

## **Partnership as a Special Case of Participation: an Experience of Cooperation Among Farmers, Researchers and Extensionists in Brazil**

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### **Abstract**

Restriction of participation to small groups and the absence of strategies for scaling up is identified by several authors as one of the biggest problems of participatory approaches. Dissatisfaction with these limitations led to the recognition of the need for partnerships with agricultural organisations. The aim of this article is to discuss the problems and opportunities of partnership among farmers, researchers and extensionists and their organisations to promote rural development. Partnership is introduced as a specific form of participation, in which organisations are involved. Its impacts go beyond the micro social level to include the meso and the macro levels. However, in the transition from participation at the microsocial level of action to meso and macrosocial levels we can observe an increase in the problems between different actors, in which cooperation is made difficult by the power relations, competition and indirect communication through intermediaries. A participatory experience in the Brazilian state of Pará is analysed: a research project in a partnership between a research organisation and a farmers' organisation in the Transamazonian region. An assessment of the causes of conflicts among the partners revealed that the most important questions of power were related to the distribution of financial resources and the competition for prestige among farmers. A major problem, however, was the lack of clarity over the type of partnership, which may take different forms ranging from distant to close. In this case, the partnership was too close. Distance increases the zones of uncertainty, diminishes dependence and hence reduces the power element in the relationship. On the other hand, antagonisms are especially strong in a close link between parties in which one cannot relinquish. Thus, the type of partnership in this experience was an inadequate form of achieving cooperation among the subsystems of the Agricultural Knowledge System.

**Keywords:** Participation; Partnership; Smallholder farming; Agricultural research; Rural extension.

### **Introduction**

Restriction of participation to small groups and the absence of strategies for scaling up is identified by several authors as one of the biggest problems of participatory approaches among which are Participatory Rural Appraisal and Participatory Technology Development (Blik & Veldhuizen 1993:F4; Okali et al. 1994:107; Veldhuizen et al. 1997:281; Kitz 1998:192). Dissatisfaction with the limitations of the participatory approaches led to the recognition of the need for partnerships with agricultural organisations. Thus, participation is not effected only between individuals or small informal groups at the microsocial level, it also extends to meso and macro-social levels among research and extension institutions apart from other organised actors.

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In the last years the concept of partnership has developed to an important pillar of the rhetoric of development and is also used frequently in traditional research and extension. However, it is understood as more than a loose network of contacts among different actors in a rural context, among them the "real" clients, the farmers (EMBRAPA 1998:19).

The aim of this article is therefore to contribute to the better understanding of the problems of partnerships between research, rural extension and its clients in Brazil and to facilitate the cooperation of the actors in the rural areas. Thereby contributing to the development of the concept of partnership, thus avoiding the substitution of the relatively unclear concept of participation by the even more nebulous concept of partnership.

In this article partnership is understood as a special form of participation, in which organisations are involved, and thus it goes beyond the microsocial to the meso and macro social levels.

Participation at the meso and macro social levels predominantly occurs through mediators (intermediary persons), normally representatives (see Glasl 1997:62-64). Researchers, extensionists and farmers meet as representatives of non-formal organisations (farmers' interest groups), formal organisations (associations, trade unions, regional movements), local government bodies, and state institutions (agricultural research institutes, universities, extension services). Moreover, they bring along varied interests (private, their own links with other groups, etc.), even when these may lead to role conflicts. In the transition from participation at the microsocial level of action to meso and macrosocial levels we can observe an increase in the problems between different actors, in which cooperation is made difficult by the power relations, competition and indirect communication through intermediaries.

The ideas discussed in this article are the result of a larger study based on the experiences of farming systems research and extension in a partnership involving researchers, farmers and their organisations from 1994 to 2000, and as external supervisor of the Lumiar Project<sup>1</sup> of the National Institute for Colonisation and Agrarian Reform (INCRA) from 1997 to 2000, both in the state of Pará.<sup>2</sup> The decisive themes of this study, conflicts, power and organisation, are discussed with reference to Simmel (1995) in order to understand the nature of conflict and its different forms and according to the approach of the "French School" of sociology of organisations led by Crozier & Friedberg (1993). These latter authors start from the formation of "concrete action systems", which allows them the analysis of collective constructions which do not necessarily coincide with that of formal organisations. They can be organisations with relatively weak possibilities for sanctions, public extension services as well as farmers' associations, municipal development councils or partnerships. The existence of a concrete action system (structured human ensemble; Bernoux 1985:138) is not natural; it develops from concrete problems and actions of the involved members. Power is understood as a relation between actors (at the level of action) and not as a structural phenomenon (e.g. domination), an attribute of certain persons (e.g. an authority with capacity to command) or as a "combination of coercion and legitimation" (political power; Chazel 1995:214, 228, 241). Crozier & Friedberg (1993:30, 68) introduced the phenomenon of freedom of the actors in the analysis of organisations which gives another perspective of social action, going beyond the Taylorian view of a passive person. Within the organisation groups may be formed which have opportunities for common action (trumps) and interaction capacities, some considered strategic, others apathetic, depending on its influence on organisational life. The fundamental mechanism of structuring of power relations and of collective action can be understood as a game,

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<sup>1</sup> Lumiar Project (1997-2000) was administered by INCRA, the Brazilian agency for agrarian reform, in order to offer a free public rural extension service to the farmers of the INCRA settlement projects. Peasants' organisations could choose, which extension service they wanted to subcontract. Before Lumiar, public rural extension was only possible through the state's organisations of rural extension.

<sup>2</sup> Schmitz (2002); *titel* (translation): Partnership among farmers, researchers, extensionists and their organisations: reflections on the agricultural knowledge system in the State of Pará, Brazil.

making cooperation possible, uniting freedom and joint-action. Power is localised in these free spaces, uncertainty zones, in which one of the adversaries makes use of the opportunity of refusing what the other demands of him, to a greater or lesser extent. Rarely does someone whose future behaviour is totally predictable (that is transparent) manage to succeed. While each actor wants to reduce the complexity, that is the unpredictability of the other, at the same time he is worried about increasing the complexity of his own behaviour towards the others (Crozier & Friedberg 1993:40-41).

The methodology of the study mixed elements of ethnography and action research. As I had the dual role of observer and actor, even though only as an associated researcher of LAET with scant involvement in organisational decision-making, several measures, such as 'peer debriefing' and triangulation<sup>3</sup>, were taken in order to reduce the element of bias caused by the predominance of the view of the researcher. (Lamnek 1995; Albaladejo & Casabianca 1997; Flick 1999; André 2000). This meant, among other things, consulting others for their perceptions and interpretations, e.g. through the analysis of documents written by my colleagues.<sup>4</sup>

### Partnership between the researchers and the users

The partnership was a pretext for disseminating proposals and results for a wider public, if the scope of the activity were ample enough (e.g. part of the 40,000 agricultural families in the Transamazonian region). This was the thinking which led the two organisations, the Movement for the Survival of Transamazonia (MPST) and the Transamazonian Agro-Ecological Laboratory (LAET), to participatory cooperation in 1993.

The MPST was formally founded in 1991 as a reaction to the reduction of the presence of the state in this region of official colonisation. Two years later it counted on the participation of 25 associations, 4 cooperatives, 8 rural workers unions (STRs)<sup>5</sup> and unions of teachers and health agents, when it sought greater involvement of the research through the Federal University of Pará (UFPA) in order to work on the problems of the region with approximately 40,000 farming families. The objectives were the implementation of a programme of technical assistance to the movement for the drafting of financial projects aimed at the development of the region and the training of experts to manage the projects. The LAET was created in 1993 in response to this request. LAET declared as its objective to contribute to the development of sustainable family farming and the better management of natural resources. The work was based on a permanent partnership between organised farmers ("unionists farmers") and the team of interdisciplinary researchers following the farming systems research and extension approach, which includes a joint definition of the lines of action in a participatory and interactive process (Castellonet et al. 1996:141; Henchen 2002:72-78).<sup>6</sup>

<sup>3</sup> Peer debriefing is the consultation and regular discussion with persons not directly involved in the research in order to identify other points of view and to verify work hypotheses and analyse results. Triangulation is a combination of different methods to investigate a phenomenon (Flick 1999:249-252). Moreover, documents of the organisations under study were also analysed.

<sup>4</sup> Christian Castellonet played an important role in the formation and coordination of LAET from 1995 to 1997; Mário José Henchen was a researcher of LAET, but he had a long period of cooperation with the social movement of the region; Gutemberg Armando Diniz Guerra had a more independent position as member of an other associated group of the same programme in an other region of Pará; Jean Hébette was until 1995 head of the whole regional programme and the first LAET Coordinator.

<sup>5</sup> In Brazil, the members of "rural workers unions" (Sindicatos dos Trabalhadores Rurais - STR) are rural workers and peasants (the last are the great majority in the region under discussion).

<sup>6</sup> There are many studies on the results of this cooperation. Castellonet & Jordan (2002) list 25 publications that refer to the issue.

The ideas of this partnership were based, among other things, on Merrill-Sands & Kaimowitz (1990; quoted by Okali et al. 1994:84) who list seven conditions for an effective partnership with clients. These include: create opportunities for interaction; seek agreement on tasks; cultivate mutual respect; have common goals; promote understanding of interdependence; perceive the other as partners not as competitors; and the personal benefits should outweigh the costs. As cooperation evolved, we identified other factors. "However, cooperation can occur in a more conflicting manner due to the divergent interests which can be partly antagonistic or that exceed the capacity of the actors to manage them, because of their complexity. Lack of skill in recognising the divergences and in dealing with conflicts can lead to a breakdown in cooperation and failure to achieve objectives" (Schmitz et al. 2000:52).

## Conflicts

Although cooperation between the partners in farming systems research and extension and the users deepened in the first years, from the start we perceived some critical issues. Representatives of MPST expressed the view that for many of the peasants the role of LAET was not very explicit and that the researchers interfered too much in internal affairs of the farmers' organisation. MPST therefore saw the need to maintain a greater distance between both organisations. It was perceived that there were two undercurrents within the MPST: one interested in strengthening the partnership and in cooperating in joint projects, and another concerned about the loss of political leadership being left in the hands of a group of foreigners<sup>7</sup> with their own specific interests. On the other hand the researchers believed that the peasants at the grass roots level were not sufficiently involved in the process of decision-making of MPST.

As the climate in the relationship between MPST and LAET cooled down, the MPST, during one of the rounds of negotiation about the continuation of the agreement, took the opportunity to propose an integration of LAET as a technical service within the structure of the MPST, under its coordination, in which case LAET would lose some of its autonomy. This subordination was rejected by the members of LAET. A subsequent agreement did not last more than a year. The drawing up of a new project for the financing of a common programme had reached an advanced state before the MPST surprised its partner, at the end of 1998, by declaring that it no longer wished to sign the request. This conflict ended up in a dispute over the resources to be requested. The MPST insisted in an equal division of the budget between the movement and the research group.<sup>8</sup> Nevertheless, this cooperation continued for some time in this cold atmosphere, until it ended in 2000, when the project was rejected by the funding agency and also due to another conflict over a natural resources management project.

In the following sections, I shall discuss the two forms of the conflict - the struggle for power and competition - which in my view were the most important determinants for the dismantling of this partnership.

### *Power Struggle*

The struggle for power is a conflict between two adversaries (diade) which can occur within an organisation, between organisations and between individuals. Possible results are victory, exhaustion or accord (Simmel 1995:138-153).

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<sup>7</sup> LAET was a French-Brazilian cooperation project and was initially coordinated by foreigners.

<sup>8</sup> Up to this moment, LAET had administered the majority of the resources designated for the common programme.

The dominant role of LAET was especially reflected in its control over the financial, material and human resources and their distribution, such as vehicles, computers, physical space, and the contracting of collaborators, and in the definition of research themes. The researchers often confronted the unionists with fait accompli or involved them much later and in an insufficient way in the decision-making process, such as the drafting of the financial projects. The MPST claimed that it did not receive adequate infra-structure, while the partner managed to better equip itself through the common programme.<sup>9</sup> A permanent source of conflict was the request for contracting professionals for MPST and the remuneration of unionists for project work with resources of the project. The MPST wanted more control over the resources, but did not make much progress in this regard up to the time of the rupture. A community project in natural resource management in which the partners had posited much expectation contributed to the final breakup of the partnership. While the municipal Natural Resources Committee of the level of the municipality, which invited LAET to advise it, wanted some committee members to be remunerated, LAET tried to contract collaborators from within the communities in an attempt to give value to the technical functioning of the project, as these would be more directly involved in the project activities. The unionists became more irritated when another organisation, in contrast to MPST, would directly manage the resources for their project activities. The unionist prove that the partnership had failed in the negotiations.

### *Competition*

Competition is a direct or indirect dispute between competitors in order to win over a third (triade). Victory or advantage over the adversary are positive results; however, these are worthwhile only in so far as the party with the advantage also gains the favour of the third. Limitation or, in a few situations, impediment of competition, are possible (Simmel 1995:84-105).

A key point of competition among partners was who is recognised by the public as the leader of the peasants. The representatives of the peasants' organisations were mainly interested in reinforcing their organisation. Thus they hoped for a cautious behaviour on the side of the researchers who were called to advise them. These, on the other hand, must have defined their role in a definitive way.

A complicated aspect of the partnership was the question of political activities. The MPST maintained the monopoly on the question as LAET was new in the region. In the course of time, the researchers developed their own political activities which culminated in winning the elections for the head of the UFPA campus at Altamira. A group of lecturers belonging to the Workers' Party (PT) and LAET won the election with the support and coordination of MPST, against another group supported by the urban social movement and by another faction of PT. The MPST was divided on this question, with the coordination in favour of the LAET group, later facing severe criticisms, and the divergence between the different segments of PT being an important factor. Nevertheless, this occurrence was a confirmation for the MPST critics that LAET had become a rival on the question of control of the social movement. From this moment the MPST tried to initiate some activities without the involvement of LAET, partly supported by other research and development organisations, and to reduce LAET participation in the ongoing projects (Castellonet & Jordan 2002:70-71). In this case it was political engagement which created the problems.

Struggles for hegemony could be observed also on the part of the research group. The researchers of LAET were distrustful in relation to other research with farmers of the region not negotiated through them. A study, which transformed the researchers into objects of research led to a strong reaction against

<sup>9</sup> The situation of MPST (today: Movement for Transamazonian and Xingu Development - MDTX) in terms of material and human resources improved substantially after the separation.

the interference of other organisations supported by the MPST. Openly critical and derogatory remarks about this study provoked a conflict (Guerra 1999:461-463).

One special point of sensitivity in the relation between researchers and the unionists was the representation of the peasants (the grass roots), of which the social movement wants to maintain control. Direct contacts between researchers and the grass roots level, without mediation through the MPST, were interpreted as competition for control of the grass roots or its organisations. The mention of the expression "base" (grass roots level) three times in the proposal by LAET for the continuation of the partnership<sup>10</sup> irritated the unionists. Official visits of peasants with an evaluation team, without MPST involvement, were understood as an affront.

## Discussion

### *Issues and stakes of the conflict*

The conflicts which led to the final breakup of the partnership between MPST and LAET were perceived differently by the actors involved. Each of the actors interviewed presented different explanations, influenced by his own interests and perceptions. Important reasons for some were deemed irrelevant by others. The survey<sup>11</sup> revealed 16 perceived conflict issues that fit into four problem areas: power struggle (involving both the partners and the insiders); competition between the partners; subjective factors (personal) and dissatisfaction with the results (Schmitz 2002:202-203). On the other hand, Guerra & Castellonet (2001:148-149) identified different strategies as a cause and affirmed that "... the existence of extremely different fields of interest and power, equally divergent conceptions of development and of the role of the researchers complicated the development of a balanced alliance where each one benefitted from the other, without threat."<sup>12</sup> In order to arrive at a negotiated equilibrium in this relationship, they propose "... the rigorous identification of well-defined common fields of interest, and by contrast, reserved fields, where each partner understands how to preserve his supremacy and suggests clearly to the other to minimise his interference" (Guerra & Castellonet 2001,148-149).

We did not attempt to explain the conflict by only one cause. According to Glasl (1997:90-93) we understand that a series of factors and confrontations contributed to the final result. Whether a potential conflict results in open confrontation also depends on the attitude and behaviour of the individuals. What is decisive is the perception of at least one of the parties.<sup>13</sup> An assessment of the conflict issues (Schmitz 2002:203) reveals that questions of power related to the distribution of financial resources and the competition for prestige among the farmers were the most important causal factors.

The issues of the conflicts shifted over time. They were: the elections for the head of UFPA campus, credit projects, contents of the research work, remuneration of sindicalists, contact with the grass roots farmers). However, what was at stake did not change very much. These were relatively stable: questions of power related to financial resources and the transformation of research and development work into political representation (MPST) or scientific recognition (LAET).

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<sup>10</sup> Document: Proposta preliminar de novo convênio MPST-LAET 1997-1999. Altamira: LAET, 1997. 4p.

<sup>11</sup> Interviews with various actors of the different groups involved in the process of building the partnership were carried out. Moreover, I had direct experience at some moments with the conflicts, and was present at some meetings which addressed these issues.

<sup>12</sup> The nature of the partnership between MPST and LAET and the expression alliance are discussed below.

<sup>13</sup> Social conflict is an interaction between actors in which at least one actor experiences incompatibilities of thought, representation, perception, feeling or wish with the other, so that an impediment occurs in the other's action (Glasl 1997:14-15).

Thus subjective behaviour reinforced the conflicting tendencies. Compared with this, satisfaction with the results of cooperation and different objectives and strategies had a less important role. Generally, the difficulties are not linked to problems of communication or comprehension among "different social worlds" (Guerra & Castellonet 2001:148; Schmitz 2002:203).

In order to ensure their power positions the partners maintained uncertainty zones which involved, e.g., on the MPST side, their political strategies, possible alliances and their position relative to the partner (the organisation was divided in two internal groups, one of them in favour of the partnership, the other against). On the LAET side were negotiations for development projects, level of engagement and commitment of the researchers and their position relative to the partner (there existed three different opinions on how to relate to the partner - subordination, equality or intervention in his intern affairs) (Castellonet & Jordan 2002:146; Guerra & Castellonet 2001:131-132).

### *Trust*

When we started cooperation with the peasants in order to accomplish an action research on mechanisation in partnership between LAET and MPST, we were convinced that transparency and trust would be important elements of the partnership (Schmitz et al. 1996:232). However, some time later, studies on this partnership concluded that it was not possible to develop "a balanced alliance ... The culture of non-transparency, the divorce between rhetoric and practice ... would impede the development of a common strategy ..." The dissimulation and manipulation of information by the farmers' organisations were identified as limiting factors (Castellonet & Jordan 2002:153, 192; Guerra & Castellonet 2001:146-148).

However, due to the relations of power and the zones of uncertainty (Crozier & Friedberg 1993:40-41) maintained by the actors there can only be a limited form of trust. Based on experiences acquired through the action research and this partnership, we came to conclude that trust is not necessary for a successful partnership (or, in general, cooperation). So theoretical and empirical considerations would suggest, that neither trust nor transparency are the bases for the relationship between the actors in an organisation or between different organisations. One can distinguish between direct cooperation with individual farmers and interest groups, that is, at the microsocial level; and cooperation among organisations and actors in the political arena, that is, at the meso and macrosocial levels. Trust is more restricted to the microsocial level, in which strategies and power games have a minor role. The limit between the two situations can be the level of association. Above the microsocial level, the tactical and strategic considerations gain more importance. However, cooperation is achieved in spite of the different interests of the actors involved, and the existence of common goals and perspectives in the long term, often identified through delayed and somewhat conflicting discussions, is not necessary (Crozier & Friedberg 1993:57; Schmitz 2002:247).

### *The form of partnership*

Partnership can be constructed in different ways: near or distant. LAET committed itself to the target group through the creation of a permanent research team, headquartered in the region, "to establish a true relationship of partnership and trust", different from other researchers who were present only at specific moments, leaving the local experts to do the surveys (Castellonet et al. 1996:145). A central idea was the "privileged partnership" between the two organisations.<sup>14</sup> The partnership agreement was drafted

<sup>14</sup> Concerning the nature of the LAET/MPST partnership Hébert (1996:51) had no doubt. "It was not that they associated to undertake some precise activities, such as specific research, an agricultural mechanisation project, or the setting up of a cooperative. It was to work jointly on a development process of peasant agriculture ..." which would take "... a period of five years... to be set up...".

immediately after having started cooperation with LAET and delivered to the directors of MPST, so that they would suggest only modifications in the description of the objectives of MPST, taking this document more as a formality on the part of the researchers. The relationship between LAET and MPST was characterised as a narrow and permanent partnership or as an alliance understood as a very close form of cooperation (Castellanet et al. 1996:139-144; Guerra & Castellanet 2001:131, 148; Castellanet & Jordan 2002:54; Hébette 1996:55).<sup>15</sup>

Glasl (1997:244) distinguishes different types of relationships: alliance, coalition and symbiosis. In general, the expression alliance means a union against a common enemy which ends when the adversary (or another objective) ceases to exist (Simmel 1995:111; Glasl 1997:244). "Coalitions are formed in order to pursue objectives in common through a process of integration and exchange in the long term. The parties in a coalition expect an increase in the benefits for all the participants involved in a cooperation, without the need for giving up their autonomy." In the case of symbiosis the persons or groups look for "... support of each other because they expect compensation for specific demands ... The relationships between partners in such unions are characterised by strong links which strongly undermine personal autonomy" (Glasl 1997:244-245). The closest form of partnership would then be the symbiosis. The partnership between LAET and MPST can thus be characterised as a coalition with tendencies towards a symbiosis.

The strict relationship which LAET intended to create in a precipitative way and the fixation of written concrete rules of the partnership awakened many expectations, leading to various problems.<sup>16</sup> "From the start, the movement manifested its reticence and refused the term 'partnership'; defended autonomy or even hegemony supposedly threatened" (Hébetette 1996:50). There were constant manifestations against LAET's interference. Several times a greater distance was demanded. For the members of MPST this form of partnership created the feeling that LAET would act exclusively in its service as its research organisation. In view of this sense of belonging the researchers were seen in the initial phase as possible allies of the movement's political project (Henchen, 2002:86). Thus, there arose possibilities for disappointment, especially because LAET was internally divided on the question of its relation with the MPST (subordination, equality or intervention), in spite of the fact that the leadership made it clear that officially LAET would only support the policy of development, but not any party politics (Castellanet & Jordan 2002:66).

## Conclusions

The case presented here shows the presence of aspects of power in the day to day operations of organisations. They must be considered at all levels of the Agricultural Knowledge System<sup>17</sup>, without illusions about the possibility of consensual negotiations of the different interests and objectives. Many serious people, technically well qualified, are not prepared for these power games and, consequently, fail or waste much energy wishing to improve the "moral" of other stakeholders in order to end the power

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<sup>15</sup> The alliance goes beyond the partnership to include the right to criticise as in the case of the comrades in the struggle (Hébetette 1996:55).

<sup>16</sup> LAET recognised that "this contract was a proposal of the research team, perhaps without the MPST seeing all the implications of this partnership clearly and which would concretely mean alliance between researchers and farmers" (Castellanet et al. 1996:144). The "definition of *privileged partner* caused some misunderstanding. On LAET's side, it did not seem clear .... After all, whom did one classify as the privileged party?" (Henchen 2002:86).

<sup>17</sup> The Agricultural Knowledge System is composed, according to Nagel (1979:147), of three subsystems, research as the generator, extension as the transmitter and the farmer as the one who integrates innovative knowledge in the process of production. Between the subsystems there exists an efficient communication flow in both directions (for an updated discussion see Schmitz 2002:63).

games and to establish greater transparency and predictability. However, based on previous explanations, it is necessary to free oneself from a purely negative and repressive vision of power, which predominates in several scientific disciplines and also in everyday as well as in organisational life, simultaneously making it difficult for critical analysis and for use. There does not exist social action without power (Crozier & Friedberg 1993:17-18). Thus, the ideas about partnership presented initially must be reviewed.

The proposal of defining "exclusive fields of interest" between partners can be referred to, in the case of power struggle, as a strategy for avoiding interference (intervention) in the internal affairs of the partner. This could also mean, on organisational level, to reduce the interaction between the members of each organisation and to concentrate on the communication processes and decision-making exclusively on leadership level. But this option, apart from not being very realistic, would also affect the possibility of widening relations and cooperation, and it would restrict the initiatives to the leadership. Attempts to reduce or impede competition and to impose respect in hegemonic areas only partially worked. Nevertheless, rules for attaining negotiated equilibrium in the partnership can be successful only if they are respected by all the members of the organisations. However, the indefiniteness of the role of the LAET researchers in relation to the MPST impeded an agreement over fields of interests.

Similarly, the definition of rules cannot eliminate power manifestations in relationships and in conflicts of interest. Power relationships and conflicts are normal phenomena with which the researcher and extensionist must learn to cope. The main problems of the partnership were not related to communication or a lack of comprehension among different social worlds (farmers, researchers and extensionists), but to mediation between different interests (Schmitz 2002:247).

Could the rupture between LAET and MPST, which was prejudicial for the development of the region, have been avoided or did it only serve to confirm a generalised tendency? Can the partnership approach between research, extension and farmers' organisations be interpreted as a failure?

The experiences of the Transamazonia provide some insights. An assessment of the causes of the conflict (Schmitz 2002:213) revealed that there were various motives - the most important were questions of power related to the distribution of financial resources and the competition for prestige among farmers. A major problem, however, was the lack of clarity over the form of partnership.

In the case of LAET and MPST, the partnership that LAET was seeking was too close: on the one hand it nurtured expectations of the unionists farmers of having at their disposal an exclusive service provider; on the other hand, it led to conflicts, when LAET began to behave as an independent NGO, an autonomous force, gaining clout in the region and on the academic campus, instead of remembering that it was the farmers who had given impetus to the foundation of LAET, through the MPST, which had built up a name and legitimacy as an actor in the region (Henchen 2002:13, 86).

The two aspirations - proximity and independence - cannot be simultaneously achieved in this situation between coalition and symbiosis. There are two contradictory messages, reminiscent of a *double bind*.<sup>18</sup> LAET committed itself too intensively and could no longer interpret the messages of the partner in the original sense which, for example, was often a political manoeuvre. Once locked into this process, a real conflict dynamic evolved, which manifested itself from the start in tensions among the partners and whose later manifestations could not be connected to each stage of escalation (Schmitz 2002:242).

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<sup>18</sup> Double binds often occur with individuals in an intense relationship, where it is vital to their interests to distinguish exactly what type of message is being communicated, in order to react in an adequate manner. A double bind often occurs when the opponent sends out two types of messages, each one denying the other, and the individual finds himself locked in this situation. The individual is incapable of distinguishing these messages and of deciding to which message he should respond. He cannot make meta-communicative affirmations, neither can he simply opt out of the situation (Bateson, 1983:278-279).

A greater distance between partners would have been better in this case. Distance increases the zones of uncertainty, diminishes dependence and hence reduces the power element in the relationship. The limited knowledge about the other means economy which makes possible the concentration of energies for the real work (see Bateson 1983:192-193). Distance allows one to recognise interlinkages and context. On the other hand, antagonisms are especially strong in a close link between parties in which one cannot relinquish (Simmel 1995:56-64). Proximity can provoke confrontation. Thus, the partnership in the LAET way was an inadequate form of achieving cooperation among the subsystems of the Agricultural Knowledge System.

In comparison with the experience of the partnership between LAET and MPST, the partnership developed with peasants' organisations within the framework of the Lumiar Project (subcontracted extension service) in Transamazonia can be considered as very successful in its partnership with the farmers' organisations. The Lumiar teams were committed to much less than the LAET and their role was clearly defined as rendering specific services to the client. There were several partners, however none had the "privileged" position as the MPST in relation to LAET. Unilateral decisions to avoid involvement in politics had a positive impact, such as the restriction on political party activities, imposed by the supervision. Subjective factors, in the first place empathy, also played an important role: permanent contact of the president of the extensionists' cooperative<sup>19</sup> and the peasants' leaders was decisive in order to maintain good relations among the partners. As cooperation is achieved within a concept of more distant partnership, but clearly defined as the relation between the advisor and the client, even the difficulties of some extensionists in interrelating with the farmers were not interpreted as prejudicial to the partnership. "Presently, the teams in Transamazonia have autonomy, within the work plan negotiated with the settlers, in defining their activities and in making proposals, a fact which raised the level of satisfaction among the extensionists and also increased creativity by focussing on the dialogue between extensionist and farmer as the locale for decision-making" (Schmitz 2001:367).

It seems then, that the attempt at subordination or the rupture of the partnership were not the only alternatives.<sup>20</sup> Neither subordination nor symbiosis builds a creative environment for participatory work. In the first case it is unlikely that critical dialogue with the farmers (Freire 1992) will occur, in the second case the friction is too great for potential to develop.

The researchers and the extensionists must be relatively autonomous in their relation with the farmers, attending to the demands and transforming them into proposals and activities to be achieved within the ambit of the annual work programme. They must have a certain organisational independence in relation to the representative organisations of farmers in order not to lose the distance necessary for critical dialogue, without the chance of building a true partnership, as was the case in relation to some farmers' organisations and which was criticised in the evaluation of the Lumiar Project at the national level (Marinho et al. 1999:38).<sup>21</sup> It is important that we remember that the extensionist must be an actor and not an instrument of extension (Neuchâtel Group 1999:12). Especially in organisations with weak sanctioning and control mechanisms, such as in research and extension, motivation of the professionals

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<sup>19</sup> The service was carried out by a service agency, the "Cooperativa de Prestação de Serviços em Desenvolvimento Sustentável, Técnico e Social da Agricultura" (COODESTAG).

<sup>20</sup> Another experience in Pará, the partnership between the research organisation, the "Laboratório Sócio-Agrônomo do Tocantins" (LASAT) and the farmers' organisation (FETAGRI) also continues.

<sup>21</sup> It was demonstrated that "... the weight of certain social movements ... seems out of proportion in the states where they accumulate the function of service agency and contractee or representative of the interests of the settlers. Such a fact can represent an inversion of logic as, contrary to contributing to participation, the social movements become the one who decides, in an authoritarian manner, the destiny of its representatives, discrediting the project as public policy" (Marinho et al. 1999:16). "... it is not working for the proposed objectives of the project, that the social movements of great penetration ... absorb and control it, diverting it from its proposal of participation, plurality, diversity and decentralisation" (Marinho et al., 1999:38).

is decisive. Without this, actors' freedom and available room to manoeuvre would have a negative effect on the quality of the service, a fact which would be difficult to correct through strict sanctions (e.g. dismissal). However, in order to guarantee this autonomy a permanent process of communication with the farmers' organisations at the municipal and regional level is essential in order to maintain the capacity to mediate between the different interests and to have a clear definition of the role of each partner in relation to the other.

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