

Brazil: System-building and leveraging state policies for the development of family agriculture

The Sustainable Development Project for Agrarian Reform Settlements in the Semi-Arid North-East (also known as the Dom Hélder Câmara Project) was implemented at a positive juncture in the political and economic life of Brazil: a favourable economic environment accompanied by strong political commitment to reducing rural poverty reduction, especially following the election of Luiz Inácio da Silva as President. Substantial resources were assigned to programmes (such as the famous Bolsa Família Programme) supporting the development of human capital and favouring the integration of family agriculture into the national economy. In this context, the project was conceived as an innovative response to the need for transforming agrarian reform settlements (occupied by poor rural families) into small agricultural enterprises.

Project design was based on a multidimensional approach to reducing poverty, with interventions to improve human and social capital, economic opportunities, citizenship rights, and relationships with policies and institutions. The project relied on pre-existing institutional structures in the North-East of Brazil (NGOs, rural trade unions of various political and social origins), and described itself as an “enabling agent” linking the target group with various stakeholders and facilitating their access to the benefits of development policies. The overall objective of the project was to establish a territorial system geared to supporting the development of family agriculture, which would be sustainable after project closure and serve as an example to other Brazilian states and territories.

Key elements

Through the project, beneficiary agricultural families and their associations were firmly placed in the driving seat of their own development, having been entrusted with the management of project funds and with implementation of project activities. That operational model presupposed the existence of a support network in which different stakeholders (organizations, rural trade unions, NGOs, municipalities, state institutions, the project, banks, and specialized service providers) worked together in a well-thought-out system of checks and balances. Under such a system, the function of the project was that of a territorial “articulator” inasmuch as it connected up the different levels, invested and leveraged resources in a strategic manner, and created mechanisms to ensure that the system worked for the benefit of farming families. Rather than acting as a service provider, the project assumed

the functions of socio-economic entrepreneurship, linking up and promoting synergies among the various stakeholders.



The IFAD-supported Dom Helder Camara Project worked with local governments, farmers’ organizations, civil society associations and state companies to improve poor people’s living conditions. Together they have brought safe water to communities, opened new markets for their farm products, trained young people and adults.

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The project’s vision meant that the farmers’ relationship with their environment took centre stage. Its motto, *Conviver com o semi-árido* (co-existing with the semi-arid environment) conveyed the message that the harsh natural conditions of Brazil’s North-East Region can be compatible with sustainable improvements in household living standards. The project backed up this vision up with an ample array of agricultural investments and actions aimed at the social and human development of farming families. In this way, the project brought about a substantial change in the agro-production system in the North-East of Brazil – formerly a cotton monoculture that

was largely eliminated in the 1990s – and oriented it towards sustainable and environmentally-friendly farming practices.

The project worked with 346 associations of farming families and thousands of individuals of all ages. Its operating model was based on a tripartite cooperation scheme consisting of beneficiary organizations, social mobilization agents and providers of technical assistance. Social mobilization agents, mostly from rural trade unions, helped shape the organization of the beneficiary associations and their needs, and providers of technical services (mostly NGOs) were supported in their respective specializations. This set-up allowed for social control of resource-use and for the delivery of quality services. Beneficiary requests were brought before a territorial committee, with ample representation at all levels, which decided democratically and rationally on which projects to finance. The appropriateness of this approach was confirmed by the evaluation, which also recorded substantial gains in terms of income and empowerment among farmer family associations, women and youth.



Rural youth, including those from the quilombolas communities, were targeted with dedicated actions aimed at enhancing the knowledge of arts and traditions of Semi-Arid North-East.

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Lessons

A multistakeholder territorial approach can substantially increase depth of development intervention if it succeeds in combining the legitimate interests and participation of key agents. Such an approach tends not to be geared to maximizing outreach (i.e. numbers of families targeted) but rather to ensuring long-lasting results on the ground. Such results include different types of services becoming available as, when and where required (financial, technical, networking, marketing, etc.), thereby increasing the sustainability of development impacts.

While progressive system-building at the territorial level in order to produce sustainable grass-roots effects does take time, it holds the prospect of a greater leverage effect later on. The evaluation showed that bringing beneficiary associations up to a self-sustainable

operating level calls for at least three to four years' support. For the phasing out to additional areas and groups, policy-makers and IFAD must think in several continuous stages, rather than limiting their support to a certain number of years.

The function of "articulators" as performed under the project is often the missing link for effectively implementing rural development policies. Governments and IFAD should give consideration to how such a neutral articulation function could be institutionalized more permanently in order that policies reach their intended target groups.

The evaluation stressed the importance of proper sequencing of activities. During the early years, the project's linking up with existing programmes had an immediate positive effect on the beneficiaries (provision of water tanks, a campaign for providing identity documents to rural women). This confirmed both the project's credibility and the beneficiaries' cooperation with other stakeholders. The ensuing work on production development aimed at increasing food security and supporting the gradual participation of family farmers in markets. The establishment of self-correcting institutional arrangements was also crucial to effective implementation of project activities.

Continuous leadership of a committed and professionally recognized project team, based on a convincing vision, has been critical to gaining credibility, mobilizing participation, helping to build up the territorial system and orienting the action of different stakeholders.

At the strategic level, two essential elements are required: understanding of the project's orientation and activities at the steering committee level (with corresponding conceptual and financial support), and freedom of action to allow for taking innovative approaches and improving operations without the burden of numerous bureaucratic restrictions.



Workers peel cassava roots in Muniz community, Simão Dias district. Cassava is an important food staple for the rural poor in Brazil and in many parts of the developing world.

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Further information:

Federative Republic of Brazil, Sustainable Development Project for Agrarian Reform Settlements in the Semi-Arid North-East, Interim Evaluation, Report No. 2321-BR, March 2011, ISBN 978-92-9072-227-4, IFAD Office of Evaluation, Via Paolo di Dono, 44, 00142, Rome, Italy. The full report, Profile and Insights are available online at www.ifad.org/evaluation; email: evaluation@ifad.org.