

Food security and nutrition, family farming and institutional purchases: challenges and potentialities

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The paper written by Giselle Silva Garcia and Elisabetta Recine addresses the issue of food security and nutrition and focuses on the share of family farming in institutional purchases. As suggested by the title, “Perspectives of supply of family farming products to public food security and nutrition facilities of the Federal District”, great potentialities are identified in this construction process, enhancing food security and nutrition (FSN) and strengthening family farming. Moreover, this innovation brings new (and old) challenges to be overcome. Thus, the paper looks at a controversial, up-to-date and socially relevant topic. It discusses the most significant issues, and ends by proposing solutions to them.

By discussing FSN in Brazil, this paper touches upon the main problem of long-standing famine, reported by doctor Josué de Castro, from Pernambuco, in the early twentieth century. Such record enables readers to realize when the topic started being a cause for concern in Brazil. The paper also explains how the term FSN was conceptualized worldwide, and then in Brazil, where the concept of FSN is effective in the main existing legal framework, passed in 2006.¹ The description of this process also refers to the institutionalization of the National System and National Program of Food and Nutrition Security (SISAN and PNSAN, respectively), which are still being implemented.

Thus, the process of institutionalization of FSN in Brazil has to be recorded. It relied on the participation of different segments of Brazilian society.² The results of the set of policies emerging from such social process are also worthy of mention, as they highlight the advancements of Brazil while combating poverty and famine with both short-term and long-term measures combined. This set of policies and programs, developed across different sectors, has reached important segments of society under food insecurity, including impoverished family farmers.² Some of these policies are addressed in this paper, for example, the Food Acquisition Program (PAA), whereby food is purchased directly from family farmers, without procurement procedures, and donated to families under food insecurity. This is an unprecedented action.

The experience with PAA was considered as a learning process for both public management, which started making institutional purchases through different procurement processes, and certain segments of family farming, which started to trade their surplus production. Based on such experience, the National School Feeding Program (PNAE) also started the institutional purchase process to supply its target public schools.³ This paper highlights the significant outcomes achieved by creating and implementing those programs: 1) family farming was strengthened, and there was an increase in the income, productivity and feeding quality of the farming families involved; 2) both regional and local economies were boosted, and there was increased feeding quality of populations that received food through those programs.

Thus, taking PAA and PNAE as benchmarks, and considering the positive outcomes observed in the implementation of those programs, the authors believe that purchase from family farmers should also be adopted by public food security facilities, such as food banks and community restaurants, created while FSN was institutionalized in Brazil.²

To contextualize the reader geographically about the field research, the paper described how the Federal District (DF) joined SISAN, and mentioned the Plan of Food Security and Nutrition that had to be drawn up. The study focuses on the debate about the process experienced in this regional scenario, but always in line with the national process. That part of the text introduces the guidelines for I PDSAN, which is in line with the guidelines of PNSAN and aims to “encourage the promotion of supply and structuring of sustainable and decentralized, agro-ecologically based systems for production, extraction, processing, distribution and marketing of foods, in addition to fostering production and agribusiness based on family farming”. The goal of such mention, therefore, is to consider that the pursuit of this guideline is essential for the consolidation of FSN, and its implementation needs to be made at the national, state, district and municipal levels.

This section in the paper highlights the importance of family farming production nationwide by presenting statistical data on productivity. For some particular foods, it ranges between 60 and 70%. According to these data, more than half of all food produced in Brazil comes from family farming. This is evidence that family farmers can maximize cultivation areas for production, especially when compared with industrial food production, the so-called agribusiness, which receives support from the government. While the National Family Farming Program (PRONAF) received, in 2014, funds of 21 billion reais, agribusiness received up to 156 billion reais.⁴ PRONAF was only set up in 1995 while agribusiness has received government support since the 1970s. This explains, historically, how the latter became the hegemonic production process.

Then, the authors reported data on family farming production in the Federal District, which are much lower when compared with data for Brazil. This is indicative that family farming production faces drawbacks in that region, especially because there is not enough land for it. This situation shows the concentration of land ownership that prevails in Brazil, one of the main problems that have to be solved for the consolidation of FSN in the country. Unfortunately, despite the importance of FSN, it has not progressed as much in Brazil since the 1988 Federal Constitution was enacted. According to data from 2003, approximately 120 thousand families remain encamped all over Brazil, waiting for settlements.⁴

As regards understanding the issue of FSN as introduced by the respondents, the quality and reach of the debates are worthy of notice. The paper focused on the perceptions of people involved in public FSN facilities, that is, people that have somehow participated in the debate on FSN and are aware that it is a right to be enjoyed. This should be highlighted because, in general, there usually lacks an integrative view on this issue that associates food production and health while also taking environmental issues into account. This can be considered an interesting differential reported by respondents and the outcome of a training process that has occurred within FSN, which qualifies individuals who adopt the actions taken to promotion of FSN, providing a broader approach to the issues of food and nutrition, from the perspective of ensuring the human right to adequate and healthy food and building citizenship.⁵

The results obtained also foster reflection upon the structure of the current agri-food system. The respondents reported their concern about restricted access to food, insufficient supply and the unsustainability of the current production model. They acknowledge that the current production system has harmful consequences for the environment and for human health. The recorded comments suggested that the production system is “aggressive to FSN”. Those comments seem indicative that the respondents thoroughly understand that food and nutrition insecurity is generated, and that this is closely related to the current agri-food system.

However, despite such understanding, when they refer to eating habits and health promotion, they expressed the belief that changing one's (unhealthy) eating habits on an individual basis can only take place by means of nutrition education. That is in contradiction to the issues aforementioned. In other words, they have a critical view of the agri-food system, but it is not yet combined with the need to change the latter, by means of structuring processes aimed at creating healthy environments, i.e., promoting FSN and, thus, healthier eating practices and wider adoption of FSN. Some accounts from respondents tend to "blame" people for their "unhealthy eating habits".

The comments made by respondents raised a question: how important would it be to make a deeper analysis based on the approach of social determination of eating and nutrition profile of contemporary society? Developing FSN is complex, in a society organized around capitalism, where the agri-food system is regulated by the private sector and strongly influenced by the media, and food moves along this system while it is considered as a merchandise only.⁶

Such understanding is in contradiction to the concept of food as an essential asset for preservation of human life, as expressed in the Brazilian concept for FSN. According to this perspective, the agri-food system has to be structured based on the logic of human right to proper and healthy food.⁷ The design of such systems is in line with the current debate on public policies for health promotion, which have received invaluable contributions from certain authors. One of the most innovative contributions was given by Breilh, who advocates that building a healthy society depends on structuring a supportive and sustainable society.⁸ Health promotion may be accomplished by a population depending on how it organizes itself to ensure social justice and equal rights to its citizens, and how the relationships between human beings and nature are established in the countryside and in the city, whether they encompass cooperation, coexistence or exploitation, thus determining whether or not such society is sustainable from an environmental, social and economic point of view. Emphasis on such elements reinforces the idea that they are important for promotion of FSN, which, in turn, is also crucial for developing a supportive, sustainable and healthy society.

Also in this regard, the respondents reflected upon changes to the current food production model. In this sense, it is important to discuss the unsustainability of the modern agri-food system, as proposed by the so-called Green Revolution.⁹ This process, driven by the countries of North America, was found in Brazil and other countries of the southern hemisphere, from the 1960s onwards, and aimed to carry out "the transition from an agriculture that depended on nature to an agriculture based on intensive consumption goods and industrial inputs".¹⁰

Different studies conducted over the past decades show the impossibility of such a model, which was imported from northern countries and, therefore, is not adapted to the conditions of soil and climate in tropical countries such as Brazil.¹¹ The complex maintenance of industrial

food production demand requires the use of harmful substances to human health and the environment, such as pesticides and drugs for veterinary use, and promotes the adoption of practices that lead to the degradation of nature.¹¹ Given this finding and the need for changes, the framework of agroecology has been proposed.⁹ Agroecology is a science that brings together the knowledge required for the management of agri-food systems, sustainably and in accordance with the principles of FSN.

This issue was not addressed in the paper under discussion, because it was not exactly its central theme, but somehow it is a key issue for FSN and for the sustainability of family farming. The construction of another way to produce food, guided by agroecology, refers to the rescue of ancestral knowledge developed by families, peasants and indigenous farming, combined with the knowledge of modern ecology.⁹ Currently, it is acknowledged that the transition from the industrial model of food production to organic production is required. In Brazil, this process is expected as one of the main objectives of the National Policy for Agroecology and Organic Food Production (PNAPO), enacted in 2012.¹² Its implementation is of vital importance to FSN and to environmental, social and economic sustainability of the country, and it is a challenge that will depend on the political decisions of government authorities and the general support of society.¹³

The claim that there is need for the transition from the current production model, which uses highly dangerous inputs to consumer health and the environment, to ecological food production, raises a question: will ecological agriculture be able to ensure food security across the country? The answer to this question lies in the need of strengthening family farming, which is the segment of rural production in Brazil with the greatest potential to perform the agroecological transition required. The inclusion of the principles of the Green Revolution by Brazilian farmers, in a context of strong agrarian land concentration and poverty, caused the unsustainability of traditional forms of production and rural exodus.

Agroecology, by contrast, aims to improve “the sustainability of agroecosystems by mimicking nature rather than the industry”.¹³ Thus, its practice contributes to greater autonomy of farming families, which stop relying on the purchase of external inputs to the property for ensuring production. Therefore, such a transition becomes feasible, concurrently with the execution of FSN policies that focus on proper management of agroecosystems and their reorganization in the country, according to the regional characteristics of production and biodiversity, with the guarantee of access to land in the amount required to ensure the demanded output. Thus, this discussion should also consider the principle of food sovereignty, in addition to that of human right to food. Understanding this principle implies recognizing that access to land, water and native seeds, and the maintenance of traditional food practices, are fundamental to accomplish FSN.¹⁴

Within this perspective, there is also the need to develop a national policy on food supply by encouraging short marketing or proximity cycles,¹⁵ as well as maintaining and expanding public facilities for food and nutritional security such as fairs, public markets, popular restaurants, community kitchens, food banks, etc., in order to ensure access to healthier food and fair prices.¹⁵

In line with all the arguments already presented, institutional purchases in the Federal District are seen as advantageous by respondents when it comes down to the topics of food system, farming families, public procurement and its potential. The social and economic processes generated by this new perspective of operation of public policies demonstrate the essential role of these for social inclusion and empowerment of historically neglected segments of the population, and they play an important role in the national development process.

As challenges to the advancement of the proposed institutional purchases in Brazil, the respondents mentioned hegemony of agribusiness and bureaucracy. The question of the hegemony of agribusiness is indeed a challenge to be faced, because it interferes in the process of strengthening family farming due to the constant competition for political space and resources, and also because its advance in the territory causes damage and disruption of family production (especially the agroecological one), displacement of families from their land and migration to urban centers.⁴ Thus, just like agribusiness received long-term state support in order to become stronger, family farming production needs financial tax incentives and appropriate technical assistance, in accordance with its production scale and characteristics.

Bureaucracy was mentioned as another equally important issue because it also restricts the access of family farmers to public policies. Considering the constraints imposed by the existing legal paradigm, this segment needs to organize itself in a process of qualification and professionalization (project preparation, production planning, organization of the productive unit, basic administration and management, issuing invoices, accounting), which is often unavailable for many farming families. This fact generates workload, and changes the focus of production, and affects the entire production logic; moreover, irregularities may occur, because some farmers are unaware of all existing administrative and legal requirements. Unaware of the reality of family farming, and afraid of lawsuits over these situations, managers tend to increase process control operations. These procedures, in turn, further hinder the participation of family farmers in FSN policies, thus impeding the aspect that characterizes, precisely, such policies as structuring ones.¹⁶

Such situations pose difficulties when innovations occur in the types of relationship between state and society, or between political society and civil society. One justification for the existence of such a legal framework is the combat against corruption and the protection of public property, thus avoiding the permeability of the state apparatus to private sector interests.¹⁷ On the other hand,

there are more informed discussions on the concepts of the New Economic Sociology, linking “the notion of market to social relations rooted in local contexts [...] permeated by values and practices that ultimately redirect the focus of analysis to a prospect targeted at social actors[...].”¹⁶ From this perspective, it is considered that one of the policy objectives is the strengthening of family farming, and there is a need for an urgent review of such frameworks to adapt them to the reality of the segment, in order to value the trust relationships that are built locally, without, however, affecting the public interest.¹⁶

Only this set of strategies will gather the means to overcome the difficulties that currently hinder more active and constant participation of family farmers in FSN public policies.

Proposals made for the challenges identified, besides the one above, include the implementation of agrarian reform, the development of a national supply policy mainly underpinned by family farming, and society’s appreciation of the importance of FSN. Interestingly, respondents did not propose, for this agenda, the construction of a model for producing healthier, pesticide-free food.

This finding may indicate that there is a lack of production alternatives such as agroecology and/or that such discussion is still incipient, even in environments that work towards developing FSN, which is a limiting factor for the advancement of this ongoing process. In this sense, the importance of approaching the theme of ecological food production should be highlighted once again, set in the discussions about family farming and FSN, carried out both in the academic sphere and in society in general. Without considering it as a key issue, it is not feasible to think of consolidating the guidance contained in the I FSN District Plan (I PDSAN), already mentioned here and in the paper being discussed.

Successful experiences in the construction of alternative market mechanisms, with food from ecological family farming, have been recorded by studies conducted in different states of Brazil and demonstrate the feasibility of this proposal.^{15,16} It is also important to retrieve the existence of mechanisms developed under PAA and PNAE, which guarantee payment of a different price for purchasing ecological food, which is an important stimulus to the choice of agroecological transition offered by family farming.¹⁵

Finally, agreement with the concluding remarks of the paper indicate some possibilities to advance the access of family farmers to institutional markets in the Federal District and the importance of a participatory construction of this process. The realization that the environment is favorable to the proposal is encouraging, and the analysis is accurate when it shows that, although there are good intentions, government authorities have to make political decisions and the whole society needs to get involved.

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