

“In order to be someone, I have to leave the farm”:

Valuing rural youth decisions to continue traditional production

Evelyn R. Nimmo
Alessandra Izabel de
Carvalho
Robson Laverdi
André E. B. Lacerda

Traditional erva-mate agroforestry systems include a wide range of plants and livestock that take advantage of the shaded environment of the Araucaria Forest. Photo by João F.M.M. Nogueira

The production of erva-mate (yerba mate, a tea commonly consumed in southern South America) in traditional agroforestry systems in southern Brazil is a practice with roots in Guarani indigenous culture that has continued for generations on small-scale family farms. These systems take advantage of erva-mate’s characteristic as an understory tree and make use of the forest cover of larger tree species, many of which are endangered, to provide the shade necessary for erva-mate to thrive. The use of the natural forest structure has led to the preservation of important forest ecosystems in a region plagued by deforestation and land conversion to large-scale monocultures. Despite the important role these farmers play in local ecosystem services and food security, their knowledge of the forest, and the agroecological practices they use, are often devalued or ignored.

Challenges for youth

One of the greatest challenges these communities face is the continuation of traditional systems. Many youth who grew up on these farms are reluctant to continue this traditional way of life as it is not valued in their communities or in society more generally. In our ongoing research documenting erva-mate producers’ oral histories and knowledge of the forest, we have spoken to members of the next generation who have eloquently elaborated on the challenges they faced when deciding to continue on the farm.

Jessica, a young woman of 26 and daughter of an agroecologist and *erveiro* (traditional erva-mate producer), noted that throughout primary and secondary school her

teachers emphasised that students need to leave their communities in order to “be someone” in society. She stated that this perception of small-scale farmers as “poor” and “unsuccessful” was prevalent even in a rural community school, and teachers suggested that the best path for students was to attend university and migrate to the city. Jessica also faces challenges in terms of being a woman in rural production. While it was expected that her brother Jean would continue to live and work on the farm, Jessica’s choice is unique among many families. It is much more common for young women to migrate to the city, which has led to a significant difference (reaching 10% in some areas) in the numbers of young men and women in rural areas. Meanwhile, based on a recent assessment by Oxfam, men are the owners of an overwhelming majority of rural establishments in Brazil (87%), while women are proportionately more likely than men to own properties of less than 5 ha. A scarcity of social outlets for young rural women, as well as a lack of mentorship and representation in local farming organisations, can be both isolating and a significant deterrent for those thinking of continuing family farming practices. Considering that there has been a steady decline in the number of small and medium-sized family farms and an increase in the number of large agribusinesses, encouraging more young women to remain on the farm is an important strategy to support rural resilience.

Another member of the next generation also recalled his struggle to decide to return to farming – an increasingly common process in which young people who have migrated to the city are returning to rural life. When he was finished with school, Thiago, the son of an *erveiro*, went to Curitiba, the state capital of Paraná, where he managed to find a job. But due to the low wages in Brazil for entry-level employment and also violence, poor housing and food insecurity, Thiago realised that the realities of migrating to the city to escape rural life did not necessarily offer him a better life. In the city, young people often face precarious situations never encountered on the family farm. Thiago has since started his own family and is now coordinating the organic cooperative

in his community that meets the needs of the National School Food Programme (PNAE) and National Programme for Food Acquisition from Family Agriculture (PAA).

Policy initiatives supporting rural youth

The perception of rural life and small-scale production often found in urban contexts contrasts with the very real contribution these producers make in their communities, and the important rural-urban connections they foster. Through PNAE, for example, local producers work together through cooperatives to provide agroecological and organic produce to public schools in their municipalities. While this programme has been in place since the 1950s, a policy change in 2003 requires that at least 30% of the produce come from local and organic sources, thus offering new markets and types of production for younger generations. The PAA programme also acquires produce from family farmers to supply public institutions. While this programme has had great success in attracting young farmers, it is susceptible to budget cuts and changes in government policies, and its future is unclear.

One policy put in place to stem the migration of rural young people to cities is a financial programme called “Our first land” (*Nossa primeira terra*) in which children of family farmers can apply for financial assistance to purchase their first plot of land. Although this programme is relatively poorly subscribed, with only 3000 families enrolled by 2010, it enabled Jessica and Jean to acquire a property in their community which they have begun to manage, giving them not only a sense of pride, purpose, and accomplishment, but also the opportunity to develop a successful agroecological business. The expansion of such programmes is essential to supporting the continuation of small-scale family agriculture in the face of land consolidation for large-scale agribusiness. In Brazil large properties make up only 0.91% of all rural establishments yet they occupy 45% of the country’s total rural area – while farms of less than 10 ha represent 47% of all farms but occupy only 2.3% of the total area.

Local initiatives to involve young people in farmers’ unions and other networks are being developed in many of the communities in which we work. Thiago, for example, plays an active role in the local chapter of the union of family farmers (FETRAF) and many young people participate in regional events such as seed exchanges, fairs, and caravan excursions to neighbouring communities. While these social and networking outlets are essential to creating a shared identity as young rural producers, Jessica noted a lack of young women participating in these events. This is mostly due to the continuing perception that young women are not farmers, but also, as Jessica mentioned, due to a clear bias in how rural life is portrayed.

Increasing awareness and support of rural-urban connections

What is becoming clear in our work to document and share knowledge about traditional erva-mate production in southern Brazil is that recording, sharing and valuing these practices is an important first step in changing the way



In southern Brazil, Chimarrão is the traditional way of serving and drinking erva-mate; its roots lie in indigenous Guarani culture. Photo by João F.M.M. Nogueira

small-scale family farm production is seen, both in their own communities and in larger urban centres. Consumers of erva-mate, for example, are unaware of the benefits of traditional production systems, or of the cultural and ecological importance of their continuation. There is a definite lack of recognition of the central role small-scale producers play in providing the biodiversity and the clean air and water that periurban and urban areas depend on, and that help to ensure communities remain resilient to global change.

One of the goals of our project is to recognise and to disseminate information about the significance of these traditional agroforestry systems across a variety of scales, beginning in the communities in which they are practised. Our multidisciplinary team includes researchers and outreach workers from federal, state, and municipal institutions, universities and community partners. We are starting this process by working with municipal secretaries of education to develop learning resources in order to integrate this knowledge and local history into school curricula. The aim is to foster a better understanding among youth of the importance of maintaining traditional agroforestry and agroecological practices and of valuing their cultural, ecological and socioeconomic contributions.

Evelyn R. Nimmo

CAPES Post-doctoral Fellow, Department of History, Universidade Estadual de Ponta Grossa

ernimmo@gmail.com

Alessandra Izabel de Carvalho and Robson Laverdi

Professors, Department of History, Universidade Estadual de Ponta Grossa

André E. B. Lacerda

Research Scientist and Research Station Manager, Embrapa Forestry

andre.biscaia@embrapa.br

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