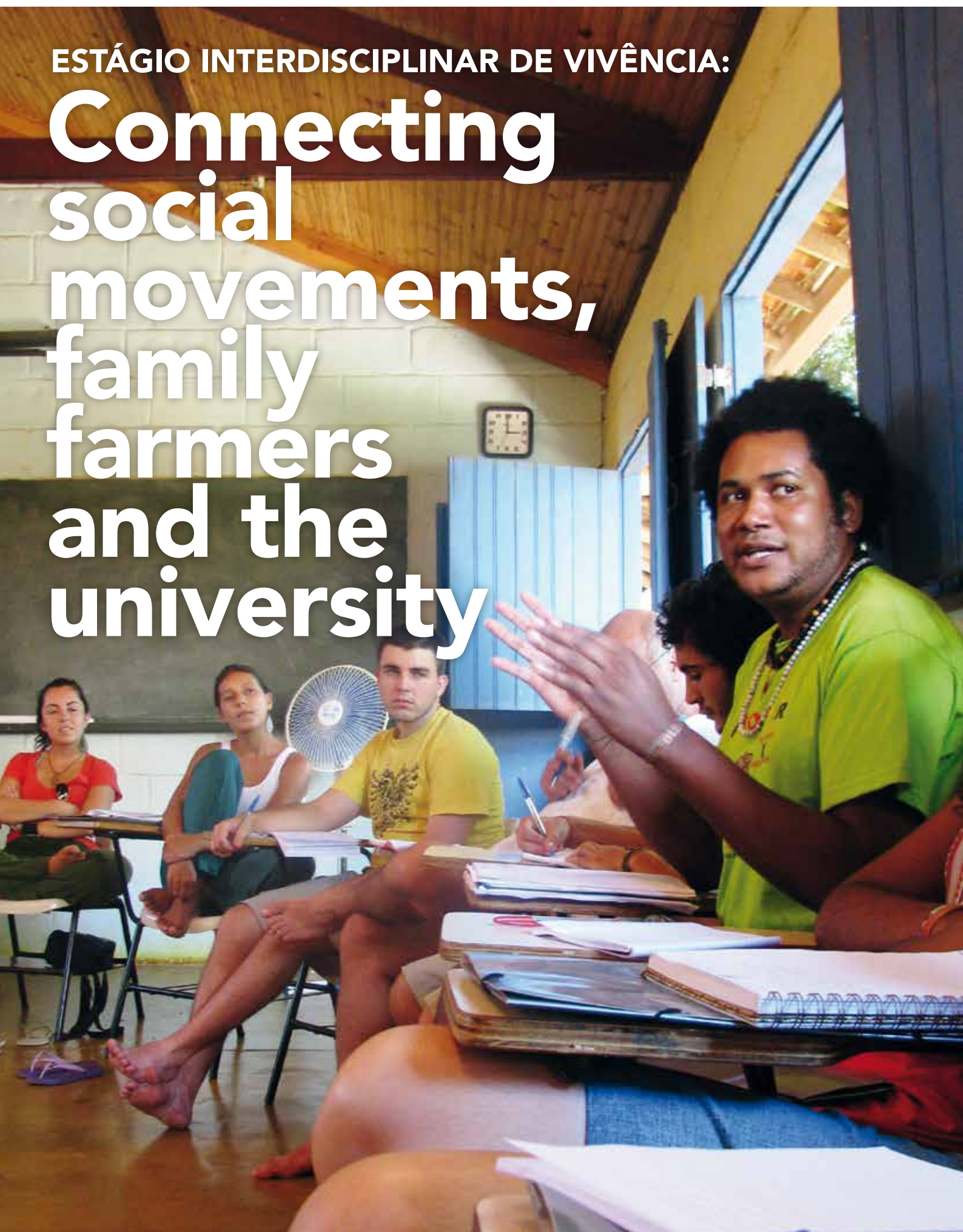


ESTÁGIO INTERDISCIPLINAR DE VIVÊNCIA:

Connecting social movements, family farmers and the university



Family farmers play a very important role in Brazil, and not only in terms of food production. Yet, in spite of their enormous contribution, the knowledge that is developed and shared in educational institutes is rarely connected to their traditional knowledge. Most higher education institutions are highly theoretical and often oriented towards large-scale industrial agriculture, thereby creating gaps between their research and outreach activities and the needs of family farmers. An initiative started by a group of university students is successfully changing this situation.

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During the 1980s the process of political liberalisation that took place in Brazil helped strengthen the social movements and organisations working towards an alternative model of agriculture. Groups such as the Landless Rural Workers Movement (MST), founded in 1984, have since been lobbying for radical transformations in the field, but also for change in the education system, as Brazilian universities were strongly shaped by the Green Revolution.

Together with MST, the National Federation of Agronomy Students started the *Estágio de Vivência* (EIV) project in 1989 in the municipality of Dourados, in Mato Grosso. This aimed to address the fragmentation and lack of connection between different science fields that characterises higher education in Brazil, and also to shorten the distance between the university and the reality of family farmers and social movements. Since then, this initiative has been adopted in many other universities, organised by the students themselves, often involving not only future agronomists, but also students of many other disciplines. The students live for a period of time with family farmers and social movements, working and learning in a rural environment.

The Estágio Interdisciplinar de Vivências The EIV started in the Federal University of Viçosa in 1996 with the support of the Centre for Alternative Technologies of Zona da Mata (CTA-ZM). With support from MST, the Movimento dos Atingidos por Barragens (Movement of People Affected by Dams, MAB) and many farmers' unions from across the region, this is now an official extension project of the university. It is not a course, so students cannot get credit points for it, but it can be taken as

one of the extracurricular activities which all students are obliged to take.

The whole process is guided by three principles. One of them is *partnership*, as the social organisations involved contribute to the activities of the project, helping to establish linkages between students and farmers. Another important principle is *interdisciplinarity*. The rural reality and its relationship with students and social movements is a complex issue that goes beyond the scope of any one discipline. Students' experiences are richer when people from different fields are brought together to share ideas and points of view, in an attempt to establish a common understanding based on a holistic approach. The third principle is *non-intervention*. We find it important to reinforce the idea of a horizontal relationship. This means that students respect the customs and traditions of their hosts, and do not try to change these during their short stay in the farm. The EIV aims at raising awareness and facilitating the exchange of ideas and information, and is not a technical intervention aimed at solving a particular problem.

Structure and logistics The EIV usually takes place in March, at the end of the summer holidays, just before the academic year starts. But its organisation starts much earlier and involves different activities. A set of open seminars during the year, involving students, lecturers and the main partners of the project, helps define the specific topics to be addressed. The first of these meetings is also a moment to evaluate the previous year of the project and re-affirm (or adjust) the principles, values and goals for the present year.

Another important part is the initial preparation of the students. Four different workshops are organised



Preparing to go and visit Pedrinho's field, and then sharing the lessons learnt: "The EIV gave me a lot that was missing at the university". Photo: 13th EIV, 2010

every year, which focus on the broader context. These workshops provide a space for discussions not normally held during courses or university seminars. At the same time, the families who will receive interns in their farms are selected and prepared. These families are usually chosen by the social movements, using several selection criteria involving the farm's productive and social aspects.

The EIV involves approximately 25 participants every year, and lasts slightly more than three weeks, divided in three major phases: (a) preparation, (b) the farm experience and (c) a collective evaluation. During the first phase all the students get together for a five-day series of lectures covering a range of topics that includes agro-ecology, gender issues, agrarian reform, extension and communication. This is also a moment to discuss the principles of the project and for students to plan how they will approach and communicate with the farmers. Immediately after this, the students all go to live on a different small-scale farm for thirteen days. The time spent with a rural farming family helps them understand the family's reality, identify their problems and threats, and also see their strengths and the possibilities they have. After this, the students get together again for a general

evaluation which lasts for four days, and provides the interns with the chance to experiences, discuss that they have learned and produce collective outcomes. The students discuss the importance of social organisations and also reflect on how this learning process differs from their regular courses, and how it has contributed to their personal and professional growth. Afterwards, each of them prepares a report describing the farm, paying attention to social, environmental, cultural, economical and political aspects.

A later meeting between the interns and the organisational team adds to this collective assessment, and also helps to bring in new students and start the preparations for the coming year. Those who completed the previous EIV are invited to help organise the next one. Each farmer family is also visited for the evaluation, an opportunity for them to share their impressions of the presence of the students on their farms.

Many results More than 400 students have followed the Zona da Mata EIV internship and many are now working with NGOs, social movements, universities and/or the local or the federal government – strengthening family farming and supporting



and experience rural life and do not intervene or try to change it. However, we have seen that many students go back to the communities involved on the EIV, to develop extension or research projects. Many ex-students now work at a national level, bringing indirect results, such as more appropriate public policies for family farmers. And several farmers involved in the project now have a much closer relationship with the university. Joao Donizete, for example, has attended several of the university's extension courses, on homeopathy, apiculture and medicinal plants, something he probably wouldn't otherwise have done. *"Before we had a different image of the university, as only a place for the elite. The EIV has brought us closer."*

Where next? After many years of the EIV, several farmers started to talk about the need to organise a bottom-up EIV, which is now being referred to as "vivências educativas" (educative experiences). The idea is to bring their sons and daughters for a "living experience" at the university,

"The EIV has brought us closer"

a transition towards agro-ecology. Some students have gone on to high ranking positions. To name only a few, Glauco Régis is now the executive director of CTA; Alexandre Leandro Santos de Abreu works with MST; Davi Fantuzzi works at the Permacultural Institute of Bahia (Instituto de Permacultura da Bahia); Clara Teixeira Ferrari works for FUNAI (the Brazilian National Indigenous Foundation); Erineu Coop is the marketing co-ordinator at the State Government of Minas Gerais. While the EIV was only a small part of their university experience, they all acknowledge its importance, and how it helped them bring their studies (and the university itself) closer to the rural reality of the country and to the social needs of family farmers and rural workers. As one of the students stated, *"the EIV gave me a lot of information that was missing at the university. It sharpened my desire to know, ask and discuss. I learned how to work better and share my opinions in a group. And mainly, I could understand the feelings and needs of rural workers, with whom I will probably have contact for the rest of my life."*

We have no doubt of the benefits for students, but do the farmers benefit too? It is difficult to see a short-term effect, as the students go only to learn

where they can participate in different activities and lessons organised by a group of students and lecturers. The idea –again– is to break the barriers between university and society, in an effort to build a more popular and democratic university.

And while we are all working so as to improve these efforts even further, we are also proud to see that the EIV is also gaining international scope, with a similar course now being developed at Wageningen University in the Netherlands. As a joint effort of students and several partner organisations, the Farm Experience Internship started in August 2013. We are sure that it will see equally positive results!

Further reading

Freitas, A.L., C.T. Ferrari, M.G. Silva and F.V. Zanelli, 2009. *Análise dos princípios e metodologias no Estágio Interdisciplinar de Vivência – EIV*. V Simposio Nacional de Geografia Agrária, Niterói.

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