

Minifundios and Metropolis: territorial management of Organic Farming in Ibiúna (São Paulo, Brazil)

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Introduction

In spite of the growing demand in green vegetables from three main cities in São Paulo State, small-scale vegetable farmers are still facing economic problems. Subsequently, the maintenance of small farmers and families depending solely on agriculture appears as very difficult. Organic Farming (OF) is increasingly considered as a possible alternative for designing a "new rural" in Brazilian communities (Abreu, 2000). It is seen as an opportunity for economic valuation of horticulture products (root, fruit and leaf vegetables for salads). The existing demand for this type of product, together with favorable green market prices, especially during summertime, would both stimulate and propitiate an expansion in production (Assis, 2002). The consumer of organics also expects a product that has certified or guaranteed quality, and such standards are not yet fully stabilized in Brazil. Organic farming is also considered as a way to preserve environment; although this attribute is not always recognized by consumers. However, the ways small farmers adopt OF in new peripheral "green belts" (Ueno, 1985) to conquest a urban demand in organics have not been investigated extensively. We explored this issue with a case study in the wide community of Ibiúna, located close to three main cities of São Paulo state, comprising together 20 million inhabitants. This study shows how small farmers were organised or organise themselves to meet urban demands and develop organic production. It explores a diversity of development models of horticulture organic farming, based on four forms of social organizations which are characterized and discussed.

Study area and methods

The wide municipality of Ibiúna (1093 km²) is presented as a tourist station located in the fringes of Paranapiacaba mountain, which grant it a temperate humid climate. It belongs to a Biosfera reserve, as it is formed by original Atlantic Forest vegetation. It also harbors environmental protection units established by state and federal laws (Ahrens, 2003). This rural territory is rich in strategic aquiferous resources, which provide not only irrigation water for vegetable growing but also feed the cities of Sorocaba and Ibiúna. Formal or illegal real estate building and development of activities such as pay-per-fish fishing resorts contribute both to lower quality and higher demand in water. Other activities also take place, either associated to country society's values (second homes, horse farming and horse-riding, ecological trekking..). Ibiúna (SP) attracts in average 20,000 tourists every weekend. It counts 64160 inhabitants; including 42979 in the rural zone. Farming is still considered as the basis of its economy (IBGE, 2000). The landholding structure in the territory is formed by small properties, where over 50% of all properties have less than 10 hectares of area. With such structures, horticulture is the prevailing agricultural activity, with a total vegetable crop area of 7728 ha (including 4096 ha of leafy vegetables i.e. 53% of crop area).

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Based on secondary data, we identified the number and location of organic farmers in Ibiúna. We then have focused our study on a micro-basin (Verava), where most of the organic farmers are located (72 organic/ total of 90 farms). We have interviewed a number of local social stakeholders, including: 12 organic farmers and 01 conventional farmer; 02 people in charge for a company that commercializes produce; 02 presidents of associations of small organic farms, 02 inspectors of certification organs; 02 Rural Office (“Chamber of Agriculture”) technicians. We also discussed with political representatives (councilmen) of the local population, and with environmentalists.

Results

From the point of view of social forms of production, we have found a diversified socioeconomic universe. Today, we can identify in OF *four* basic forms of social organization that express *a priori* different concepts about the market and the organic farming. The first one is the oldest and congregates the majority of organic farmers: it has been a constant reference for all stakeholders interviewed.

The company’s structural strength

The first form of insertion of farmers in the market is characterized by hierarchical relations between farmers and the company’s officials, whose main goal is to occupy spaces in big supermarkets and possibly expand its space of commercialization both domestically and outside the country. It was legally defined as an association of small organic farmers, but it actually operates as an enterprise with private-capital company. A total of 130 farmers sell their products through this company, and a significant part of them, approximately 70 farmers, are geographically located in the Verava rural neighborhood, which is also a hydrographic micro-basin occupied by organic vegetable farming. This double configuration brings forth questions of organic-based-entities for environmental resources management.

The contract that rules the relationship of farmers with the company is based on a relation of exclusivity, meaning that farmers compromise to sell the entirety of their production to the cooperative, based on a previous production plan defined by the company. Inputs and technical assistance services are part of the production planning, and costs of it are paid by farmers; nonetheless, the company does not compromise to buy or sell the whole production. Products are sold on consignment, that is, prices received by farmers refer only to the part that has actually been sold, thus excluding transportation losses and remnants of production not sold to supermarkets. Costs are high and contribute to further burden farmers’ profit. The certification process is carried out by a certifying institution chosen by the company, and paid by the farmer. Several farmers were initially certified by AOA (Association of Organic Farmers of São Paulo), and started being certified later by IBD (BioDynamic Institute), which is accredited by IFOAM. This production is clearly identified today in supermarkets in all major cities.

Associative form of horizontal relation, with a different productive and commercial positioning

A second form of social organization in Ibiúna is found in the association of 15 small farmers, where 08 farmers give assiduous precedence to commercialization through this association, and the others do not observe a very regular frequency. Therefore the relation of farmers with this association is not based on a contract of exclusivity, as was the previous company. This is a group led by one member farmer who chose, for ideological reasons, to create a new organization based on principles of exchange of experiences and information on daily problems of production and commercialization. This group, as opposed to the one mentioned above, prioritizes the definition of a “socially just” price both for

producer and consumer, and the association keeps 10% of the commercialized value. It operates in a flexible and participative way, and is distributing produce to two large supermarkets and smaller points of sale. The group also operates with home delivery and sells to a consumer community organized in the outskirts of São Paulo that is connected to the Catholic Church base communities.

Integration through an existing cooperative

A third form of organization is being born, from the rupture with principles and practices as established by the first form of market insertion. This is the case of farmers from a same rural neighborhood who are worried with the low price paid for their products when compared to prices practiced in supermarkets. They seek to assure economic value for their production, and they hope to achieve this goal with the creation of an association of small farmers in the neighborhood. This association intends to integrate dissident organic farmers into a traditional and well known rural cooperative established in the region, so they will have support for produce commercialization through the cooperative's functional structure.

Persistency of individual, direct selling forms

The last form is classic and individual. It is represented by small farmers who sell their products in street markets and free spots of commerce in the city streets. They sell their products directly to consumers. This distribution seems incipient to us and was not closely investigated. We can also observe a diversity of forms of a wider organization, connected to world visions and systems of value that are different from all those presented above: these are biodynamic production systems. Commercialization is based on a net of consumers across cities in the state of São Paulo that keep geographical proximity. This system is characterized by a greater diversity of products (vegetables, fruits and dairy products) that are commercialized through direct sales in the production unit, or through home delivery.

Discussion and conclusions

Our field case study starts from the theoretical point of view that there are reproduction spheres that are socially structured and economically distinct in the contemporary rural universe, and that inside such rural territories there are social nets that articulate to one another, or overlap, but do not mingle (Carneiro 1999). This conception of the process of farmer's insertion in the market may propitiate and enrich understanding of that complex territory.

In the case of organic farmers in Ibiúna (SP), the space of articulation and action cannot be singled down to the municipality of Ibiúna, or to the circle of commerce and proximate relations in terms of geography (neighborhood and municipality), since those organic farmers keep relations with larger and more diverse nets either of market, or technical assistance systems, or certifications, as well as relations with urban consumers. Therefore, it seems we should consider this territory from the point of view of the expressions of multiple possibilities for the integration of farmers and development agents to the global society.

Although Ibiúna presents itself as a tourist station, its configuration is not essentially based on rural tourism. The Verava micro-basin has a dual status: horticultural production and resources conservation. That it also is in the organic horticulture activity that this rural territory can be original and even contribute with a relevant experience in the direction of a better economic position for farmers, as regards qualification and addition of value to products of this territory. The role of the Ibiúna

municipality in organic farming development is probably more crucial with decentralization, and it differs from imposed citizen dynamics in peri-urban areas (in Lorda and Duvernoy, 2001).

The insertion process of farmers in the market also shows the lack and deficiency of public policy instruments for the support and strengthening of organic farming (Assis, 2002), and in general, of Brazilian familial farming. However, in spite of scarce resources of the Micro-basins Environmental Monitoring State Program, in this specific territory the program can be seen as an indirect financial support to local development: organic farmers have close relationship with environmental requirements and constraints, and these are regularly monitored by the certification body. This indirect support allows for an expansion of environmental practices, especially because there are conditions for the implementation of practices destined to recuperate soils and ciliary (river-bordering) forests, actions that improve the quality of water and natural resources. Farmers are open to the technological and environmental propositions contained by that project.

Some questions emerge from this study like clues for a deep research in this territory. First, it is necessary to reconsider the environmental issue as a constitutive element of those forms of organization. Secondly, it is necessary to analyze the meaning of the different forms of organization in terms of systems of values, which may be associated to an ethical dimension of the activity, since relations (direct sale) with consumers will likely contribute for the integration of new values; and it is also necessary to deepen this study so as to analyze OF's contribution for social stability.

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