

Building markets:

A challenge for family farming

In a situation where transnational corporations are playing an increasingly dominant role in the world's agri-food systems, two of the greatest challenges that family farmers face are developing strategies to improve market access, and adding value to their agricultural production. There are many successful experiences that set examples that may be amenable to replication. In general, these successful cases involve developing closer relationships between producers and consumers through revitalising and reorganising local or regional markets, in ways that create space for economically beneficial exchanges and also promote the biologically-diverse and culturally-contextualised production typical of peasant agriculture.

Paulo Petersen

By efficiently articulating new developments in information technology, infrastructures and facilities for the long distance transportation of goods, and by exploiting changes in the institutional frameworks that regulate the domestic and international markets, transnational corporations have come to exert an unprecedented level of control on the configuration of agri-food systems – or on the flows that link the production, processing, distribution and consumption of food. Philip McMichael refers to this as the corporate food regime, and points out that this has further promoted and intensified the scientific and technological paradigm of the Green Revolution, with the introduction of genetically modified organisms (GMOs), the rapid and uncon-

trolled expansion of monocultures and the subsequent standardisation of agricultural landscapes. An equally massive standardisation process has been experienced on the consumer's side. The political and economic power accumulated by major players in food retailing has led to the imposition of industrialised junk food, the homogenisation of diets and, by the same token, the destruction of local markets through which family farmers have traditionally sold their produce. The growing homogenisation of production and consumption practices is both a cause and a consequence of the emergence of what Jan Douwe van der Ploeg calls the “food empires”, the governance mechanisms for food and agriculture at a global scale. Truly international, their power increasingly extends to the economic and political arenas,



Creative systems are emerging all around the world, where both producers and consumers play an important role. Photo: AS-PTA

and they now capture an ever larger share of the value added along the food chain.

Local alternatives for global challenges The global dissemination of “nowhere food” (or food whose origins can hardly be traced) is not the only visible trend. In parallel, and developing as a form of resistance to this dominant trend and its negative effects, creative strategies to relocalise and recontextualise agri-food systems are emerging all around the world. In this sense, markets are the arena where power struggles are taking place between the contrasting and coexisting structures and mechanisms that shape the production and consumption of food. On the one hand, there is the political and ideological influence of agri-businesses on national states and multilateral organisations. On the other hand, there are emerging social processes that seek to rebuild, revitalise and diversify market circuits that promote a more equitable distribution of the wealth generated through agriculture, and to simultaneously alter the metabolism of agri-food systems so that the flows of matter and energy are more sustainable. Whether in Brazil (p. 10) or the Netherlands (p. 18), these examples are becoming more widespread and visible, with producers, consumers and their organisations playing an important role.

In this sense, the development of local markets (or short chains) should be understood as an active social process that aims to increase people’s autonomy and independence from the “very visible hands” of multi-

national agri-food businesses on the global market. The political dimension of this emerging process construct is increasingly expressed by the concept of “food sovereignty”, a concept that is rooted in the understanding that the access to food of one’s choice is a basic human right.

Beyond monetary value Achieving increasing levels of governance over markets is one of the main tenets of the movements, organisations and individuals who promote agro-ecology around the world. Without a doubt, the ability to scale up agro-ecological experiences, both socially and geographically, directly depends on the construction and defence of viable marketing channels that link production and consumption together, and establish stable and transparent relationships between these two economic spheres. The advancement of an agro-ecological perspective for rural development does not follow conventional economic logic, defined in terms of competitiveness and vertical social relationships, but crucially depends on regulated markets that stimulate horizontal relations and co-operation among social actors. In this sense, these markets are reproduced and (re)structured around social values that go beyond the monetary dimension.

This edition of *Farming Matters* presents some of the meaningful experiences that are taking place in different countries and in so doing furthers the debate around markets and rural development. What strategies are farmers and their organisations implementing as alternatives to the dominance of large agribusiness corporations? How do farmers articulate strategies that enable them to become more resilient in the face of the uncertainties and threats arising from the volatility of agricultural prices, food crises and global climate change? How do local markets and shortcuts to commercialisation and marketing contribute to generating more sustainable livelihoods for family farmers? How are family farmers’ innovations in organisational models shaping new economies? How can farmers strengthen autonomy within markets? And what is the role of states in interacting with these emerging issues?

Based in Rio de Janeiro, **Paulo Petersen** works as Executive Director of AS-PTA. He is vice-president of the Brazilian Agro-ecology Association, and is also the editor of *Agriculturas*, our sister publication in Brazil. E-mail: paulo@aspta.org.br

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