds of technologies complement one another, since each one has its own purpose in the struggle against precarious conditions within the Semiarid region of the Northeastern part of Brazil. She declares that to face up to the conditions of the semiarid region within a spirit of “co-existence” with this biome²¹ – rather than an approach aimed at “combating” the negative aspects of the drought and its consequences - it is necessary to bring together a wide range of practices and technologies in experimental productive processes that guarantee access to a water supply for the families. In this sense, there are no easy solutions, but CASACO, as a group, understands the importance of experiencing new forms of gaining access to and guaranteeing the storage of water through the construction and adaptation of diverse types of water technologies, based on a balance between technical knowledge and the talents and capacities of the community, since community members have a solid sense of what might be most appropriate within their particular context.

What is unique about CASACO as an association is the fact that it invests in a group of farmers who have developed a strong degree of expertise in complex issues, such as the use of native seeds, through their hands-on experience in the field, which makes it difficult sometimes to distinguish between community leaders, technicians or advisors. Since its creation, CASACO was constructed by farmers, many of whom took on technical and administrative functions over time, developing new skills as they took on new responsibilities. These boundaries are more nebulous in the case of CASACO, due to the fruitful partnerships developed with a wide range of organizations (ASA, the National Semiarid Institute - INSA, Pastoral Commission of the Earth (CPT), Nucleus of Rural agroecological extension services, connected to the Federal University of Paraiba , etc.), as well as the key role of community leaders in organizing activities, experimenting innovative approaches and techniques and reaching out to families and community-based groups within such a wide territorial area. It is rare to find an organization with so much capillarity, that possesses the qualities of an extensive “network” made up of community leaders who are so highly attuned to the pressing issues of the current political context and so well-articulated with important organizations within Paraiba through solid partnerships.



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21. A series of conceptions were constructed to understand the Northeastern region as a place that carries with it the stigma of delay and severe poverty, given that these attributes are directly related to the conditions of the biome Caatinga, considered as a place with limited environmental resources that is overtaken by periods of severe drought. (ESMERALDO, 2019) This vision that “naturalizes” poverty and hunger as consequences of natural adverse conditions, such as climatic irregularities, has oriented governmental policies that aim to combat droughts up until the early 1980s. A critical perspective began to be developed in the mid 1980s, with proposals of actions that aimed to find ways of “living with” the conditions of the Semiarid region, in the understanding that the Semiarid region is a complex system composed of ecosystems with limitations and possibilities, in which it is possible to construct new, more sustainable relations between humans and the natural world. (SILVA, 2006) These series of proposals gained momentum in the late 1990s, with the creation of the Network of the Semi-arid Region (ASA), which united more than 700 NGOs and social movements.

3. Representation of women in the organizational structure of CASACO: forms of action

The Coordinator of actions and networks in CASACO, Maria Celia Araujo, makes important conclusions about the fundamental role carried out by “experimental farmers”, the majority of whom are women, due to their multiple forms of exercising leadership. They take on responsibilities not only as community organizers but also as those who possess a certain kind of expertise, attaining technical abilities and skills within a certain specific area in the course of their involvement with productive activities. According to Maria Celia, “in many occasions, we carry out workshops with men and women (in mixed groups); we coordinate workshops and trainings in agroecological techniques with ‘experimental farmers’ and we lead actions of commercialization.” She goes on to say that women tend to take the lead in all these actions, especially when it comes to the management of the “Olaria” Kitchen Group, where they play a key role in cooking and in the production of “food products.” These diverse expressions of leadership are made evident within the communities that compose the territories that make up the organizational structure of CASACO and help to construct this dynamic and innovative form of organizing from “the bottom up.”

CASACO as an organizational structure seeks to maintain equal representation between women and men in its board, as well as in its working groups and committees. According to Célia, one of the major goals of CASACO is to stimulate women’s capacities, in such a way that they take on the administrative tasks in relation to both the rural property and the community-based association, on the same level as male leaders. It is noteworthy that within the direction of CASACO, 2 of the 4 posts are occupied by women, and the president is also a woman - Maria Gomes de Oliveira. Also, when it comes to the leaders of committees or working groups, the Projects’ coordinator, Kitchen’s coordinator, administrative coordinator and youth and women’s collectives’ coordinators are all female leaders. The only male coordinator is of a working group dedicated towards the construction of a solidarity revolving

fund for credit²² - a collectively managed community savings reserve that is used to strengthen family farming.

CASACO currently has 7 specific “working groups”, all of them constructed around specific interests and demands. One of the groups is dedicated to organizing native seeds in a reserve, known as a “seed bank”, and networking with other groups and organizations that are dedicated to the preservation of native seeds in the state of Paraíba. Another interesting initiative is the “Olaria” kitchen, which involves the use of a mini industrial kitchen in the headquarters of the Association to prepare and serve food products for events, but that was deactivated during the period of the pandemic. CASACO carries out trainings and workshops with the members of each of these “groups” - “the women’s collective” and “youth collective” – on a wide range of issues, as well as cultural activities, such as “cultural circles”, capoeira and artisanship.

CASACO is connected to a state-wide effort involving the construction of a network of organizations that aims to preserve and distribute “native seeds”, as a fundamental strategy for facing the difficult conditions caused by the prolonged drought, as well as promoting food and nutritional security and elevating the rate of biodiversity. Since 1999, a state-wide network of “native seeds” – known as “passion seeds” - has been devoted to the construction of seed banks, exchanges between farmers and technicians as well as investigations and research projects focused on the development and experimentation of different kinds of seeds. The term “passion seeds” has to do with the interpretation that people save seeds out of an act of “passion.” Most all of the communities in the semiarid region have seed banks and women play a key role in cultivating the tradition of preserving and exchanging the native seeds.

CASACO promotes 7 community native seed banks in three municipalities within this geographic area: Caraúbas, Boqueirão and Alcantil. In all events that are coordinated by CASACO – whether they be exchanges, encounters or open fairs – native seeds are exchanged. CASACO is especially well-known for cultivating and exchanging what is known to be a kind of native bean seed, classified as “fava.” Francineide Barbosa de Oliveira, one of the community leaders who is deeply involved in the cultivation of community gardens and seed banks, as well as the

22. This savings fund is formed through the voluntary donation of resources by each member who participates in it or it can also be constituted through external resources destined to the community. In the case of CASACO, every member makes a monthly contribution and these collective resources are used for granting benefits to the rural properties. Through the use of this solidarity fund, the association was able to implant biodigestors, ecological stoves, wire screens and reuse water system filters. The fund is managed by all those involved.

action involving the agroecological logbooks, claims that most of the families have the custom of saving their own seeds as a family unit, especially varied kinds of beans, corn, watermelon and okra. Fran also highlights the effort to preserve seeds derived from animals, such as those that originate from poultry hens or goats and are so prevalent in this particular region – claiming that they can be viewed as a form of “savings”, in the context of increasing levels of precariousness and economic instability.

Within CASACO, there exists a women’s group made up of approximately 15 rural women from the areas surrounding 9 cities that represent focal points in the region. Since this women’s group plays a major role in the management of this investment conceded by PROCASE, it is fair to affirm that CASACO can be considered to be one among 23 women’s groups that have benefited from productive projects, constituting 24% of the total of investment plans. This Women’s group, that exists within a mixed organizational structure, serves as an excellent example of self-management, since their meetings are financed through a series of creative strategies, such as the resources raised (ex: transportation costs) through lunches that are prepared by the “Olaria Kitchen”. Celia claims that one of the main objectives of the educational courses and trainings that CASACO participates in is to help the women “leave the private sphere and occupy the public sphere, in search of their autonomy, not only when it comes to their income, but also in respect to their self-esteem.” Some strategies have strengthened the Women’s group itself, such as exchanges that took place in 2018 between productive groups, with a focus on gender issues. Four workshops that focus on issues of gender, race and ethnicity were also carried out by the organization that coordinates technical assistance services in the territory of Eastern Cariri – Institute of Assistance for Citizenship and Local Sustainable development (IDS) – with the orientation of the Gender Specialist from PROCASE’s staff team - Maria do Carmo Soares d’Oliveira. In many of these workshops, a reflection concerning the nature of “domestic work”/“care work” took place, which has been reinforced by the Campaign for “equal distribution of domestic work”, a Campaign that was launched in 2016 and has been continually fueled by a large array of social organizations that take part in the “Network of Feminism and Agroecology” within the Northeastern region of Brazil. It is important to point out that this kind of action is aligned with one of the major components of the IFAD gender strategy on an international level: the

search for transformations in the distribution of tasks on a domestic and community level, so as to alleviate women’s workload. Another element that is worthy of mentioning when it comes to PROCASE’s intervention strategy is its efforts to involve this women’s collective of CASACO in local councils for sustainable agricultural development, among other spaces dedicated towards public policy making. All these actions have been closely monitored by a “Gender reference group”, made up of members of PROCASE’s staff and partner organizations with the key function of constructing a work plan, evaluating the actions that have been carried out by PROCASE and formulating recommendations for improving such strategies. This particular space was strengthened after the work carried out with the Agroecological Logbooks, given that the use of this methodology made all those involved acutely aware of the need to plan and evaluate actions collectively so as to attain solid and far-reaching results.

Another memorable moment has been the yearly “Women’s March for Life and for Agroecology”, made up of 5 million women from the region who are mobilized in a preparatory process organized around key issues, such as the just division of domestic and care work and the struggle against multiple forms of violence against women. The women who take part in CASACO return from this march every year moved by the powerful emotions that are raised by this mobilization. Another significant activity for the Women’s group within CASACO has been the involvement of 15 women in the use of the agroecological logbooks. The women from CASACO also mention the “Campaign for a Just Division of Domestic Labor”, an initiative which has been carried out by the “Network of Feminism and Agroecology from the Northeast” and which during the Pandemic has occurred only on-line, constituting a crucial part of their political agenda.

Within CASACO, there is a strong emphasis on rural women as “experimenters” who serve as protagonists in the invention and dissemination of innovations. According to one of the leaders of CASACO, being considered an experimenter in agroecological practices means seeing their properties as “experiences in the transition” towards agroecology, engaged in constant processes of change and mutation.” This vision is especially interesting because it allows us to consider “agroecology” as a process: in other words, one is not naturally “agroecological”, given that agroecology is a theory, a form of practice and a social movement that evolves over time.

Certain leaders can be identified as spokespersons of unique experiences, and have grown to believe that they have a special role to play, for instance, as “safekeepers” of biodiversity, through the care that they take in saving and passing on “native seeds” or protecting and preserving “native races” of small animals, such as chickens. Often, they are the ones who take the lead in exchanges between communities and territories, using their experience as an example that can stimulate similar experiences, as well as serving as a reference point for their replication. For instance, Sra. Maria Gomes cultivates native breeds of goats, in partnership with INSA through the Nucleus of Animal Production Systems, that has also carried out a number of investigations about native poultry chickens and eggs that explore the nutritional qualities of forage plants from the Caatinga biome.

Another community leader who serves as a reference in the region is Francineide Barbosa de Oliveira (Fran), who acted as a mobilizer of PM1C for ASA for many years and discovered a new mission for herself after participating in the first training of the agroecological logbooks in Recife in 2019. When she returned from this initial training in the methodology with leaders and team members of other IFAD projects, she recognized herself as a female farmer with the capacity to multiply and extend her expertise within the communities, motivating other women to use the agroecological logbooks through groups of whatsapp as well as other mechanisms. Her own backyard garden also serves as a reference point in the community and in the territory as a whole, because of the diversity of plants, vegetables and small animal production. She claims that she takes pride in cultivating medicinal plants because “they promote health.” Since August of 2019, she began to take part in the Gender Working Group of PROCASE – a steering committee that gives guidance on the use of the agroecological logbooks within the rural territories.

4. Actions with the realm of agricultural production and commercialization

The investment plan with the support of PROCASE, which was put into place in 2012, was constructed with the following objectives: (i) to fortify the productive output of the backyard gardens; (ii) to construct and implement technologies for water capture and storage, such as the reuse of “grey water”; (iii) to acquire equipment that can support small animals, such as chickens and goats; (iv) to improve the processing of products, adding to their value and contributing towards their greater durability so that they can be successfully sold in the Agroecology Tent – a collective space for commercialization. Another crucial dimension of this productive project has been the acquisition of breeding stock, breeders and equipment to expand forage support, which involves validating the position of women as goat and sheep breeders, many of whom take on leadership roles within CASACO.

In this particular productive project, there are 15 holders of financial investments dedicated towards 15 backyard gardens -, which includes 12 women (2 of which are youth) and 3 men. Since the onset of this productive project, women have played a major role, given that they are considered the principal holders of investments (12 out of 15). One of the first steps of the Project involved giving out equipment: the installment of 15 filters for freezers, a balance, vacuum packers and wrappers. Technical assistance was also given to the group members in 2017 and 2018 for the creation and development of the logo for their products, other matters related to the commercialization process, as well as technical aspects for small animal breeding.



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One of the major focuses of the work with commercialization has been the improvement of techniques for food processing, in the case of cheeses, meats and fruit desserts, as well as measures to be used for improving the logistics (especially the forms of transportation). The women work individually or in small family groups in the processing of goods within their homes or in the “*Olaría*” kitchen, which is located in the Association’s headquarters. One of the leaders of CASACO, Celia, declares that one of the most important features of this productive project involves the expansion of the supply of meats – an important source of income in this region – as well as the construction of units for food processing. Such techniques and equipment have allowed the women in CASACO to further develop their skills in food production, so that they can take advantage of the different properties of diverse kinds of food. Other advantages of minimally processed foods include the possibility of cutting down waste and guaranteeing a longer duration of such products over time. It is worth noting that minimal forms of processing food, beyond contributing towards the preservation of their nutrients, given that very little of their original value is lost, are also clear expressions of the creative capacity of rural women, who engage in initiatives for transforming certain kinds of food – in their raw form – into a wide array of “sub-products” that are derived from the “main” crop. This kind of situation can be observed in the case of manioc root, with its capacity to transform into more than 10 kinds of products.

One of the most innovative dimensions of the commercialization plan of CASACO is the construction of an “Agroecology tent” as a fixed reference point in Cariri, which over time is intended to become a “network” with focal points in 6 cities of the region. CASACO is certified for selling organic products directly, a victory that was gained in 2018 with assistance from SEBRAE, as well as the private Brazilian Service of support for Micro and Small Enterprises. With the invention of this new strategy – the Agroecological Tent – there was a drastic change in these processes, in the sense that the products were no longer handed over to “middlemen” who would negotiate the prices. The products began to be negotiated directly with the administrative sector of this reference point, which retained 25% of the total value of each product sold. The women involved with backyard gardens have also used the Agroecology tent as a commercial outlet for selling their food production, which has greatly increased their economic autonomy.

In terms of other commercialization strategies, it is interesting to note that public policies such as PAA and PNAE were never easily accessed by the rural female farmers. The tradition of public marketplaces is strong in Paraíba, and in recent times, women have made a conscious effort to become more directly involved in such short circuits for commercialization. Usually one of the female farmers takes the products to sell in the local market, acting as a representative of a larger group of producers. One of the major challenges faced by the Women’s Collective in CASACO involves the regulations and restrictive measures for selling certain processed products, such as cheeses.

During the pandemic, it was necessary to make some adjustments in strategies aimed at commercialization. The Agroecological Tent continues to be a major reference point for selling products, but it has turned into a “distribution” center, since after the products are handed in, deliveries are made to the consumers. Many women producers within CASACO report that the demand for products has increased and that many of them have begun to use “Ze Delivery” as an on-line system for delivery. CASACO as an organization is investing in new tactics, such as updating the Facebook page with products that are adequate to each season as well as a list of recipes to incite curiosity about certain kinds of fresh food. The organization has been discussing the possibility of engaging the children of family farmers in these social networks so that they can aid their parents in the use of technological innovations for selling agricultural products during this critical period and in the near future, as a form of amplifying their clientele in nearby cities.

CASACO continues to display its capacity for constructing innovative strategies in the face of adverse times – such as the pandemic -, which affected all commercial transactions for family-based agricultural production since March of 2020. What is unique about its organizational tactics is that it seeks to involve all family and community members in all kinds of initiatives. Women, as well as other social groups, gain an active voice in such a flexible, democratically-based organizational structure.

CHAPTER 4

Women's leadership within the Afro- descendent community "Mearim" in Ceará, Brazil.

1. Introduction

This process of systematization focuses on the organizing strategies of a recently created community-based association in the afro-descendent community of “*Mearim*” within the municipality of Quixeramobim in Ceará. This experience is significant in that it reveals the important role taken on by women who come forth as leaders within the organization itself as well as on the sidelines – whether it be in respect to agricultural production and commercialization, or in acts of validation of their cultural traditions. This community is assisted by the nongovernmental organization CETRA – Center for support and assistance for workers -, which is one of the organizations that has been included in contracts endorsed by the Project Dom Helder Camara (PDHC II) for technical assistance services within the state of Ceará.²³ Initiated in 2001, this project, that is in its second phase of execution, is carried out on the federal level, by the Ministry of Agriculture, livestock and Food supply, in conjunction with the National Agency of Technical Assistance and Rural Extension services. It is present in 913 municipalities in 11 states of the national federation and has the main objective of providing technical assistance services with a strong focus on improving local productive systems, as well as contributing towards the diffusion of social technologies and the construction of public policies and programs dedicated towards sustainable agricultural production.

In the case of this particular project, the targeting strategy was implemented with success, in the sense that women represent more than half of the direct beneficiaries. Out of a total of 54.046 families that are benefitted, 36.108 or 67% are seen to be represented by women, which means that they are the direct beneficiaries of the proposed actions. Within the register that is made of the families assisted by PDHC II, an identification is made of those family members who declare themselves to have some level of responsibility in the “unit of production.” Within the information system established by the National Agency of Technical Assistance and Rural Extension (ANATER), it is interesting to note that in the current moment, 37.072 women are identified as being mainly “responsible” for the family unit and for the investments made, in contrast with 32.156 men. When it comes to the promotion of

activities in the “productive sphere”, it is interesting to note that in 10.979 families - out of a total of 13.965 families benefitted -, women are considered to be responsible for the managing of financial resources.

However, upon evaluating the Project’s approach from the perspective of a gender strategy with a focus on social transformation, it is important to note that the “inclusion” of women in the design of a project or program focused on sustainable agricultural development is far more complex than simply guaranteeing that a significant number of women are direct beneficiaries and/or holders of investment plans or productive enterprises. For that reason, educational activities that strengthen women’s groups and networks on a territorial level, contributing towards affirming women as social and political agents, as well as highlighting their capacity to take on leadership positions and encouraging their direct involvement in the construction of public policies are extremely important measures to be taken into account.

It is crucial that Projects adopt gender-transformative approaches, addressing the structural causes of gender inequality rather than merely responding to the needs and demands that appear on the surface. In alignment with IFAD’s institutional gender strategy,²⁴ defined for the period of 2016 to 2025, such an approach goes beyond “focalization”: that is, the prioritization of women as direct beneficiaries of strategic actions. It involves a focus on those interventions that create opportunities for individuals and groups to challenge and change gender norms, that promote positions of social and political influence for women in communities and that tackle the hierarchical, unequal power relations between women and men at the family and community levels. In the case of PDHC II, it is evident that crucial steps have been taken in this direction, principally when it comes to not only encouraging women’s empowerment through their inclusion as “direct beneficiaries” and “holders” of investment plans, but also granting them a privileged place as the major participants of capacity-building activities, as can be witnessed in this particular experience. Such elements also can be found in experiences outlined in other chapters of this systematization.

23. The following staff members from CETRA were interviewed during this systematization process: José Emmanuel Lima Sousa, Danubia Alexandre Xavier and Larissa Rodrigues de Sousa.

24. In its institutional strategy, inaugurated in 2016, IFAD prioritizes the impacts of strategies that aim towards gender equality and women’s empowerment. This implies not only contemplating a large number of projects that incorporate a focus on gender within their design through “mainstreaming” and/or directly involve a significant proportion of women as direct beneficiaries, but also contemplating interventions that can be seen to adopt a gender transformative approach, in alignment with the Objectives of Sustainable development - ODS 1 “The end of poverty” and ODS 5 “Gender equality.”

This systematization does not bring to center stage the narrative of a “group of women” that organizes itself in an autonomous manner. Rather than that, it clearly shows the impacts of women’s organizing efforts within an over-reaching structure: the Association that was recently created for the afro-descendent community “Mearim”, which is engaged in a process of recognition and affirmation of its ethnic identity, in dialogue with the state authorities. In this case, women’s organizing efforts²⁵ gain visibility within the context of a community-based organization, showing women’s potential to lead the administration of projects and investment plans, as they look out for their own particular interests while also considering the demands and necessities of the community as a whole. Such an experience is a clear example of how organizing efforts that arise from a specific group – such as women or youth – within a diversified community, do not disintegrate the other organizing processes or divide the “general struggle”, as we are often led to think, given that all issues that affect collective interests are interconnected.

2. The historical evolution of this experience and its repercussions

The community of “Mearim” has 33 families, and of this total, 19 are considered to be afro-descendent families. The community has reached out to CEQUIRCE – the state Commission for Rural “Quilombola” Communities of Ceará -, as well as the Secretary of Agricultural Development, in an attempt to create a new association that specifically focuses on the validation of its heritage. According to one of the female leaders, Antônia Eliane Duarte da Cunha, “the idea of creating our own association, dedicated towards safeguarding our rights as “quilombolas”, that differs from the community’s older association, was a dream at one point, but now it has become a reality.”

The afro-descendent community association, which was recently created, is made up of 17 families. At the same time that here are concerns about fighting for recognition as an afro-descendent community during a moment of such political turbulence when the political scenario is full of constant oscillations, there is also a common understanding that, given that these lands do not formally belong to them, only the recognition of their status as a “quilombola” community will allow them to have formal rights over the land.

Many of the women involved in the community-based association in the region of “Central Sertão” were directly involved in PDHC²⁶ during the first phase of its execution. Also, many of them took part in the Project focused on Agroecology that was implemented in 2011 with the objective of supporting families who were experiencing the “transition to agroecological practices” through a variety of educational activities and exchanges, in close alliance with Councils of Rural and Sustainable development and other technical assistance institutions.



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25. A total of 10 women take on leadership positions within the community-based organizations in Miririm: Valdeniza Ferreira de Menezes, Antônia Cristiane da Silva, Maria Jacinta da Silva, Antônia Eliane Duarte da Cunha, Francisca Antônia Siqueirada Cunha, Regina Célia Pinel, Maria Aldenira Nascimento da Cunha, Francisca Jacira Batista da Cunha, Valdenia Ferreira da Cunha e Antonia Paula da Silva.

26. The first phase of the Project “Networking and Dialogue about Public policies to reduce poverty and inequality in the northeastern region of the Semiárido biome” – Project Dom Helder Camara was initiated in 2001, under the coordination of the Ministry of Agrarian development (MDA), in partnership with the national agency for technical assistance services (Anater). Up until 2010, 13 million families in the northeastern semiárido region were benefitted. It was viewed as an exemplary project by FIDA due to its success during the first phase of implementation, which motivated the financing of the second phase, so as to consolidate the acquired experiences, socialize the lessons learned and offer contributions to diverse instances of the government with the objective of improving public policies focused on family-based agriculture.



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Certain characteristics are central in the affirmation of this community's identity as an afro-descendent community, such as the fact that they unite to carry out tasks as a "collective" – coming together as men or women in tasks that can be considered to be gender-specific. For example, the men often form a "task force" when they plan to plant their crops, while women form a "task force" to thresh or husk beans or corn, or when they store seeds for "seed banks." These collective efforts are part of the social fabric that sustains a community such as "Mearim", as well as so many other traditional (afro-descendent or indigenous) communities in Brazil.

Given that "Mearim" is an afro-descendent community, it is important to consider the fact that its major struggles have been focused on the recognition of its ethnic identity. According to Larissa Rodrigues de Sousa, one of the technicians from the organization Cetra, the women in this community have a strong history of organization and are deeply engaged in safeguarding their own rights. The use of the agroecological logbooks by CETRA within these communities since 2012 was a major factor in stimulating the women to involve themselves directly in a productive activity, reinforcing their active involvement in projects and processes that were put into place before PDHC II began

its cycle of implementation. For instance, the women who participate in this initiative accessed a fund of the Palmares foundation²⁷ – Project Zumbi - for cultivating free range chickens in 2018, with the purpose of strengthening their practices of self-consumption and commercialization. Before that, in 2013, there was an investment in sheep farming via the Program "Brazil without Misery."

PDHC II is a project that gives support to families and grassroots, community-based groups through technical assistance services, rather than providing financial support for investments in productive activities. The role of the technicians in PDHC II is to support the farmers in their comprehension of and access to public policies and programs, such as PRONAF and Agroamigo (from the Northeastern Bank), as well as ensuring that they make more efficient use of investments that they have received, in the sense of improving the quality of their productive activities and enterprises. To achieve this goal, the technicians from CETRA who work with 1.700 families in 8 municipalities have carried out a series of actions, such as a selection of families based on diverse criteria, complemented by a diagnosis and a series of visits and collective educational activities.

27. The Cultural Foundation Palmares is a public Brazilian institution created in 1988 linked to the Ministry of Culture that aims to reinforce rights of citizenship, as well as cultivate the identity and collective memory of ethnic groups.

3. Underlying principles of a system of technical assistance services in rural communities within the context of PDHC II

The investment in poultry farming, that was originally supported by the Palmares Foundation with the involvement of CEQUIRCE has been taken on by the women who take part in the community-based association. This productive project has been accompanied by the technicians from CETRA within the scope of the project PDHC II. The women take an active part in various tasks required within this investment, ranging from the acquisition of the inputs needed, the administration of the funds, the commercialization of the products, the mobilization of the community members and the organization of meetings. What becomes evident is that this initiative is a direct result of the technical assistance that was provided by the team of professionals during the Project Dom Helder Camera - Phase I, which has had important repercussions during the second phase. This kind of experience testifies to the importance of the system of ATER (rural technical assistance and extension services) in the construction of different forms of social organization, contributing directly towards the strengthening of capacities within diverse collectives.

CETRA is an organization that has accompanied this territory and community since the Project Dom Helder Camera - Phase I, which was carried out between 2001 and 2010. Officially founded in 1978, CETRA is a nongovernmental organization that develops strategic actions in 7 rural territories in the following areas/themes: Agroecology and peaceful coexistence with the semiarid biome; social and environmental actions; economic justice; the construction of social organizations and networks; gender and youth; social communication. In 1994, CETRA underwent an internal transition, moving its focus from juridical assistance to rural technical assistance, in the construction of a new vision of agriculture from an agroecological perspective

that supports and validates diverse traditional practices and sources of knowledge. In all the territories in which it develops projects and programs, CETRA gives special attention to certain strategic actions that provide the conditions for solidifying community-based organizations, such as the construction of networks made up of farmers that aim to insert themselves in popular, agroecological marketplaces.²⁸ CETRA also has dedicated its efforts towards strengthening team relations, in such a way that it is able to solidify its technical assistance services, which involve a series of trainings in themes that are considered to be crucial to the success of its intervention strategies (agroecology, communication, gender, recuperation of native seeds). In the context of PDHC II, some limitations have been encountered when it comes to carrying out educational activities, due to a series of regulations concerning the number of activities that are permitted and their nature, but luckily, many of these limitations have been overcome, due to the team's capacity to develop a system of ATER – technical assistance and rural extension - with a strongly pedagogical character, in its foundation and forms of operationalization.

In this sense, to understand more clearly the connection between the system of Technical Assistance and Rural Extension and the construction of knowledge and expertise in agricultural practices it is important to cultivate a critical reflection about the system of ATER in place within Brazil, its historical construction and its connection with processes of social organization. In 2010, a new law was created and sanctioned for the system of Technical Assistance and Rural Extension in Brazil, that inaugurated a new vision of these services, as a result of fruitful dialogues between social movements and organizations and governmental authorities. This new vision was fundamental in the sense of deconstructing the conventional system of ATER, that since the 1950s had operated with a top-to-bottom, unilateral approach. Such an approach considered “technical” knowledge as both scientifically founded and neutral, to be passed on to rural communities as passive beneficiaries. This approach failed to take into consideration diverse forms of knowledge, as well as local and regional cultural traditions. The new law for Technical Assistance and Rural Extension services in Brazil set important precedents for a new conception of rural agricultural development that was horizontally constructed and more socially inclusive, with a strong emphasis on agroecology, the decentralization

28. In the territory of Sobral, CETRA has contributed towards the construction of a network (“Network of marketplace sellers”), made up of 60 farmers (50 women and 10 men), organized for commercialization in local and regional marketplaces.

of actions and the participation of groups that are often socially excluded (women, traditional communities, youth). (WEITZMAN, 2010) Many nongovernmental organizations that provide technical assistance services, such as CETRA, especially those that adopt agroecology as a theoretical framework, a reference scheme and an orientation for its actions, have contributed enormously to introducing new ways to carry out rural extension services. CETRA, like many other NGOs, not only promotes technological and methodological innovations, but also has greatly contributed to the strengthening of diverse forms of social organization. Recognizing the importance of over-reaching, community-based organizations, such as associations, but also responding to the specific interests and demands of those social groups that are often seen to be “on the margin” (women, youth and traditional communities) – lies at the core of any Technical Assistance System in rural areas. CETRA has also played a key role in forging connections with other institutions that affirm ethnic identity, helping the women’s collective within the community of “*Mearim*” to have pride in their heritage and ratify their place in the society as afro-descendent women who have a unique contribution to collective processes. For example, in November of 2019, during the pandemic, a project began to be executed called “Black women in movement” in the name of the Institute of Rural youth in Brazil, with financial support from ONU Women’s institution

and the European Union. This project has fortified the agency of women within afro-descendent communities in diverse territories of Ceará, including the women from the community “*Mearim*”, through the use of diverse social communication methods that aim to consolidate this network via virtual on-line platforms, such as YouTube.

4. The agroecological logbooks: a key component of women’s organizing efforts

The use of the agroecological logbooks²⁹ is cited as a strategic action that was decisive in increasing the potential of women’s organizing efforts in this particular context. “Agroecological logbooks” represent an important methodological instrument that registers the impact of women’s agricultural production on food and nutritional security, income and agro-biodiversity, giving visibility to women beneficiaries’ contributions in agricultural production, sales, consumption and exchange. Because of its simplicity, this instrument is easily assimilated by rural women, and has the capacity to give visibility to both the economic and non-economic aspects of their productive activities. (WEITZMAN, JALIL, et. al 2020) It is part of an umbrella strategy to strengthen the empowerment of women as farmers, especially within backyard gardens – the space from which a large part of the production that they report is derived – as well as being a landmark in the construction of innovative, participatory monitoring and evaluation methods that use inputs from women beneficiaries across IFAD’s portfolio.

In the case of this particular community, “*Mearim*”, the agroecological logbooks are seen to have been a decisive factor in the construction of a horizontal and decentralized model of technical assistance that contemplates women as the key protagonists. According to Larissa Rodrigues de Sousa, the technical assistant from CETRA who has given assistance to this community, the use of the agroecological logbook permitted a close proximity between female



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29. The agroecological logbook project was put into place in July of 2019 through the Semear International Program (Brazil grant implemented by IICA) and involves all IFAD projects in the country. A total of 650 agroecological booklets were systematized during a sixth month period through a joint effort involving the Monitoring and Evaluation teams from the 6 projects and a team of specialists and a publication and video were produced during this time period, revealing the concrete results of this methodological approach and its diverse impacts, many of which dialogue with a wide array of social and economic indicators that are part of the log-frames used in the M & E systems of the six projects. The data from the logbooks continues to be systematized, given that the intention is that this information gathered and analyzed completes a year-long cycle, in such a way that differences can be revealed in accordance with the seasonal variations and fluctuations in the productive cycles.

farmers and female technicians, since within CETRA, female professionals played a major role in the coordination of sensitivity-raising sessions, trainings and systematization of the data. Lara affirms that the methodology of the agroecological logbooks was critical in the construction of a women's network at the territorial level partly because the use of this instrument helps to forge links between women through their collective perception of the significance of productive practices led by female farmers.

The women involved in this initiative claim that they tend to become more involved in the actions when female technicians are at the forefront of technical assistance services. Many of the women interviewed testified to the fact that when they perceived the crucial role that women exercise as technical assistants, they were also able to understand their importance as producers in rural sustainable development processes. This is an important reflection, because it shows us how important it is to incorporate a gender perspective in systems of technical assistance, a factor that has to do with the way the strategies and actions are implemented, but also with the roles played by female technicians who guide technical assistance processes and their cycles of implementation.

Although only 2 women participated in this action from the community of "Mearim", its influence was far-reaching, due to the fact that CETRA made a point of bringing the women together for collective meetings to discuss the content of the logbooks and analyze its results. Lara, the technical assistant who was most active in the accompaniment of the Agroecological logbooks, explains that at the beginning, when there was an effort to involve the women in this action, the reason that only 2 women leaders from the community took on a commitment - Maria Jacinta da Silva and Antônia Eliane Duarte da Cunha - is that, as Lara herself explains, "the women from "Mearim" do not truly believe in the potential of their productive abilities."

It is noteworthy that at the beginning of this process, both Jacinta and Eliane were resistant, as they felt that they would not have anything to register, since there is a major limitation in the community when it comes to access to natural resources such as water and land, which most definitely represents an impediment in productive processes. During the meetings that occurred on a monthly basis, between September of 2019 and March of 2020, Jacinta and Eliane began to perceive the importance of the quantity of their production due to the calculations that are made based on the information gathered from the

logbooks. Lara declares that after 3 months of registering their production in the agroecological logbooks, Eliane had produced a total of R\$2.500 (a total of what was donated, consumed, sold or exchanged on a community level), and in this moment, she became aware of the importance of the agricultural production under her leadership within the family unit. According to Lara, other women from the community started to get involved with these visits made by technicians from CETRA to accompany the use of the agroecological logbooks, in such a way that "the logbooks mobilized the women from the community in the sense of making them more fully aware of the weight of the production in backyard gardens of which they are solely responsible, thereby allowing them to fully perceive their role as producers, as well as their contribution within community organizing efforts in certain spaces, such as the Association."

Another dimension that is important to analyze in respect to the agroecological logbooks is the nature of the agricultural production that is under the responsibility of Jacinta and Eliane and the kinds of practices in which they involve themselves, such as the donation of food to family members and neighbors. Lara claims that compared to the other communities that are involved with the agroecological logbooks, the women from the community "Mearim" are very committed to registering their production on a daily level and tend to fill up 8 pages of the logbook within one month. She claims that their engagement in the use of this instrument makes it so that they register on a more frequent basis than other women. Also, the kind of food that is registered and its social functions are quite revealing about the reality of this particular community within the territory. The large amount of food produced may have something to do with the way that food production occurs in the context of an afro-descendent community, which relies on collective efforts and task forces. In such a way, due to the strategies that they use, these kinds of communities are able to maximize their amount of food production

Most of the food that is registered is dedicated towards self-consumption and donation. According to Lara, the rate of self-consumption in "Mearim" is one of the highest in all communities accompanied by CETRA, which partly has to do with the isolation of the community from local outlets for commerce, but also has to do with the fact that "women are at the center of the stage, guaranteeing the basic food needs and rights of their family members." Another practice in which they are deeply involved is food

donation, which is also a reflection of the importance of a cultural tradition that goes back to many past generations, involving reciprocity and exchange, whether it be food, labor or other goods and services. Once again, these are practices that have sustained the social fabric of afro-descendent communities for years and years and come to the forefront during the systematization of the data from these logbooks.

Lara concludes by saying that the “agroecological logbooks are a spark that lights a fire”, inspiring other women to become involved in community organizing processes. The women involved in this action affirm that after the use of the agroecological logbooks, many women who did not participate in workshops or other collective activities began to participate in these kinds of activities, besides becoming more actively involved in the community association. This kind of feedback is proof of the power of agroecological logbooks in the strengthening of social organization within diverse collectives; in other words, when women reflect about their experiences with this methodological instrument in a group setting, inevitably they begin to become more involved in other processes within the communities and in the region. This is one of the reasons that it is important to emphasize the importance of working with the agroecological logbooks on a collective level, reinforcing moments of reflection with groups of women who are registering their production on a daily level. Lara claims that CETRA is currently identifying other women in the community of “Mearim” who desire to adopt the use of the logbooks in the coming months, until May of 2021, many of whom have accompanied the visits and meetings that took place with Jacinta and Eliane during 2019 and 2020.

5. Fortifying forms of collective social organization: signs of progress

The signs of this progress on a collective level are quite evident when we consider their leadership positions within the community-based association that was recently created in July of 2020: for instance, the president of the association is a woman, and in the directory of the

association, 5 women and 6 men participate, in such a way that there is gender parity (almost 50% men and 50% women) within this particular instance. When it comes to commercialization, positive results also become clearly evident. Many of the women from “Mearim” commercialize breads, yogurt and crackers at a local level (in the community, selling from home-to-home) and every 15 days, they commercialize in marketplaces.

As was mentioned earlier on, when it comes to productive activities, it is interesting to note that most all the activities are carried out in groups, within a “task force.” This is a strong cultural characteristic in afro-descendent communities and other traditional communities within Brazil, given that they tend to carry out their tasks in a collective manner, collaborating with one another for making a fence, putting up a pen for chickens or constructing a technological innovation for water capture and storage. The female leaders claim that in many of these “task forces”, when the community comes together to construct a piece of equipment or participate in a productive activity, the women are more present in numbers, whereas the men often participate as mere collaborators.

The women had the opportunity to participate in 3 workshops, facilitated by the organization CETRA, without the presence of men, and in all of these occasions, they report the importance of creating specific moments dedicated towards creating their own space and strengthening their forms of organization. The women within the afro-descendent association that was recently created also report the importance of taking on other projects, dedicated towards sewing or culinary activities, such as processing dairy products (yogurt, cheese) and making cookies or breads.

The 10 women who are actively involved in the community-based association claim that during the pandemic, the possibilities of commercialization increased, partly because most consumers are within their homes and have less options as well as having limited access to markets. Through cell phone use or other types of social media, the women involved in these productive efforts have been able to easily make contact with consumers and attend to their demands. The expansion of their commercialization activities, through direct contact with a wide range of consumers through social media, has most definitely contributed towards strengthening women’s organizing efforts within the community of “Mearim”.

CHAPTER 5

The experience of Tiana:
a model in wastewater
reuse and agroecology
in the Community “*Olho
d’Água Velho*” in Ceará,
Brazil.

1. Introduction

This experience is different than the others presented in this publication because it focuses on one farmer and naturally inclined leader – Maria Celeste Pereira da Silva (Mrs. Tiana): a woman who experiments new technologies and methods in agroecology, replicating such experiences within her family and the community as a whole. Tiana serves as a source of inspiration, being a strong example to others within the field of agricultural production. She derives her leadership potential from her actions, through the dynamic, experimental method of “learning by doing”. This is the case of this particular leader, who does not even consider herself to be a leader because she does not fit into the “mold” that is constructed socially for defining leadership traits and qualities. Her experience, developed within the context of the Project Paulo Freire in Ceará with direct assistance given by IAC - Instituto Antônio Conselheiro³⁰ - is incorporated into this publication because, although it is developed by a single person in her home and backyard gardens, it helps to inspire and solidify collective experiences on a larger scale.



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2. The nature of the experiments developed by Mrs. Tiana: agroecological practices and technologies for water use and storage

The experience lived out by Mrs. Tiana, in the community of “*Olho d’Água Velho*”, that is located 12 kilometers from the main headquarters of the municipality of Ipu, Ceará is a clear manifestation of the capacity to unite diverse strategies – agroecological practices, technologies for water use and storage and alternative practices for commercialization – in an intervention focused on one productive space – backyard gardens. A simple technology – called “reuse of grey water” – provoked a strong revolution in Tiana’s life and in those around her, who consider her to be an important example of innovation, because it allowed her to fully adopt agroecology as an option for sustainable agricultural practices. The lack of water in the Semiarid region – which has intensified during the prolonged drought between 2010 and 2016 -, has made it more difficult to maximize the level of production and fully experiment agroecological practices. Although agroecological practices require less inputs and resources than modernized agriculture, that was constructed as a model for agriculture in the 1950s and 60s, as part of the “Green Revolution”,³¹ water is a necessity for food production. In 2019, Tiana and her family received the system of “reuse of grey water”, a social technology that collects water that is used in baths, the cleaning of clothes and dishes. This water is collected and directed to a filter composed of biological and physical mechanisms, and after being filtered, the water is stored in a tank, to be reused in the irrigation of fruit trees, vegetables, medicinal plants, among others. The reuse water system is a strategic option for dealing with the challenges of the semi-arid region, since it is inexpensive and easy to implement, which increases its possibilities for replication. It is the kind of technology that can be easily amplified and taken to a larger scale, partly

30. Information for this systematization was provided by professionals from the team of IAC: Amanda de Lima Silva and Karina Ikeda -, both social advisors -, and Jorge Henrique Alves, the professional responsible for technical assistance in agricultural development.

31. The Green Revolution is considered to be a set of technology transfer initiatives aimed at increasing agricultural production worldwide that were constructed on the basis of the argument that they would combat world hunger. The discourse that is behind the intervention strategies fuels the idea that food production must be increased, neglecting other factors that should be taken into account, such as the level of access to quality food by all social groups, as well as the distribution or concentration of wealth and power in societies around the globe, whether they be “developed” or “third world” countries. This model has been associated with chemical fertilizers, agrochemicals, and controlled water-supply (usually involving irrigation), as well as newer methods of cultivation that involve mechanization. All of these together were seen at that time as a “package of practices and instruments” that supersede ‘traditional’ technology and are to be adopted as a whole. The belief in high levels of technology for agricultural production represents the basis of “agrobusiness” – monopolized by large enterprises that control a diversity of products: industrialized food and transgenics, pharmaceutical remedies, among others.



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because of its simplicity, as well as representing a valuable form of innovation, as it was created in dialogues between farmers and technicians within the semiarid region, through a fruitful dialogue between different forms of knowledge and expertise. It is also an ecological technology that contributes to environmental sustainability, because the water no longer flows through the backyard garden, causing harm to the soil, to the animals and to the family itself.

It is interesting to observe that, in the case of Dona Tiana, before the implementation of the technology of reuse of “grey water”, there were a series of other prior experiments: “Before the installment of the reuse technology, we placed a pipe that came from the bathroom below the earth to capture the water to the coconut tree, so that the ground would not be all wet.” Now, in retrospect, Tiana realizes that the water that accumulated in the yard affected the health of small animals in the backyard gardens, such as chickens, who ended up drinking this water and becoming ill. The novelty here is the possibility of purifying the water with the system of reuse of “grey water”.

The individual experience of Tiana should be contextualized within an investment plan focused on agroecological backyard gardens that are integrated with the creation of free-range chickens, some of which are conjugated with irrigated fruit growing and pens. This investment plan is managed by the Association of habitants and family-based farmers from “*Olho d’agua*

velho” and “*Lagamar*”, which was founded in 2018, due to the pressure that the Project Paulo Freire put on the community members so that they would become better organized. There is no autonomous group of women in the community, although women represent a significant amount of the Association’s members and have been consolidating a sense of autonomy as a social group through the use of the agroecological logbooks. Tiana is very active in the community-based association, which currently has saved up enough money to buy a piece of land where their headquarters will be implanted. She exercised the role of vice-president during a period of time and continues to be vocal in the discussions and debates.

Up until the current date, the first stage of the Investment Plan, involving the construction and implementation of basic infrastructure, was completed. Within the scope of its technical assistance services, since the end of 2019, IAC has prioritized the amplification of the commercialization of products, aiding the beneficiaries in their involvement in local and regional markets. For many farmers such as Tiana, the chance to exercise an active role in commercial transactions has been a new experience, since this was not a common activity. The significance of having an alternative source of income, derived from their own production, is very significant, especially for rural women, who historically have not had the opportunity to sell their products and have autonomy over the administration of finances.

Tiana also takes part in the project involving the agroecological logbooks, being one among 18 women selected at the level of the municipality of Ipu. She has constantly participated in the workshops and encounters at the municipal level (Ipu, Ipueiras and Reritaba), which have occurred within the backyard gardens of each of the women who take part in these events. The exchanges are aimed towards allowing for greater dialogue about the experiences with this tool and allowing for a deeper understanding of key issues that are brought forth through its use (such as Food and Nutritional Security). The fact that they occur within the backyard gardens is a factor that allows for rich exchanges about agroecological practices, since the productive processes can be easily visualized. After the pandemic began, an adaptation occurred and these activities had to be held on-line.

Tiana also has played an active role in the agroecological markets, which have been taking place since 2018, at the municipal and intermunicipal levels. Tiana sells eggs and processed products, such as ice cream popsicles made up of fruit in these markets. During the pandemic, the markets were adapted to occur on-line, with deliveries being done to people's residences, and Tiana became very involved in these initiatives. IAC is one of the few organizations that has constructed a methodology for carrying out markets on-line during the pandemic, assisting the farmers who will sell their products so that they are aware of what price should be asked for when it comes to each one of the products, helping to make up the lists of products and organize the baskets.

Some interesting dimensions of these markets will be highlighted. One dimension is the fact that Tiana not only sells agroecological products in these spaces, but she also buys what is needed in her daily diet. This aspect of encouraging the buying and selling of products within the same marketplace is an important tactic for guaranteeing another logic for the economy, that involves the circulation of products at the local level. Another important factor is that during the process of commercialization, especially in markets, she claims that she began to sell various products that before the project she hadn't thought of as possibilities, such as, for instance, desserts made of a wide variety of fruits. Also, seeds are being distributed to Tiana as well as other farmers so that they can diversify their production, including new products in the markets.

If one was to construct a timeline, distinguishing between the differences in Tiana's life trajectory before the introduction of the technology of reuse of grey water and after its use, many noteworthy landmarks can be noted. For instance, before the technology was created, she only sold popsicles with acquired ingredients. After the technology was introduced, she began to use fruit from her own backyard gardens for making many processed goods, such as popsicles. Now she has a wider variety of fruits than she had before – types such as oranges, guava fruit and papaya – all of which are irrigated with the grey waters that are reused. This is a definite sign of the kind of change that occurs after the use of a system for the reuse of grey waters: the diversification of the agricultural production.



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CHAPTER 6

The women's group from the afro-descendent community "*Jardim*" in Ceará, Brazil



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1. Introduction

The experience to be analyzed here is led by a women's group³², made up of approximately 7 women from the afro-descendent community "*Jardim*" in Quiterianópolis – within the territory of Inhamuns. This particular women's group is part of an over-reaching, umbrella Association with a total of 60 members. In this particular experience, we call attention to the struggle that these women have undertaken to fortify their ethnic identities, which is directly connected to their efforts to successfully commercialize their products. Within the context of the project "Paulo Freire", through the collaboration of the NGO Esplar³³ that accompanies this particular community and other communities within the rural territory of Inhamuns, certain dimensions have been highlighted, such as the productive activities and commercialization efforts connected to poultry-farming and honey fabrication.

The afro-descendent community "*Jardim*" has faced struggles that are considered to be crucial to its survival, such as the collective search for access to public lighting and transportation, the construction of its headquarters, health and sanitation issues, the organization of a local school and the search for projects that will attend to its particular needs, articulated with a larger struggle oriented towards securing rights for traditional communities in Brazil. Struggles for access to infrastructure took time to reap fruits and generate outcomes: only in 1987 was the community able to construct its first school and until 2005, the community used only

lanterns and gas lamps. One of its major struggles concerns the demand for a water supply system that can minimize the negative impacts of the lack of water, which inevitably affects rural women more acutely due to women's major role in the collection of water for their families. For this reason, women tend to be more intensely involved in efforts to engage in community efforts to improve water storage.

Different steps were taken in that direction: In 1997, the first cistern was constructed and in 2010, the first reservoir was created through personal initiatives, without the help of state public authorities or NGOs. Today there are two small reservoirs that are dedicated towards supplying water to the animals; 3 deep wells, one of which has a desalination plant; and 23 small wells. To this day, the community experiences difficulties when it comes to conquering basic rights for infrastructure and public services, which is directly related to its organizational process as an afro-descendent community, since this process depends on self-identification, but also formalization through certain state and federal institutions.

The struggle for registering this community as an "afro-descendent" community has been intense since the work team of the Project "Paulo Freire" began to accompany this initiative. The community has not yet gained formal recognition for its ethnic identity on a national level,³⁴ despite its efforts in this regard. Some of the female leaders clearly remember the process of preparing for the certification process, which involved what they call the construction of a "map" of the community, with the main goal of showing their history, as well as their major characteristics – which then, subsequently, is submitted to the "public authorities." According to one of the female leaders who is very active in the association, there was controversy at the time that this mapping process occurred and the documentation was submitted in 2018, since many people from the community did not want to go through the certification process because they did not recognize themselves as being part of an afro-descendent community or thought that they would be discriminated against if they called attention to their cultural heritage. The process of "coming to terms" with this identification of "afro-descendent ("quilombola") community" is not a simple one, as it involves negotiations and conciliations involving different forms of understanding and viewpoints in a turbulent and conflict-ridden political scenario.

32. During the course of this systematization, I was able to interview the following women from this afro-descendent community: Núbia Simião Elias and Raimunda Oliveira de Melo.

33. Interviews were held with the following professionals from Esplar: Silvana Chagas Holanda, Ana Carla Martins and William Pereira dos Santos.

34. As a criteria for the formal recognition of communities as "quilombolas" (afro-descendent), federal legislation recognizes the importance of self-identification. This criteria is recognized in Article 2 of the Decree 4.887/2003, as well as the convention 169 of the OIT (International Trade Organization), created in 2002. In accordance with this Decree, self-identification is the first stage in a process that aims to confer a title to afro-descendent communities, and these communities should ideally refer this demand to the Cultural Foundation Palmares, the institution responsible for analyzing each case and emitting a certificate that officially recognizes each community's cultural identity.

2. The history of women's involvement in the social organization of an afro-descendent community: Projects, investment plans, collective efforts

Obviously, these structural problems, such as the lack of access to land, the difficulties in gaining access to water and the subsequent years of drought have negatively influenced their productive practices, making it difficult to expand and diversify the crops that are cultivated for self-consumption or commercialization. Despite these limitations, the women in the community are deeply engaged in the cultivation of vegetables and medicinal plants as well as animal breeding within the backyard gardens, and their hope is to increase the diversification of the plants that are cultivated in these areas. Nubia Simão Elias, one of the group's leaders, points out that after participating in trainings about agricultural production with an agroecological approach, she felt that she learned how to "take care of these backyard gardens", taking better advantage of different natural resources, such as the water, which because of its scarcity, needs to be used with caution in the semiarid region. Techniques such as reuse of the water used for washing dishes for cultivating crops in the gardens were taught by technicians during visits and trainings. One of the goals of the group is to produce vegetables in a community garden that is to be managed collectively.

The plan of investment financed by IFAD in partnership with the state government in Ceará in the scope of the Project "Paulo Freire" focuses on two productive activities - poultry-farming and honey fabrication -, contemplating a total of 40 families. The women directly involved in this initiative affirm that families that originally were not members of the Association decided to become members of the association after becoming involved in this investment plan. This fact reveals the importance of the Investment plans in the sense of fortifying other forms of social organization, since it tends to be a laboratory for the experimentation of new technologies and methodological

approaches, beyond revealing the force of collective processes. During the diagnosis that occurred when the project was being constructed, one of the main concerns of the members of this group was the need for more work opportunities and an improvement in their incomes. This factor was a motivating force in the construction of the productive project that resulted in an investment plan.

Out of the forty families that are benefited from the Investment plan 28 consider women to be the main holders of the investments, in the sense of being responsible for receiving and managing the financial resources. . In respect to the production of honey, there is a common belief that this product and the activities associated with it (such as the collection of honey) are more difficult and dangerous, but it is interesting to note that women have engaged themselves in this activity, showing a large degree of participation. This is an important observation, because many times in initiatives within family-based agriculture, women are seen to be on the sidelines, rather than being viewed as direct beneficiaries of any project or program dedicated towards rural development. Historically, men have been seen to be the main representatives within families that take part in community-based associations,³⁵ given that women only began to act as individual members of these kinds of grassroots organizations in the late 1990s, within a nation-wide campaign aimed at giving visibility to their role in public policies and in trade unions, associations and cooperatives. Social mobilization around the importance of increasing the number of women involved and represented in trade unions in the rural sectors was intensified in the late 1990s, having as one of its major effects the creation of a policy for minimum for quotas for women, established at 30% in a Congress for Farmers promoted by CONTAG (the National Confederation of Farmers) in 1998, which was then progressively applied across the board for all trade unions at the national level. Concrete signs of progress when it comes to the incorporation of rural women in public policy making was clearly evident from the 2004 onwards, when the "Program for Promotion of Equality of Gender, Race and Ethnicity" (PPIGRE) was created within the Ministry of Agricultural Development (MDA) as a result of an intense process of dialogue between women's movements and organizations and governmental institutions.

35. In investigations undertaken by Deere (2004), she affirms that in the '70, it was quite common to have one representative for family within the structure of the trade unions. In some rural trade unions organized for farmers, men even argued that the unionization of women was prohibited by law. (DEERE, 2004, p. 180) Pimenta (2013, p. 157) argues that the "journals from the second and third congresses specifically directed towards rural women workers, that were promoted by CONTAG in 1973 and 1979, did not make any reference to the female farmer, except a quick mention that was made to the "farmer's wife."

Although the title referring to who formally is the holder of a productive investment and takes on full responsibility for the “family unit” may seem to only be a detail, it is extremely relevant when we consider that women historically have been systematically denied access to land and other resources and benefits. Although IFAD designs investments for productive projects with a focus on the “family” as the primary object of its intervention strategies, within a strategy of focalization that takes into account the need to reach out to the most vulnerable social groups, it is important to consider the roles played by women and men within the family unit.

During the course of this investment plan, the women took a lead in many administrative aspects, helping to accompany the purchases that were made, as well as the delivery of materials. This is a common phenomenon in IFAD projects. When women become involved in some form of social organization, they tend to become engaged more intensely in the financial and administrative dimensions of an enterprise or a project, which often then leads to other forms of exercising leadership roles. The women in this group also began to dream of other possibilities that could motivate them collectively, such as working with artisan crafts for instance, since, as one of the group leaders points out: “every woman develops a different kind of artwork and since I can remember, women have always worked with craftsmanship in this community: some do crochet while others do other kinds of crafts.”

A major focus of the nongovernmental organization that gives assistance to this community within the Project Paulo Freire has been the social and cultural development of traditional communities, such as the Quilombo Jardim, given that gaining pride in one’s roots and cultivating cultural traditions is an important step towards gaining visibility in the political scene, discovering new organizing strategies and obtaining access to public policies and programs. Over the years, the group has shown the increasing ability to participate in networks that validate their identity, such as CERQUISE, the state-wide coordination of rural afro-descendent communities that is made up of 2 representatives from each one of these communities and that fortifies diverse forms of mobilization and organization through a partnership with CONAQ – the National Network of Rural afro-descendent communities. The professionals from Esplar, with the support of the Consultant for Gender, race and ethnicity from the Project Paulo Freire, Fernanda Senra, stimulated the participation of women in the “*Quilombo Jardim*”, in



a series of educational and organizational activities which were planned and carried out, such as the Participatory Diagnosis and the workshops that discussed issues such as domestic violence, public policies and the division and redistribution of domestic work. Esplar puts into place a tactic for ensuring women’s participation: activities of recreation with the children of the women directly involved in the workshops and other educational activities.

The women who have participated in these workshops point out that some of them have been especially significant, such as state-wide encounters of “*quilombola*” (afro-descendent) movements, promoted by CONAQ and CERQUISE. A workshop that also stands out in their memory is one that dealt directly with the theme of public policies, partly because shortly afterwards, the women together with the youth in the community became more active in ensuring that public policies were implemented, going to the city council to fight for the reform of the school, the installment of a health post and services for electricity.

3. The agroecological logbooks: an opportunity for improving commercialization strategies before and during the period of the pandemic



Another action which has contributed towards the empowerment of female farmers has been the agroecological logbooks, which involves 6 women of the women's group³⁶ within the community's association. One of the leaders in the group, Núbia Simião Elias, discussed the ways in which the use of the agroecological logbooks altered her vision about the value of her work, much of which was invisible to others' eyes:

"We learned that our work is valuable. Everyone said that it was only help. But we talked with our husbands and showed them that this is not only help. With this work, we benefit everyone in the house. Our work has much higher value."

Other women in the group point out different benefits of this methodological instrument: "It is gratifying especially at the end of the month, when we gather the data and are able to visualize how much we have produced"; "In the past, I knew that my product was extremely valuable and I sold it for what the consumer wanted, because I didn't know how to put a price on the product. Now I don't do that, because I understand the value of the product I have produced with my own hands." One of the major changes that occurs in the women who make use of the agroecological logbook involves a new perspective on the backyard gardens, allowing them to think more critically about how they will put into practice their knowledge and re-contextualize this space as a productive area.

The commercialization practices were also strengthened due to the strategy of the agroecological logbooks, because when the women involved began to record their production, they gradually perceived the value of what they traded, donated and consumed, leading them to fortify and expand their involvement in alternative markets. The act of numerically measuring their production was a novelty for them and they testify to its importance as an exercise. They declare that placing value on each one of the products has been an extremely valuable method for preparing for commercialization in other spaces. The women in the group make a point of selling products in a collective manner. According to one of the leaders, Raimunda Oliveira de Melo, often when she receives a demand for a certain product, such as eggs, she goes to the neighbor's home to see if she also has eggs, and when they come together, uniting their efforts, they are able to meet the demand. Also, when a client asks for a certain product, she indicates which women in the community can provide what is being solicited. In the circuits for commercialization, such as marketplaces, the women who go tend to take with them a wide array of products from the whole community, instead of focusing only on what they can offer. One of the professionals from Esplar that accompanies this particular community, Silvana Chagas Holanda, claims that recently, the group organized their involvement in a marketplace in a collective manner: each one brought their products and the definition of the prices as well as labeling of each product was discussed by all involved. This was a crucial moment in the community organizing process, because it was possible to show here that what was sold represented the whole community and not only the production under the responsibility of each individual.

36. The following women were directly involved in the work with the agroecological logbooks: Maria Glória de Sousa, Maria de Fátima Fernandes Viera, Núbia Simião Elias, Glevani Elias Simião, Raimunda Oliveira de Melo, Antonia Moreira Rodrigues and Silvana Gonçalves Marthins.

During the pandemic, the professionals from the Esplar team report that the production of vegetables and fruits increased not only for commercialization purposes, but also for exchanges and donations. The information registered in agroecological logbooks during this time period confirms these conclusions. Another interesting factor worthy of attention is that the women are recording the use of natural remedies to cure or prevent illnesses in their logbooks during the pandemic with greater emphasis, as many people are searching for alternative treatments so as to protect their health and combat COVID-19.

Finally, an interesting development observed during this period is that many of the women from the group report that due to the increase in social vulnerability they were stimulated to become even more united in their efforts to sell their products. For instance, to sell honey, which is a product created and sold with frequency, the community brought their produce to one spot in the community, as a reference point, and only a few people would stay there so as to avoid attracting a big crowd. The women report that during the pandemic, there were many losses in fruits

or vegetables, especially those that spoil quickly, such as tomatoes, even though they tried to sell these products via WhatsApp or other social networks.

The accompaniment that has been carried out by Esplar during this precarious period of the pandemic has greatly depended on the use of social media. In order for the technicians to inject enthusiasm in this work with the agroecological logbooks, social mobilization techniques are adapted and molded into podcasts, messages and videos transmitted through groups of WhatsApp. In this sense, we witness the ways in which the social media has become a vehicle for constant communication and networking. Although it is unable to substitute technical assistance services, it has become a temporary solution, that guarantees the continuity of such vital processes as these at the grassroots level. Therefore, it is evident that the pandemic has opened up new possibilities for strengthening the bonds between women from the afro-descendent community of “Jardim” through new strategies for fortifying forms of social organization that involve the use of social media.



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CHAPTER 7

The Association of Embroiderers from the community Nova Brasilia in Tobias Barreto, Sergipe - Brazil³⁷

37. The following staff members of the Project Dom Tavora made important contributions to this systematization, through participating in interviews and providing written documents (reports, etc.) for analysis: Amarize Soares Calvacante, consultant in social management; Daniela Bento Alexandre, consultant in technical training; Aldomir Alves de Santana, technician in Agriculture and local management; Elis Gardênia dos Santos, consultant in social management. Many members of the Association of Embroiderers in Nova Brasília were also interviewed: Elisangela Menezes Angelino, Josefa Alves dos Santos Cavalcante, Vanessa Santos Oliveira, Kelly de Melo Santos Fonseca, Jilvanda Correia de Andrade Silva, Josivania Menezes de Melo Santos.

1. Introduction

The experience of the Association of Embroiderers in Sergipe reveals the importance of female craftsmanship in the context of IFAD projects. It reaffirms the importance of embracing a broad vision of rural development, in the sense of supporting not only agricultural activities carried out by project beneficiaries, but also considering what may be classified as “non-agricultural” or “off-farm” activities. This leads us to reflect on the fact that family-based agriculture has a strong intrinsic characteristic - its “pluriactivity”. In this sense, a true understanding of small-scale, family-based agriculture involves incorporating a vision of the multiple dimensions of the activities carried out by rural family members. IFAD projects have the possibility of working with a large array of productive initiatives within small-scale investments, which gives greater visibility to a diversity of social actors – women, youth – and their different forms of contributing to each one of these activities in the productive sphere. However, even so, productive investments that support such ventures as craftsmanship are not so prevalent in most IFAD projects in the 7 states of the Northeastern region of Brazil – with the exception of Project “Dom Tavora” in Sergipe.

In all 15 municipalities that are included in the scope of the Project Dom Tavora, there are a large array of initiatives focused on arts & craftsmanship, even at an incipient level of organization, and most all of them have encountered obstacles in the past when it comes to receiving the support of public investments. The confection of handicrafts, clothes or other items represent the focus of a total of 17 investment plans in the Project Dom Tavora, corresponding to 8% of the total of productive projects in PDT, and involve almost exclusively feminine labor, being an important example of initiatives aimed at fortifying women’s forms of self-organization. Many of the women in these communities who are directly involved with handicrafts depend on this particular activity as their principal source of income. The Dom Tavora Project has implemented concrete strategies that allow for the associations and groups that work with handicrafts, made up mostly by rural women, to become well-structured and organized. Undoubtedly, with the use of equipment such as sewing machines, they have been able to enhance their forms of production so as to meet the criteria of the external markets and generate more income.



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In studies carried out about the phenomena of handicrafts in Brazil, it has been shown that women tend to be prevalent in this particular type of activity. In accordance with studies carried out by the Brazilian Institute of Geography and Statistics (2007), it was revealed that Brazil has more than 8,5 million people involved with handicrafts of all sorts. Of this total, 87% are women. The presence of women is clearly evident in all stages – during the fabrication of the crafts as well as in the finalization of the objects that are created (decoration, painting, modeling). The fact that women are more prevalent in this activity has

to do with a common belief that they possess an innate ability to carry out minute and delicate tasks. (SAFFIOTI, 1982) Authors such as PAOLILLO (1987) refer to this mentality as a motivating factor for the division between what are considered to be “heavy” tasks and “light” tasks within family-based agriculture. Often, what are seen to be “light tasks”, that require less “effort”, are those tasks that are more delicate to carry out, as they demand other kinds of skills, such as attention to details.³⁸ These kinds of tasks, most often designated to women, are viewed to be less socially relevant when compared with other kinds of activities that are considered to be crucial components of production.

This kind of belief system can be considered to be a clear expression of the “naturalization” of gender roles, in accordance with an alleged alliance between tasks and aptitudes, as if women are “naturally” inclined to carry out certain activities. At the same time, it is important to recognize that this “knowledge”, which is a valuable part of the transmission of cultural traditions, is passed on from generation to generation, representing a source of pride on the part of women who generally relay this valuable expertise and skills to their daughters and granddaughters. The importance of passing on culturally specific knowledge and skills to the next generations is clearly evident in the experience of the Association of Embroiderers from the community Nova Brasília in Tobias Barreto, Sergipe.

There are a large variety of products within the productive chain of “handicrafts” in the state of Sergipe, and many of them carry with them various dimensions of family ancestry. They tend to be emblematic of the significance behind an array of cultural symbols associated with each social group and its territorial roots. Part of the richness of these expressions of handicrafts is the diversity of the raw materials that are used: from clay to straw to recycled materials. Handicrafts are a result not only of the relationship that the craftswomen forge with the raw materials, most of which come from the surrounding areas (woods, fields). They are also a reflection of the wide array of techniques that are used in the confection of these products, which reflect different types of knowledge and expertise passed on from generation to generation, being a crucial component of the communities’ history.

38. This kind of belief system is clearly revealed, for example, in regions where Coffee production is the main focus of agricultural production. Women are usually responsible for tasks such as drying out and selecting coffee beans in the yard, which is one of the most important stages before sending off the coffee to the markets, having a great influence on the prices to be set. However, such tasks tend to be less validated because of their association with easiness, levity and delicacy.



2. History of the Association of embroiderers of Nova Brasilia

Many of the embroiderers who are part of this Association in Nova Brasília work with a wide range of techniques, ranging from “cross stitch” to “Richelieu” and “*rendendê*.” The cultural dimensions of this technique are clearly laid out by the embroiderer Rosivânia Menezes, when she claims that “this technique of embroidery is 100 years old and was introduced here in Tobias Barreto by Italian religious figures. This particular type of embroidery, called “Richelieu”, currently contributes towards 85% of the family income of the community. However, we found a way to make it our own trademark.” The community of Tobias Barreto also thrives on tourism, given that it is a key point in the route to a highly visited tourist site – “*Recanto da Serra*”. The possibility of gaining greater visibility in this tourist route was intensified through the creation of the “House of Richelieu”, with the support of funds from Project Dom Tavora. The idea behind this reference point is to keep the artwork alive that fuels the tradition of this group of women that is involved directly in this arts and crafts endeavor.

Certain aspects of the history of this group should be highlighted. The group arose informally in the 1980s, and in 1997, *the Association of embroiderers of Nova Brasília* was founded. In 2016, the Association became involved in planning a project with the help of technical assistants from the Project Dom Tavora team aimed at reforming the headquarters for the association and acquiring some industrial machines, tools, raw materials, fabrics and threads, so as to initiate the expansion of their production.

Before 2000, the Association received other forms of support from other institutions, such as SEBRAE, that offered courses about techniques of embroidery, sewing and the costs of production. The Association also constructed a project with orientation from technicians of PRONESE, that was approved and received financing from the World Bank through the Program “Support to small producers” (PAPP) and “Support to small rural communities” (APCR), allowing for investments in the construction of the headquarters of the association, machinery and fabrics. Other important forms of support for the Association go beyond the specifics of the arts and crafts enterprise, to include other projects with the federal government, such as those involving the construction of water cisterns.

64 female artisans and approximately 150 families in Nova Brasilia of Tobias Barreto have benefitted from the Project Dom Tavora. The group has received support and guidance from professionals from EMDAGRO as well as a specialist in handicrafts from PNUD. Courses and trainings have also taken place between 2018 and 2020, focused on a variety of crucial matters, such as the administration of business plans, commercialization strategies and the art of design for embroideries. The Social and Human Component of the Dom Tavora Project also gave a specific contribution in the themes of associativism and cooperativism, as well as business management. Many of these trainings have been crucial in the sense of discussing the importance of the preservation of the local culture, the diversification of channels for commercialization, calculations of price and labor costs and the improvement of final stages of their production (preparation of labels, packing and tagging techniques) for selling in local and regional markets.

One of the elements that has been thoroughly discussed in these trainings is that there are certain segments of the commercial outlets as a whole that can be especially adequate for these kinds of products, such as outlets connected to spheres of “rural” and “cultural” tourism, which is why it is important to link the selling of such products to tourist circuits. In this sense, events, exchanges or “fairs”/“markets” linked to tourism that validate and affirm “rural” identities, which are promoted by SEBRAE or local and state level governmental institutions, have proven to be important channels for commercialization, as well as sources of high visibility.

3. Opportunities and Challenges

The adoption of new techniques and materials allowed for the diversification of objects for sale. According to one of the members of the group, the expansion of the number of objects that were fabricated allowed for the involvement of younger generations, since the production process involves different stages: the cutting of the fabric, the design of embroidery, the sewing and the finalization associated with this kind of workmanship. It is interesting to observe that in the present moment, men from different ages – both adults and young men - have increasingly

become involved in the production of artisan crafts, which perhaps is a reflection of the lack of options in agricultural development initiatives due to the introduction of new technologies in rural areas.

As is the case in all productive projects and enterprises, this particular group has had to re-organize itself in the face of the pandemic, innovating the confection and selling of products in the face of times of social isolation. The group members were able to introduce sophisticated techniques such as the art of embroidery of “richelieu” in the process of fabrication of masks and turbans. According to Kelly Santos, one of the group members, “richelieu” has gained much attention due to its uniqueness – as an unparalleled product - in the markets. The sales from masks and hair wraps have generated a significant income during the past 7 months.

Over the past 20 years, the handicrafts enterprise of 64 women also has been able to improve its internal procedures and usage regulations, defining rights and responsibilities for members as well as organizing the distribution of tasks among all those involved. Certain measures were taken in this sense, such as the creation of a fund used for the maintenance of the project as well as a system that regulates the entry and exit of people in the fulfillment of their duties.

Since the group’s inception, the greatest challenge that it has had to face has to do with the process of commercialization. Many of the women in the group affirm that they are in search of a large company that will buy their products on a constant basis, rather than having to sell them individually, through different channels. The creation of a major reference point for selling, as well as the group’s contacts with certain sellers in other states (such as Bahia) who offer greater advantages and higher prices for their products, has reaped positive results. The women involved in this enterprise face the challenge of developing new forms of commercialization “on-line”, such as digital platforms, as well as promoting their artwork through social networks, television and radio programs. Over the past year, especially in the face of the pandemic, a shift has occurred, in the sense that they have been challenged to discover new strategies through the intensified use of methods for social communication, involving social networks. Parallel to this process, it is important to note that the Dom Tavora project itself has deeply invested in strategies for social communication,

through the development of podcasts and other programs “on-line”, such as “Conversa do Quintal” (“Dialogues from the backyard garden”).

Another major difficulty faced by the group involves how to “put a price” on their products that does justice to their labor – to the hours involved in this important work with embroidery -, especially in the case of a technique such as “richelieu”, that is very refined and requires so much attention and diligence. This issue is closely tied to the question of self-esteem, since often the women who have developed these skills do not validate the “value” of the artisan work that they carry out daily and what it truly involves in terms of time and effort. The women in this initiative tend to underestimate the hours spent, in such a way that their final price does not reflect all their efforts. The fact that it is also hard to find clientele that will truly appreciate the price that deserves to be paid for these products makes this an even greater challenge. Rarely prices in the conventional markets are determined based on the time and effort that is channeled into the production process. This is the case of both artisan crafts and processed products that are fabricated through culinary activities.

If one was to look back on the history of the group, it is possible to identify certain landmarks in its timeline, all of which represent the strengthening of forms of self-organizing as women artisans, as well as the affirmation of their professional paths and identities. They were once part of an informal group, for instance, and made a transition into “formality”, through internal procedures that led to a greater sense of organization. Over time, they learned the importance of being part of a collective effort and engaging deeply in processes aimed at qualifying their actions, such as planning and monitoring their activities in respect to handicrafts production and commercialization. It is also important to note that 10 women from this group have participated in the pilot project for agroecological logbooks, which has allowed them to discover the value of their work, proving their productive capacity to themselves and to others (husbands, children, community leaders). The agroecological logbook allows for registering all dimensions of the productive process, showing the outputs of their workmanship, such as the money that is originated from sales or the importance of acts of donation and trade of raw materials that indirectly influence economic transactions and outcomes. This kind



of “feedback”, which is made possible through a simple instrument aimed at registering productive activities, but which takes on a wider significance when it is the object of reflection in collective circles, helps to raise self-esteem and reinforce the autonomy of their actions, as well as illustrating the importance of being a part of collective organizing processes in which women take the lead.

CHAPTER 8

The Group
“Women United
from San Antonio”
(MUSA)
in Uruguay



1. Introduction

The group “Women united from San Antonio” (MUSA) consists of a set of family units that have been benefitted by the Pilot Project for Rural Inclusion (PPIR), that was carried out by the General direction of Rural development of the Ministry of Livestock, Agriculture and Fishery (DGDR) in Uruguay, in partnership with IFAD within the department of Canelones. This women’s group, that was originally made up of 14 members when it was founded in 2012, has the following objectives: develop new agricultural practices, increase its income and strengthen its bonds with other institutions, programs and projects, in the search for sustainable social development of the rural territory of Canelones.

The group has built its trajectory around the search for access to land and the sharing of a piece of property, as well as tools and equipment, on a collective level. This experience is especially significant because it highlights a variety of key elements that are fundamental when it comes to social organization: the construction of a group led by women in rural agricultural development that is also strongly entrenched in family dynamics; the emphasis on inter-generational exchange (elders, adults and youth); the

construction of a community-based network on a territorial basis; and networking and partnerships between public and private sectors.

This group also has set an important precedent in Uruguay’s history of social organization in the rural sector due to the following factors, worthy of note:

- The capacity of a women’s grassroots group to gain access to land through negotiation not only with the public institution that is responsible for giving support on land issues – *the National Institute of Colonization* -, but also through networking with a complex web of different state institutions dedicated to a wide array of issues, from agricultural development to social progress;
- MUSA is considered currently to be an agrarian cooperative, with a woman as its president and families with women in the lead, which is deeply immersed in community dynamics and also takes an active role in the construction of local and regional networks, reaching beyond the immediate context;
- The experience exemplified by MUSA can be considered to be an important example of a commendable public policy, serving as a major reference in the region for promoting the permanence of rural families in the countryside, in such a way that it serves as a source of inspiration in combatting the high degree of exodus of rural families to urban centers.

To understand fully the complexity involved with this particular group’s trajectory, it was extremely important to receive different viewpoints and perspectives on MUSA’s evolution from different sources of information: staff from PPIR, technicians from diverse institutions and the group’s members themselves. In this sense, it is important to recognize the people³⁹ who were interviewed for this process of systematization, listed in the below footnote.

The significance of being a women’s group is clear in the understanding, on the part of women who take part in this process of organization, that the notion of “gender equality” was always present in the strategies and actions that they decided to adopt. Their desire is to ensure that women have access to the use of equipment, such as the tractor, and in processes of decision-making about the use and distribution of resources and inputs. A strong element

39. The following people were interviewed to gather a complete understanding of the social context involving MUSA and its evolution through time: (a) From the MUSA group: Mary Cazaux, Gloria (Lola) Otton, Sandra Fabra and María Caraballo; (b) 3 technicians from the Ministry of Social Development of the Program of Rurality: Hugo Andrés Taberne Hernández (Agronomist), Nilson Medina (Specialist in cooperativism and social psychologist), Marcelo Alejandro Mazzuia Ferreira (Social psychologist); (c) Other specialists/ technicians: Silvia Mercedes Yacosa Bruno (DGDR); Emily Baldassari Leguisamo (Agronomist, Consultant for gender and vulnerable populations for IFAD).

of MUSA's development as a group is connected to their process of economic empowerment through earning money in productive activities which they coordinate as individuals and not as "assistants" of their husbands – a process which involves their direct relationship with commercial circuits – without mediation - and their capacity to enter into diverse markets.

It is important to remember that in the context of family-based agriculture in the rural areas, the "family" is seen to be a united front, in which there is a complementation of tasks, as each individual member acts in accordance with overriding collective interests. In studies carried out by Chayanov (1974), Tepicht (1973) and Galeski (1975) within the tradition of Rural sociology, the overarching idea clearly presented is that of a "peasant family structure" that gains economic sustainability through the cooperation between its members. This conception is so prevalent that it is difficult to bring forth the "conflicts" that lurk under the surface within the family units, which have to do with power dynamics, given that often men are seen to be the "major producers", responsible for the productive process, while women and children are viewed as "helpers" or "assistants." When women come forth as "economic agents", who contribute individually towards agricultural development, which is the case of the MUSA group, there is a shift in this logic that has traditionally oriented our thinking about the family dynamics in rural development.

It is also important to reflect on the fact that MUSA was born out of a larger, all-encompassing structure – the Society for Rural Development -, that at this moment is made up of 400 families from different areas of San Antonio, the great majority of whom are small farmers who are mainly dedicated to horticultural production. Despite their strong link to this organization, women did not feel that their needs were being completely represented -, given that their objective from the beginning was to gain access to land and sufficient income so as to improve their quality of life within Canelones. What is interesting to observe is that, over time, they started to define themselves as a "women's group", fully engaged in the wider struggle for women's rights, and progressively gained representation in spaces such as the National Board of Directors for the Network of rural women,⁴⁰ which has forged a direct connection with the National Council for Gender. In such a way, they have taken on a central role in the intervention in public policies within Uruguay,

through constructing spaces of direct dialogue with public governmental authorities. This favorable environment, when it comes to women's rights, is deeply connected to the political scene and the types of public policies that have been ratified over the past 15 years, such as the Law no. 19.781 (August/ 2019), which establishes a precedent for accepting other forms of titleship of land. For example, this particular law grants joint ownership of land to women and men on equal standing.

At the same time, it is worth noting that this group has moved towards fully involving men, adolescents and children, becoming more integrated as a family-based enterprise. Today the group is composed of 5 women who rely on the collaboration of 5 men, all of them over 30 years of age. There was a reduction in the number of women involved in the group over time; yet, at the same time, a stronger sense of commitment was solidified, on the part of those who take part in the group's activities. This transition – involving the integration of male family members - occurred when their production became more consolidated and required greater attention to internal forms of organization. Even though women are most definitely the main protagonists, they report that in the current moment, there is greater collaboration on the part of family members than there was in the beginning stages. According to the two technicians who accompany MUSA, Hugo Andrés Taberne Hernández and Nilson Medin, both of whom are employed in the Ministry of Social Development in the Rurality Program, the male family members – husbands and sons - who became involved with this initiative gradually recognized the advantages of being able to sustain their livelihood over time, as well as the possibility of gaining autonomy over their economic situation. Working with autonomy on their pieces of land allows them to escape from the instability caused by other forms of income, given that most farmers are subjected to the conditions established by large property owners who hire labor to work on extensive pieces of land. According to the technicians from the Ministry of Social Development (MIDES), this also involved changing the logic that generally motivated organizing efforts, as these male family members came to understand that this was a women's group in which women take on a leadership position. To "become part" of an initiative led by women – wives or mothers – is quite different from taking on a "collective" enterprise in which men are at the forefront.

40. The "Network of Rural women" of Uruguay is made up of approximately 120 women who are part of 12 groups. They facilitate the local actions of rural women's groups, as well as developing connections between women's groups and rural institutions.

2. The political context: The construction of PPIR and its repercussions for women's organizing processes in Uruguay

The Rural Inclusion Pilot Project (PPIR)⁴¹ was executed by the General Directorate of Rural Development (DGDR) of the Ministry of Livestock, Agriculture and Fisheries (MGAP) with the support from IFAD in the period of 2015 to 2019 with the goal of validating innovative tools in favor of reducing rural poverty. PPIR was constructed in such a way that, beyond being a project that promoted interaction between institutions, it established dialogue with dynamics occurring at the territorial level, with a spirit of openness to productive and social projects, as well as a capacity to directly involve women beneficiaries. PPIR's implementation process involved the use of various instruments and policies for recognizing the rights of rural women and gender mainstreaming in the rural sector. It is believed, for instance, that the PPIR project in Uruguay had an influence on legislation, motivating a change in regulations and laws that regulate land ownership, as well as achieving progress in the sense of allowing for greater ownership of this resource by rural women, which was formalized officially in 2019.

Despite the fact that in its design, there was no institutional strategy focused on gender issues or concrete instruments that could be utilized, there was an affirmative action that established the need to have quotas for women's participation (25% for women and 15% for youth), and the incentive for women's groups to be stimulated to present project proposals, such as the norm that groups with more than 25% female beneficiaries would account for less of a counterpart. A factor that definitely contributed towards strengthening women's forms of social organization and access to productive resources and inputs was the calls for projects directed towards women's groups that occurred frequently and that allowed for their self-identification as possible direct beneficiaries. The DGDR implemented the calls "We are rural women", with the purpose of giving greater visibility to rural women's



grassroots groups. It is worth noting that in the first call for rural women in 2015, 126 projects were presented by 1054 women and in the second call, which occurred between 2017 and 2018, 94 projects were presented by more than 600 women.

What is interesting to observe is that despite gaps that were detected in the Project's design, there was a strategy for training Technical assistance teams in the territories that involved a preparation for working with gender issues, in the sense of stimulating women to take on leadership positions and deconstructing the traditional division between "work with female farmers" and "work with male farmers." According to Emily Baldassari Leguisamo, Consultant in gender and vulnerable populations for IFAD, PPIR had the opportunity to work directly with women who gained access to land for the first time and who also became livestock owners, changing the logic that has historically affirmed men as being naturally more prone to serving as the main producers or livestock owners. Technical assistance took an interesting turn based on the policy adopted by the Directory of Rural Development in Uruguay.

There was also a discussion at that time concerning the agenda for women's issues in Uruguay which encompassed a struggle to get women involved in the political agenda and organizational instances for rural development, such as the National Commission for Gender.

41. PPIR involves a total of USD 5.8 million, of which USD 4 million is provided by a loan from the International Fund for Agricultural Development (IFAD). The project began to be executed in the second semester of 2015 mainly due to budgetary limitations. The Project completion date was originally scheduled for September 30, 2018 but was extended until September 30, 2019.

Much signs of progress can be noted in the national scenario that have had a positive impact on rural women during the period of 2017 and 2019, such as the legislation for “collective ownership rights” for couples, which ensured that women could be considered “land owners” in certain cases – an important conquest given that women have historically been denied access to land rights, not only in Uruguay, but also in many other countries of Latin America. Also, in 2017, the agenda for rural women was incorporated in the “National Strategy for Gender Equality”, which became part of the Presidential Decree, as well as becoming an important component of the “Fourth Plan of the Open Government” of Uruguay in 2018.

The PPIR project’s capacity to promote specific measures for stimulating women’s forms of organization and direct involvement in productive processes such as specific “calls” for project proposals directed at women’s groups is worthy of attention. This strategy was fundamental in strengthening MUSA organizationally and can serve as a good example for other IFAD supported projects. Since investment plans directed towards grassroots groups and organizations, such as associations, cooperatives, specific groups (of women and youth), are a crucial element of IFAD project designs, it would be an important to reflect on the efficiency of these specific “calls” for project proposals aimed specifically at these particular social groups (women, youth, indigenous or afro-descendent communities, as well as others).

3. The story of “MUSA”: Its major landmarks, victories and setbacks

The group is situated in a region – San Antonio – that is considered one of the main suppliers of vegetables, and according to the members of MUSA, the inhabitants’ knowledge of agricultural production derives from their work over the years as pawns of large properties - a condition that they hope to change. Their lack of access to land and financial resources represent structural obstacles that this group has faced from the beginning of its existence and that the women involved in this venture have systematically sought to overcome. Since the group began to define its own identity and gain access to funds,

the members hoped to prove that it is viable to work the land and live off of their agricultural production, setting themselves free from their historical condition as workers in large properties who must submit to the rules of the landowners, so as to become owners of themselves, with the freedom to determine the conditions of their labor and its tangible benefits. For this reason, when the land was granted to them by the governmental authorities, a sign was put up on their piece of land with the following slogan: “Mission completed!”

The MUSA group, that started out as 14 women and now is made up of 5 women and their family members, has focused on the production of a variety of vegetables: lettuce, tomatoes, garlic, peas, alfalfa, sweet potatoes, garlic, leek, cabbage squash and zucchini. They have always had the desire to improve their work by doing a soil analysis which allows them to respect the productive cycle of each vegetable, as well as gaining access to seeds and fertilizers. Throughout the years, they have attributed a lot of importance to equipment that is “labor-saving” and “time-efficient”, such as tractors that have facilitated their work-load as well as reducing their vulnerability in the face of different kinds of ailments and diseases that are caused by precarious working conditions.

Technological innovations, when they are introduced in a project or program from a gender perspective, can be viewed as an important step towards alleviating women’s workload in rural agricultural production. However, the mere use of technological equipment does not guarantee that women will experience a notable change in their routines or will feel empowered by such measures. In the case of MUSA, the group members saw access to equipment such as a tractor as an important measure to be taken in their struggle for gender equality, which explains why, in one of their first projects presented to PPIR with support from IFAD, the tractor was included as a vital component of their proposal. The president of MUSA currently – Mary Cazaux – claims that the capacity to drive a tractor of a larger size represented a large victory, given the common conventional viewpoint that women are not capable of such a task. The women in the group also explain that they participated in practical trainings since 2012 that taught them how to manage the tractor more effectively, which they consider to be extremely important in their use of such kind of equipment. This aspect has been incorporated into technical assistance services that have been provided to the group, with a focus on the responsible management of

different kinds of equipment and the construction of rules for their use in a group setting.

In its process of organization, the group has gained administrative skills, as well as learning to tackle the challenges involved in financial management. They have received support from technical assistance, such as “accountants”, for dealing with the payment of different costs, including taxes, and claim that they have gained a sense of autonomy when it comes to managing such tasks in the context of projects that have been approved over the past 8 years. They have the desire to gain more expertise in financial administration, in such a way that they are able to invest the money that was gained in one year in the acquisition of materials and inputs without experiencing financial setbacks during the next one. Discovering effective strategies for planning processes (both financially and administratively) as a group has been crucial for its growth, and they celebrate the fact that they have not been alone in this arduous path, relying constantly on the support of technicians who accompany the group since it was founded.

The struggle of the group to gain access to land for agricultural production has been a long and arduous one and, in this process, they have beyond a doubt opened new doors in the policy for land use in Uruguay. They started consolidating their identity as a “group” when a small group of women – 3 as a total - created an agreement with one of the group’s members to plant in her piece of property, where they used the water from a well on this land to water the plants. The next step involved the negotiation with MEVIR, an institution dedicated towards providing living conditions – popular homes – for different social groups, for use of a vacant lot which was full of trash. At this moment in time, they also received support from the Institution “Ministry of Livestock, Agriculture and Fisheries”, within the context of “PPIR -”, the Pilot Project for Rural Inclusion -, a Program supported by IFAD. The group expanded to include 15 women who first worked on 4 hectares of land that was loaned by the MEVIR,⁴² in which they produced lettuce in “micro tunnels” covered with nylon, in what could be seen as a “greenhouse” effect. The support that they received from the “Rural fund” was used for different types of equipment and work instruments, such as a small

tractor. It is interesting to observe that in both of these initial experiences, the land was shared collectively and the financial income generated from the sales was shared equally between all women involved.

In January of 2017 MEVIR solicited that the group leave this land due to the need to use it for the construction of homes, and in dialogue with the Institute of Colonialization,⁴³ MUSA was able to obtain a fraction of land of 13 hectares so as to continue their collective work on the land. However, the transition from a small piece of land to a larger one generated a demand for more financial resources, which is one of the major challenges faced by MUSA and has motivated its search for support through specific grants.

This group was the first women’s group to receive land in Canelones from the Institute of Colonialization, which has a great amount of significance when we consider the story of land rights in Uruguay, and the evolution of the legislation that regulated women’s access to land. Terms of use were laid out to the group: a long-term land lease was given to the group with the possibility of passing it on to heirs, being conditional upon the group staying together. It is important to hear one of gratifying phrases of the women who take part in MUSA concerning the gains that they have had: “Now I no longer go down on my knees, because I no longer work on other people’s land. I am an owner of myself and I am able to provide for my own financial security.” In this phrase, we clearly can witness the close connection between being an owner of one’s own land –in a collective sense - and being an owner of one’s own self. “Being an owner of one’s self” involves gaining an inner force and sense of empowerment in all senses of the word – politically, socially and economically. It is notable that, despite the fact that this land is rented to the group and that they must take on the responsibility for paying the Institute of Colonialization from the federal government for its use per year, there are multiple benefits, such as the fact that they pay a small price for the use of these lands, compared with the price that is paid when renting land from third parties. These considerations are crucial for a group like MUSA, given that one of its major goals has been to gain a greater sense of autonomy over land use.

42. MEVIR is an organization that was created legally in 1967 with the purpose of eradicating unhealthy living conditions. It is dedicated towards the construction of popular homes in lots of land.

43. The Colonialization Institute (INC) has carried out the following purpose as an institution: the promotion of the subdivision of land and its proper exploitation, looking for the increase and improvement of agricultural production. The area occupied by the INC represents 4% of the total agricultural area of the country, according to the General Agriculture Census carried out in 2011. The INC leases large plots of land for producers at a very low price. A relevant stage in this process is the selection of aspirants through public and open calls.

Also, this piece of land was the first piece of land granted to a group dedicated solely to the production of vegetables, which is generally viewed to be “less lucrative” than other kinds of economic enterprises. Although Santo Antonio is a region in which vegetable production is one of its trademarks, to promote a proposal for production of vegetables on a small scale is significant because it challenges the concept of large-scale production, linked to more conventional and commercially acceptable crops. The fact that such a proposal came from a group led by rural women was part of its appeal, as well as being one of the factors that explains why such a proposal can be classified as “innovative”,⁴⁴ in alignment with two major factors: (i) its capacity to show women’s ability to access land directly, something which historically was not permitted to rural women, given that the properties were in the name of male family members; (ii) due to the scale and focus of its productive activities, which clearly differ from conventional agricultural production projects.

Another dimension of this process of gaining access to their own land which is important to analyze involves how this influenced their forms of social organization. In the first years of existence of the MUSA group, the land was managed collectively, and the income that was generated was divided between all those involved. When the group made a transition and gained access to a larger piece of land through its negotiations with INC, the land was divided up between the members and their families. The group asserts that even if this land is divided up between its members for their use as family units, there is a consensus among each other that there needs to be a mechanism in place in order to manage the productive process and the financial resources collectively. This explains some of the decisions that were taken recently, such as the proposal to divide up the land between all members of the group, designating 2 hectares to each of the five families, while also maintaining a small piece of land for collective use, so that they can create a “fund” for group expenses. Each of the families has different schedules and many of them have other professional jobs. Maria is one of the members who dedicates herself fully to the tasks involved with agricultural production and declares that she is constantly working on preparing the next harvest as soon as the first one is over, since she “survives economically from what is planted and

harvested.” Each of the families tries to respect each other’s use of time, while also determining moments for meetings to cultivate the spirit of a group and make important decisions. The experience of managing a piece of land collectively, as a group, has most definitely been an important factor in uniting its members and affirming their sense of group identity.

Another aspect which reveals the group’s capacity to renew its strategies is its incorporation of women and family members from different generations, ranging from children to elders, all of whom display different strategies for working with the land. At the same time that these inter-generational exchanges are enriching, tensions also often arise because of the different visions presented by youth, adults and elders when it comes to planning agricultural production. The members of the group affirm that 5 of their children formed a group that is linked to MUSA and in 2018 received a source of support from the General Direction of Social Development (DGDR), through a specific project called “Somos de acá” (“We are from here”),⁴⁵ dedicated towards gaining access to inputs that would allow them to contribute towards agricultural production in the 13 hectares which have recently been gained through negotiations with the Institute of Colonialization. This proposal was a way of taking advantage of an “opportunity” for public policies within the “Ministry of livestock, agriculture and fisheries” for channeling youth’s labor so that they could generate capacities and understand the importance of participating in collective projects.



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44. Innovation is highly valued in IFAD projects and is the focus of knowledge-management processes, especially in regard to “south-south cooperation” efforts. One of the major objectives of IFAD is the systematization of technological and methodological innovations, classified as “exemplary practices.”

45. “Somos de acá” (“We are from here”) is a call for project proposals that was set up by the “Rural Development Program”, dedicated towards youth less than 29 years in age. It is similar to the call for Projects “We are rural women” that was focused specifically on rural women, revealing the emphasis given to the specific needs of groups such as women and youth in rural agricultural development projects.

4. The group's interaction with technical assistance services: how to maximize their production and reach the markets

Technical assistance services have been provided mainly by the Ministry of Social Development, which strikes a balance in the composition of its teams, representing both technical aspects (for assistance in productive activities) as well as social aspects (for assistance in social organization, associativism and cooperativism). The projects that have been elaborated up until this current moment have sought to fill the gaps, as well as attending to the group's demands, such as the use of intensive technologies. They also articulate the need to orient the farmers towards responsible use of chemical fertilizers and pesticides. There is an intention, on the part of many of the technicians, to raise the groups' awareness of organic production. The women in MUSA recognize the value of technical assistance, citing them as "mediators" between "the government" and the grassroots local groups, since they understand the "language" of the State and are able to represent the group's demands in the face of public governmental authorities.

One of the major challenges faced by this group is how to produce vegetables (lettuce, tomatoes, etc.) that meet commercial standards in the local and regional markets, since the main objective of the group is to generate income. The commercialization of their products has occurred in the "Model market",⁴⁶ through the action of commission agents who act as middlemen. It has been a constant challenge to gain enough income to distribute among the members and leave a reserve of resources to invest in raw materials. The group members state that at the beginning of their organizing efforts, the amount of income that each one of them earned was higher because since there were less women in the group itself, each one received a larger amount of financial resources. This is one of the reasons why the group has struggled to gain a larger piece of property, because there is a belief that this will maximize their production and allow for a solid income return.

Another challenge involves how to obtain a direct channel of commercialization, given that the women have historically been subjected to "middlemen", who mediate their relations with the marketplaces, especially in the main marketplace in Uruguay- the "model market", a central municipal fruit and vegetable wholesale market in Montevideo, Uruguay, which is known to receive the largest quantity of production in the country, all of which is then redistributed to local and regional points of commerce. Since the creation of the MUSA group, the Model Market has served as the main outlet for commercialization for its members, partly because of its close distance (60 km of distance). Also, there are many impediments that make it difficult to gain easy access to other marketplaces, such as the difficulty gaining a vehicle for transportation as well as the lack of sufficient time to invest.

Marketplaces such as the "model market" centralize production and tend to distance the farmers from their clients, in deep contrast with "open marketplaces", which possess not only a commercial value but also a social relevance, due to the processes of socialization that take place between rural and urban communities, between consumers and producers. In this sense, it is important to highlight the fair that is promoted by the "Territorial Fund" and occurs every 15 days, in which MUSA as a group is able to make contact with a wide range of women from other areas. Another strategy has been the construction of "baskets", made up of vegetables and fruits that are prevalent in each season, which have become increasingly more in demand, especially due to the fact that they are organically grown. These are all important initiatives aimed at strengthening the small circuits of commercialization; however, the women from the MUSA group clearly state that there is not a strong "cultural tradition" involving direct purchase of products from producers in the Zone of Canelones. Although they recognize the value of "fairs" and "open marketplaces", they also recognize that the volume of what is sold is significantly less than the "model market", which serves as an important reference for all.

Although strategies such as selling their products in "food baskets" that are delivered to the clients, so as to skirt around the intermediaries (middlemen) and improve the prices, have been important measures for gaining autonomy, the group members also recognize certain limitations. One such limitation involves the fact that they have the need to receive money in a small amount of time

46. The Model Market is the largest market in the country. It is located in Montevideo and sales are made directly with the producers who have a truck or van and also through intermediaries (who they call truckers or commission agents) who charge them for the transportation of the goods, as well as a commission of 10 or 15%.

(4 to 5 days), since a large amount of the money earned is re-invested in raw materials (seeds, fertilizers, etc.). This process of “re-investing” in materials that are seen to be crucial for guaranteeing agricultural production is a huge weight on their shoulders because it diminishes the income they receive. This is one of the reasons why agroecology as a model of rural agricultural development is so enticing, as it frees up the need to have such a large amount of resources and inputs to keep the productive cycles in constant rotation.

Recently, the families associated with MUSA decided to create a cooperative so as to permit direct commercialization, which they see as an important step. This decision involved many discussions with the technicians who aid the group from MIDES about different models of cooperatives, the pros and cons of each kind of legal structure and the steps to be taken towards formalizing this organizational transition. They desire to establish a direct channel for commercialization, as well as diversifying different possibilities for selling products. They also are discussing the need to improve their production, in such a way that they aggregate value to their crops⁴⁷ and also establish a direct relation with clients on a constant basis. One of the ways of “adding value” to their products would be to undergo a process of organic or agroecological certification,⁴⁸ which they are exploring as an option, through the guidance of technical assistants. They are also exploring various techniques for packaging and labeling products, which has been a focus of the work of technicians who accompany this group and its family members.

According to the technical assistant who has supported the group since 2016, the group is experiencing a transition from conventional, mechanized agriculture to agroecology, in such a way that they can be seen to be “in the middle” of a gradual process that aims to eventually reach an ideal of full-fledged organic agricultural production. This practice that is “in between” is conceived to be what the technicians call “integrated production”, in which they seek to reduce the quantity of pesticides so as to alleviate its negative effects. The members of MUSA express interest in other forms of producing vegetables and show a desire to reduce the application of pesticides,

given its negative effects on their health, the health of the consumers and the environment. They claim that the use of pesticides was seen to be a necessity, partly so that they could fight the pests, as well as have their vegetables accepted in the marketplace, which had as a major factor - that carried weight in public opinion - their physical appearance.⁴⁹ Beyond that, there is a concern for carrying out organic production due to the proximity to their neighbors, so that they are not negatively affected by pesticide use. The technicians have encouraged the group to consider also the commercial possibilities that organic agricultural production can present, given that such sustainable productive systems open up possibilities of alternative clientele and markets. There is an expectation that they can also gain more favorable prices selling agroecological produce than inserting their traditionally grown crops in conventional markets.

4. Forms of financial support, partnerships and networking efforts

The group has a long history of productive projects and has gained access to funds from a wide array of institutions over the past 8 years. One of the projects that the group has had access to is through the initiative “We are rural women”, a call for projects which is promoted by the General Directory of Rural Development (DGDR) of the Ministry of Livestock, Agriculture and Fisheries (MGAP).⁵⁰ The most recent project, that was approved in 2017, has a strong focus on occupational health and forms of prevention of illnesses, which is a concern that female members of MUSA express, due to their extensive work routines and unhealthy work conditions. In this sense, a series of trainings were suggested by the technicians for achieving more sustainable agricultural practices, as well as reducing pesticide use. The proposal is to take advantage of the Polyclinic in the department of Santo Antonio as a space for these activities, that will be open to other groups in the area, given that this space is a reference point for the communities in that particular territory.

47. One of the ways of “aggregating value” to products is through attention to the labeling and packaging of products, which may appear to be a simple detail, but has important consequences when it comes to “placing a price” on such products sold in diverse market systems.

48. In the context of Uruguay, agroecological production is less visible than “organic” production, which tends to make use of the discourse dedicated to the philosophy and mindset associated with notions of “healthy food” and “healthy lifestyles.”

49. The vegetables that rely on the use of pesticides tend to be larger in size, which confirms the idea that they are more robust and appeals aesthetically to many consumers. The notion that pesticides are more effective in “combating pests” is part of the idea of mechanized agriculture as a “large package of multiple instruments” that are needed to “maximize production”, which was widely disseminated from the ‘60s on, during the Green Revolution in Brazil.

50. The DGDR has some policies considered central that structure its work in Rural Development. Among them the main actions are considered: (i) productive; (ii) institutional strengthening projects; (iii) Rural Development Tables.

Another demand has been in the sense of improving the conditions of the spaces used for collective purposes by the women and their families, in such a way that they can carry out meetings, have access to a kitchen and bathroom, as well as having a place for storage of the vegetables collected during harvests and also for the work instruments.

The group has received much support from diverse organizations since it was founded and has also shown a high capacity to construct partnerships with a large array of institutions, such as the Policlinic from San Antonio, as well as other groups that take part in the Society for Rural Development of San Antonio. It is noteworthy that MUSA has a lot of visibility in Uruguay and serves as a “reference” for other groups and organizations. As one of the group members commented: “The government helped us with money and there is no way to return this money to the state. So we must do our part – being present, receiving people, telling them about our experience.” The women in the group also view themselves as being very open to collaborating with other institutions, playing out a role socially at the community level and beyond. According to Lola, one of the most experienced leaders in the group, “The group is always in contact with many people, ranging from authorities from the State, from the area of culture, public health, colonialization, etc. For a long while now the visits have become less intense because of the COVID-19, but we are used to receiving lots of people representing organizations from many districts in Uruguay.” Two years ago, MUSA began to participate in the “Network of women” from Uruguay, which has been a strategic space for networking with women from other regions and municipalities, reflecting about the importance of achieving women’s rights and elaborating project proposals.

One of the institutions that has been especially important in supporting initiatives and lending support is the Policlinic of San Antonio. The Policlinic is cited as a space that has promoted capacity-building workshops and consciousness-raising sessions about gender issues and women’s empowerment, being a major source of information. They emphasize the importance of workshops that occurred about mental health, occupational concerns (for secure work measures), healthy food habits and organic farming practices, protection measures with pesticides and related themes. Many of these workshops also took place with men (husbands and sons of the female members), focusing on specific issues, such as the social construction of masculinity, the sexual division of labor and forms of domestic violence. Because of their intense involvement

in the Policlinic, many of them decided to become part of the “Health Commission”, which represents a space for monitoring, on a periodic basis, the policies in the area of public health. The women declare that they realized that the Policlinic needed their help and decided to become part of this Commission, as those who directly benefit from its actions, so as to collaborate in the full improvement of actions and strategies.

One of the actions that took place within the Policlinic was the construction of an almanac with images of women and men exercising activities that often are not viewed to be “suited for women”, partly because they are seen to be “masculine” tasks, such as “driving a tractor.” This visual tool, that featured women and men in roles that differ from those that are socially designated to them was crucial in deconstructing gender stereotypes and creating new reference schemes for social relations.

In the last 4 years, the group has faced the challenge of formalizing its rights and responsibilities in the process of acquisition of this piece of land with the Colonization Institute. The female members of MUSA have been deeply engaged in the construction of an organizational modality known as an agrarian cooperative, which legally has a solid foundation. This kind of cooperative can articulate with other enterprises at the territorial level that operate from a similar type of logic. The construction of a cooperative is seen as a favorable measure for the governmental agencies, that have systematically stimulated such forms of social organization. According to Mary Cazaux, one of the founders of the group, “they continue being the group of women called MUSA”, which is clearly shown to be true in their relations with all institutions or networks in which they participate. However, she makes it clear that for judicial purposes, they have taken on the identity of an Agrarian Cooperative Limited MUSA.

Adapting to the changing political context often involves the necessity to reformulate strategies without changing the essence of social groups. This can be shown to be the case with this group MUSA: its members understand that each moment requires different kinds of responses, as well as provoking the need to take on new roles and functions. At the same time, the group members recognize that one element will eternally remain the same: the dedication of the women who are at the forefront of these productive processes to a new vision of gender relations. The fight for their economic and political empowerment is a struggle that will continue to unite them for years to come.

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