

Extension or communication? – The perceptions of southern Brazilian tobacco farmers and rural agents about rural extension and Framework Convention on Tobacco Control.

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Abstract

This article attempts to critique the current process of extension through an investigation that seeks to demonstrate and analyze the perceptions held by farmers and rural agents about some aspects of tobacco cultivation in the municipality of Arvorezinha (Little Tree) in southern Brazil. The research has been taking place during the last four years, using qualitative and ethnographic methods, involving participant observations and semi-structured interviews with families of farmers, extension agents, teachers, nurses and businessmen. As part of our research on the perceptions held by tobacco farmers and rural agents, it is necessary to check if the old problems highlighted by and criticized in Freire's work "Extension or Communication?" still persist. Lastly, when presenting the narratives of adherence to planting tobacco and resistance to change to environmentally sustainable practices, the study of the perceptions is relevant as an aid to policy makers.

Keywords: risk perceptions; rural development; agricultural extension; empowerment.

Introduction

A comprehensive survey on the teaching of rural extension in Brazil has indicated that the most suitable and used book is "Extension or Communication?" by Paulo Freire (Callou et al., 2008). In this book, Freire (1971) criticizes the process of rural expansion in his time, and how it presented a one-way flow of authoritative information. Freire advocated a process of effective communication, dialogue and exchange of knowledge to be established between the technician and the farmer.

The book "Extension or communication?" by Paulo Freire still calls attention in current times, since according to studies by Callou et al. (2008), 40 years after making his proposals, it remains the reference for the current debate at the academic level. Thus, from the context of the Framework Convention on Tobacco Control (FCTC), this article seeks to present and discuss some perceptions of farmers and rural agents about the rural extension.

Public versus private extension: from conception to current practices.

According to Callou (2007 and 2008), rural extension in Brazil was born under the command of capital, with strong North American influence. It was aimed at overcoming backwardness in agriculture by educating country people to start adopting technologies, equipment and industrialized inputs needed to modernize the field. The diffusionist extension was constituted within the behaviorist method. Under that method, for every action there is a reaction, and this way people could be domesticated by responding to stimuli. At the time, rural extension was used to diffuse/transfer technological packets and assist in modernization of agriculture. The purpose of the extensionist action was to take country people from backwardness, as they were seen as mere depositories of knowledge produced from research.

According to Callou (2007) a voice had to be raised to deny the entire theoretical and practical construction performed by US extensionism in our country and in several other places. At a time when Brazil was under full military dictatorship, Paulo Freire, who was a refugee in Chile, wrote the book “Extensão ou Comunicação?” where he criticizes the notion of rural extension as an educational process for the development of rural populations. Freire proposes that a dialectic relationship be established between farmers and extensionists so that construction of knowledge would take place according to local reality and specificity by exchanging experiences and wisdom. That is, Freire proposes a dialog between coded knowledge and tacit knowledge.

Somehow those debates and discussion are responsible, or better still, are the seeds for transforming rural extension, which years later begins to value other methods and forms of action. In Brazil, one example is the National Policy for Technical Assistance and Rural Extension - Política Nacional de Assistência Técnica e Extensão Rural (PNATER).

PNATER was created in 2003 through a participative and popular consultation process, and proposes that rural extension entities and agents take part in a process capable of promoting and supporting strategies that lead to socioeconomic and environmental sustainability in the rural environment. This way the “new” Technical Assistance and Rural Extension - Assistência Técnica e Extensão Rural (ATER) requires that entities, directors and agents take on a new working approach and a new profile, in addition to action based on methods and techniques that would encourage the participation of farmers.

Despite efforts to make ATER more democratic and participative, it is noticed that many extensionist actions still make reference to old diffusionist practices with the use of outdated extension methodologies, which turn out to be inefficient and unsuited for the exchange of knowledge to take place through a participative aspect. In that sense, it can be observed that even when organizations make an attempt to redirect their practices, they end up reproducing the old models.

In Brazil, there is the presence of both the public ATER, through bodies financed by the government, states and municipalities, and the private ATER, which in many situations is configured by the offering of a larger technological packet, as is the case with chicken and pork in the agroindustrial integration system and tobacco plantation managed by the tobacco industry, the latter being the focus of the present analysis.

Regarding the focus of the study: tobacco producers in southern Brazil.

Brazil has been the world leader in leaf tobacco exports since 1993, exporting approximately 85% of the production. The quality of Brazilian tobacco, the possibility of producing at low costs and the capacity to supply the foreign market are factors that have assured the expansion of Brazilian exports (BIOLCHI, 2005).

In Brazil, the integrated tobacco production system was created by British American Tobacco (BAT) in 1918 in the southern region. The establishment of the system was the result of a well articulated marketing strategy based on technoscientific and cultural knowledge and reasoning. Some of that reasoning involves: a) adequation of lands in the region to plant greenhouse tobacco with moderate climate and well distributed rainfall during the phases of the year; b) the tradition of family production in small properties. c) cultural profile of the settlers: dedicated, tidy; and d) the consolidation of product cultivation and trade in the region (BOEIRA & JOHNS, 2007).

Technical assistance is used in the integration system. It is offered by the tobacco companies in exchange for exclusive sale of the entire production by the farmers. The farmers are morally committed and through contracts, this being the way found by the tobacco industries to keep control of tobacco production right from when it is cultivated and not only at the moment of the end sale (BOEIRA, 2002).

According to Almeida (2005), the logic used in the integration system is to convey foreseeability and security to producers. The integrating company, through its technological package has the function of financing inputs and trading the production. Due to their frailness, rural producers are entrapped, agree and accept such domination. Tobacco cultivation is labor intensive, requires exclusive and uninterrupted dedication during periods of harvesting, drying and storing the leaves. This type of cultivar exposes farmers and their families to unhealthy effects due to direct, excessive contact with nicotine sap and farming chemicals. In addition to that, usually tobacco cultivation does not remunerate producers in accordance to the sacrifices to which they are submitted.

However, Brazil is a signatory to the Framework Convention on Tobacco Control, and there are public actions forecast towards not only reducing cigarette consumption, but also continually regressing the area of planted tobacco. In that sense, mechanisms need to be created to replace the tobacco cultivars, and many of the public ATER actions should follow that path.

Methodology

The research has been going for the last four years through ethnographically driven qualitative methods involving participative observations and semi-structured interviews. Ethnographic research is always based in praxis. The first author is a researcher that was born in the target community, got a scholarship in rural development and now research the context of her own family.

The major research instrument is the investigator through direct, frequent and extended contact with the social players within their settings. Data collection has been taking place by means of semi-structured interviews with farmers, healthcare professionals (physicians and nurses), rural extension agents from Emater¹, city halls, tobacco company, either active or retired, the local articulator from the Ministry of Agrarian Development-Ministério do Desenvolvimento Agrário (MDA), the MDA delegate in the state of Rio Grande do Sul, traders and public education teachers (rural school).

Statements are collected both individually and collectively from families. Participative observation has been taking place as a means of complementing the interviews, and records from those observations have been made in a field notebook.

Results and discussions

In the following paragraphs we present some excerpts from the field diary produced during the investigation. The tobacco farmers' statements show their abidance and dependence to the integration system, especially due to the security the system offers with total acquisition of their product. The service rendering contract with tobacco farmers is written by the companies and offer no possibility of negotiation between the parties. It is all but an adhesion contract that generates serfdom and violation of human rights (Boeria & Johns, 2007).

Furthermore, even under the Framework Convention on Tobacco Control, there are few production alternatives for the majority of integrated farmers, and rural agents do not perform any educational function in pursuit of or proposition for alternatives that could transform reality.

Perceptions of the role and function of technical assistance and rural extension.

In the municipality of Arvorezinha, technical assistance and rural extension (ATER) occur both at the public sphere scope, through the municipal hall and EMATER office, and the private sphere. Private ATER is characterized by the strong presence of

¹ Rio Grande do Sul Association for Technical Assistance and Rural Extension Enterprises - Its mission is to promote actions for technical and social assistance, rural extension, classification and certification to cooperate in sustainable rural development.

technicians from integrating companies, among the standouts tobacco, chicken, pork, and more recently, dairy companies.

Despite the academic and political discourse by PNATER in handling ATER in a systemic and holistic fashion, “in which property is considered as being a whole with the perception of the existence of farmers within it”, what can be observed in empirical studies, such as this one, is that this does not always occur.

Although PNATER indicates encouragement to work and income generating practices, whether agricultural or not, driven by means of a conception of food safety and sustainable rural development (CALLOU et al., 2008), it has been found that ATER effectively takes place through conveying knowledge and remains segmented and with low participativeness.

In the present study, it can be seen that the function of each agent consists in providing assistance to a part of the property. That can be seen with the talk by one farmer who develops tobacco cultivation and breeds chicken, and therefore receives assistance from the tobacco company agents and those from the chicken company. “*Each on to their own field*” (family 11/interviewee).

On the other hand, the city hall has an agent whose function is to exercise rural extension. However, although the tobacco cultivation is predominant in the municipality, he does not serve that public. “*As a city hall technician, I do not serve tobacco producers*” (rural agent/city hall). Still on the public sphere, the service provided by the state autarchy (EMATER) is criticized by farmers. Some complain about the absence of that agent, others mention that his function is limited to develop projects to gain access to credit (financing). “*It's too much work for one technician, he can't handle it*” (family 06/interviewee). “*The truth is that EMATER only does projects for financing*” (family 02/interviewee) and, “*we don't finance anything, EMATER only provides assistance to those who have financing*” (family 14/interviewee). The interviewee feels neglected by public assistance and highlights that fact during the interview. Quite often, such dissatisfaction is fertile ground for farmers to accept the packages from integrating companies, which in most cases aim at farmers' dependence, not their liberation, as the role of public ATER presupposes.

However, other interviewees say that, when requested, EMATER agents do visit their properties. “*If they are summoned, they come over*” (family 01/son-in-law). But the families emphasize that EMATER service prioritizes farmers who practice orcharding (for example, grapes and citrus fruits).

This way, the technical assistance received by the majority of properties is exclusively from the tobacco company. “*Only from the tobacco instructor*” (family 10/interviewee). There are farmers who mention that since they stopped cultivating tobacco they do not receive any kind of assistance. “*We received it until we planted tobacco*” (family 03/interviewee). The farmers also mention that at the public ATER there is a “pass the

buck” game, the city hall assigns functions to EMATER and EMATER says it is the city hall's function. “*Yesterday I went to talk to EMATER and they sent me to the agriculture office*” (family 07/ interviewee).

On the other hand, it does not have as to analyze the work of the rural extension without perceiving that it was permanently marked by a gender bias. Although current policies are inclusive, the previous conception of the rural extension was maintained until recently: rural technicians (men) dealt with agricultural production issues and the social extensionists (women) were involved with the demands relating to the family and household. In this old form, the extension women suffered a series of restrictions on their labor and peasant women are denied their role as farmers. At that time it was stated in the organization of women groups (mothers' clubs, for example), which was followed by the extension of social welfare, and geared mostly to the themes considered "feminine". In this way, it was neglected the role that women have always played in agriculture (SILIPRANDI, 2002). However, currently in Brazil, there is a set of policies specifically targeted to rural workers, actions involving access to rural credit, health services, combating violence and promoting women's education, among others.

In his book about rural communication, Paulo Freire pointed the way the agronomist would think, as an educator. A work that would seek dialog with farmers to learn about their reality and to change it with them. Towards that sense, Paulo Freire conceived that technical assistance should turn into an action of an educational character by surpassing procedures of strict technical “assistancy”. Unfortunately, from the farmers' statements, that educational, reality transforming action is not observed.

Thus, we must consider what is the role of ATER and farmers' perception within the scope of an international health policy aimed at changing the reality of tobacco farming, as is the case with the Framework Convention on Tobacco Control.

Perceptions regarding the Framework Convention on Tobacco Control

The perception that tobacco is positive for the municipality is verified in the discourse by the tobacco company and the city hall. Among the reasons for such perception is the income that cultivar produces. “*I think that tobacco today in the municipality is very positive because of the income per area*” (rural agent/tobacco company). Still according to the perception of City Halls rural agent has, tobacco is of relevant significance for small proprieties. He exemplifies that certain rural communities such as Cândido Brum, Bugre and Lajeado Ferreira would not exist without tobacco production: “*they are highly dependent on tobacco*” (rural agent/city hall). For that reason, the city hall employee has a negative perception of the Framework Convention on Tobacco Control because he believes that its full implementation will affect farmers economically, and especially the public treasury that receives the taxes from tobacco. “*It will be tragic*” (rural agent/city hall).

Following along the perception about the FCTC, from the discourse by the EMATER agent, it can be seen that he believes that the measure could set off an exodus of farmers to urban centers, since they will not have the capital to invest in any other activity. *“I believe there will be a major rural exodus”* (rural agent/Emater).

But the discourse from the Agrarian Development Ministry (MDA) brings evidence of the extent of the FCTC policy. *“The Framework Convention is a great advancement; it attacks demand, people's awareness...”* (rural agent/MDA). But he points out that *“tobacco is an important activity, an alternative for employment and income for family agriculture”* (rural agent/MDA). Despite the MDA encouraging production diversity in areas where tobacco is cultivated, it can be perceived that its representative in some ways still considers tobacco cultivation as an employment alternative for family agriculture. According to his understanding, that cultivar is an income alternative that is not impaired by the entrance of new producers: *“tobacco renders high income with an expanding market that is not saturated with the entrance of new producers”* (rural agent/MDA).

Although tobacco production is globally criticized for the burden it places on families, poor people and national health services, it is perceived in a positive fashion by the rural agent employed by a tobacco company: *“I think that tobacco today in the municipality is very positive because of the income per area”* (rural agent/tobacco company). Additionally, he states that *“planting tobacco is very easy with the package, and it also includes technical assistance”* (rural agent/tobacco company). From his discourse it can be perceived that the agent dismisses farmers' thinking, planning and developing capabilities, and to develop activities other than tobacco production, since such cultivation features a “manager” who makes all the decisions for the farmers.

Although farmers wish to change to another production activity, in most cases the economic bias of the cultivation, associated with technical assistance and trading facilities are the hurdles for such a change to take place. But under the current system, *“farmers become an employee with no labor rights”* (rural agent/MDA), since they work for the company, follow its previously defined rules through contracts that guarantee delivery of the entire production.

The perception the tobacco company has about FCTC is that *“before eradicating tobacco they should encourage a new crop”* (rural agent/tobacco company). This idea the tobacco industry representative has is not too far from how the MDA agent perceives the FCTC: *“it's not simply ordering to stop (planting) but showing the paths”* (rural agent/MDA). According to the MDA agent discourse, one of the ways for production diversification in areas where tobacco is planted to occur could be by means of Technical Assistance and Rural Extension (ATER) and qualifying farmers. *“Investments should be made on small farmers to qualify them through the Technical Assistance and Rural Extension”* (rural agent/MDA). Although in our study we did not observe that being done in practice, only as a proposal in the discourse.

According to the rural agent's perception, the hindrance for diversifying production is the technological package provided by tobacco companies, with guaranteed purchase of the tobacco production. In addition to the traditional local feature in developing tobacco production: "*Knowing how to plant and knowing it sells*" (rural agent/Emater). The agent adds that farmers "*lack creativity and initiative*" (rural agent/Emater).

From all the above discourse it can be seen that, in association with the income and marketplace issues, public rural agents are concerned with preserving farmers' know-how, with tobacco cultivation being traditional for the majority of families in the municipality as an activity that has been developed by their parents, and in many situations, their grand-and great-grandparents. They exempt themselves from the responsibility of educating and transforming farmers' reality. It is fitting to question, why does that occur? Why do rural agents not take on the role of educating and transforming the reality?

Conclusions

Initially, we must say that it is understood that the general issues discussed in this study are exemplary what happens in other regions and other production systems (e.g., milk production and integrated production system for pigs and poultry) present in the Brazilian countryside.

According to a survey by Callou et al. (2008), 40 years after Paulo Freire's proposal of agronomists as educators, what calls attention is how current the debate is, reflected in the concerns that still remain within the scope of the studies in the rural contexts. From what can be observed, a strong reference persists to the technician, individualist and problematic character of the subject that is all too common in the criticism that Freire's conception encourages. However, paradoxically the results from this survey indicate a very strong bonding with Paulo Freire's work "Extension of Communication?". What, then, would be happening? Do the highly criticized problems from the 1970s persist: If so, can those old problems be duly challenged with the same debate that guided scholars three decades ago? Which new elements could be incorporated today?

Two reasons listed by professors could partly justify such dissociation between theoretical knowledge and rural reality. Namely: incipient reading by sociological literature students that would discourage them from a further immersion around the problems in the field of Human Sciences. The other claimed reason concerns the delayed presence of rural extension in the curricular matrix of Courses, further contributing to encumber any eventual interest by students in dwelling deeper in the reality of country people. But yet, not an ideological component underlying such reality? In the rural context too, is there no facing up to the world views regarding work and more value? Adherence to the capitalist ideology and often with a neoliberal and conservative hue by students and professors of rural sciences cannot be dismissed.

But now other issues have been added to the old discomfort, requiring that professionals who pore over the rural world provide urgent – and even more complex – answers generated from the so-called “contemporary crises”. According to Callou et al. (2008), the crisis in the world of work, the State, classic utopias and referentials of the analysis, typical of the cartesian and utilitarian science, are some of those crises. Coupled to that, exacerbated growth of social exclusion and environmental unsustainability denounce the urgency with which problems need to be analyzed and solved.

Accordingly, for Ploeg et al. (2000), the new paradigm of rural development should include the search for a new model for the agriculture sector, with new goals, such as the production of public goods, the search for synergies with local ecosystems, the change of economies of scope in place of economies of scale and the pluriactivity in rural families. Therefore, rural development must consider the multiple and heterogeneous realities.

Thus, Ploeg (2008) suggests that countries like Brazil will face the need to ensure the nutritional needs of the proper population, instead of devoting much of its farmland to produce commodities, such as tobacco, for example, that isn't a foodstuff and produces a huge series of negative impacts to the environment and to the families of farmers.

It is towards that sense that Boeira & Johns (2007) indicate that in the context of applying the Framework Convention on Tobacco Control, it would be convenient to articulate anti-smoking policies with policies for alternatives to tobacco cultivation and for fighting social inequality and environmental degradation.

Although farmers do not like to be dependent of the tobacco companies, they are still very strong in the community. According Lima (2007), tobacco planting farmers feel attracted by the vertically integrated system they are offered: 1) guaranteed purchase of production; 2) production transport without burden to the tobacco farmer; 3) credit to finance the crop, investments, and cash advances are not rare; 4) mutual insurance from the Brazilian Tobacco Farmers Association - Associação dos Fumicultores do Brasil (AFUBRA) against weather and greenhouse fire; and 5) free technical assistance.

In relation to replacing the tobacco cultivar, a research carried out by Cavalcante & Pinto (2002) shows evidence that the main reasons that lead people to seek alternatives to tobacco cultivation are: the negative perception tobacco farmers hold in relation to economic dependence with the tobacco industry, and the constant health problems observed in people who plant tobacco. The research indicates the main hurdles mentioned by interviewees to replace the cultivar: difficulty to gain access to agricultural credit, absence of technical assistance in the shape of that offered by the tobacco industry, and difficulty to convey the production.

It can be noted that the alternatives to tobacco plantations require a public ATER and a constant dialog between the extensionist and the producer when choosing the best alternative. Thus, according to Machado et al. (2006), ATER practices no longer means

going out in the field with the diligence to qualify others who are theoretically less prepared for their activities. It does mean creating means capable of developing methods and activities that would allow for the capacity advancement of those producers to make decision with great assuredness, less insecurity, fewer fears in relation to the consequences such an act may bring. In sum, it is wished that farmers have greater autonomy, more power, in the sense of making decisions that are suited to their needs, and consequently, raise their self-esteem with all the resulting benefits. There is a need for farmers to broaden their empowerment, and ATER should act in that sense.

Though, according to Ploeg (2009), the distinction between peasant pattern and capitalist production pattern is essential for understanding the dynamics of rural development. It should be noted that while the entrepreneurs and capitalists generate growth in their production units, they generate stagnation or decrease of the total added value in local and regional level. In contrast, the peasant mode generates progress that is also reverted for the community and region. Moreover, the peasant mode of farming is the mode of production that is closer to autonomy. As Ploeg (2008) the most important feature of the peasant condition is the struggle for autonomy in opposition to dependency, marginalization and deprivation. And this is the scope of empowerment.

By using Paulo Freire's teachings, empowerment is attained when extensionist technicians and the benefitted population interact within a horizontal type relationship (subject-subject), through dialog and respect for different kinds of knowledge within a context in which both parties are critically aware of their situation and the need to act on better transforming reality.

According to Hur (2006) in the field of education, empowerment was perceived as a means of liberating oppressed people. Freire (1973), one of the founding scholars of empowerment theory in education, presented three progressive steps of empowerment: "conscientizing," inspiring, and liberating. As Freire, the oppressed or the disadvantaged can become empowered by learning about social inequality (i.e., conscientizing), encouraging others by making them feel confident about achieving social equality, and finally liberating them.

However Koning (1995) suggests that Paulo Freire, like many other men writing about human experience in the sixties and seventies, failed to address the differences between and among groups of oppressed people. By treating 'the oppressed' as a single category, Freire understood that the meaning of oppression and the paths towards liberation were the same for all oppressed people. He exemplified the oppression of employers over workers, and men oppressing other men. But he failed to look at situations where, for example, men who are oppressed in the workplace or by being out of work, can take the role of oppressor of their wives and daughters in the home. In his later writings, he admits this problem and welcomes the influence of feminist theory.

Nevertheless, following Freire's call for empowerment, Trauger et alli. (2010) indicates that the extension programs of forefront of social change should increase the visibility of

women on farms who perform diverse roles and who manage diverse farms. In this way, a new and revitalising approach to rural extension could embrace women and other alternative farmers as authentic farmers and develop pedagogies that allow women to participate in and exercise more control in agricultural educational settings and on their farms.

Regarding the prospects for continuing this work, we are currently focused on the study of the perceptions of rural youth, sons of tobacco farmers, aiming to identify their perceptions about the cultivation of tobacco in the midst of a change scenario, where there are several international actions (the FCTC, for example) in favor of crop diversification in the search for autonomy, sovereignty, food security and sustainability, among others. The interest for the subject of rural youth arose during the development of this research, when performing the analysis of the notes in the notebook field is realized that the youth did not participate in conversations and interviews, thus, their perceptions and concerns were not expressed. In this sense, one will search to know the perceptions and the life projects of rural youth who intend to remain in rural areas. Thus, attempts to investigate whether they follow the actual logic of tobacco production or if they include activities that lead to sustainability and autonomy of families.

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