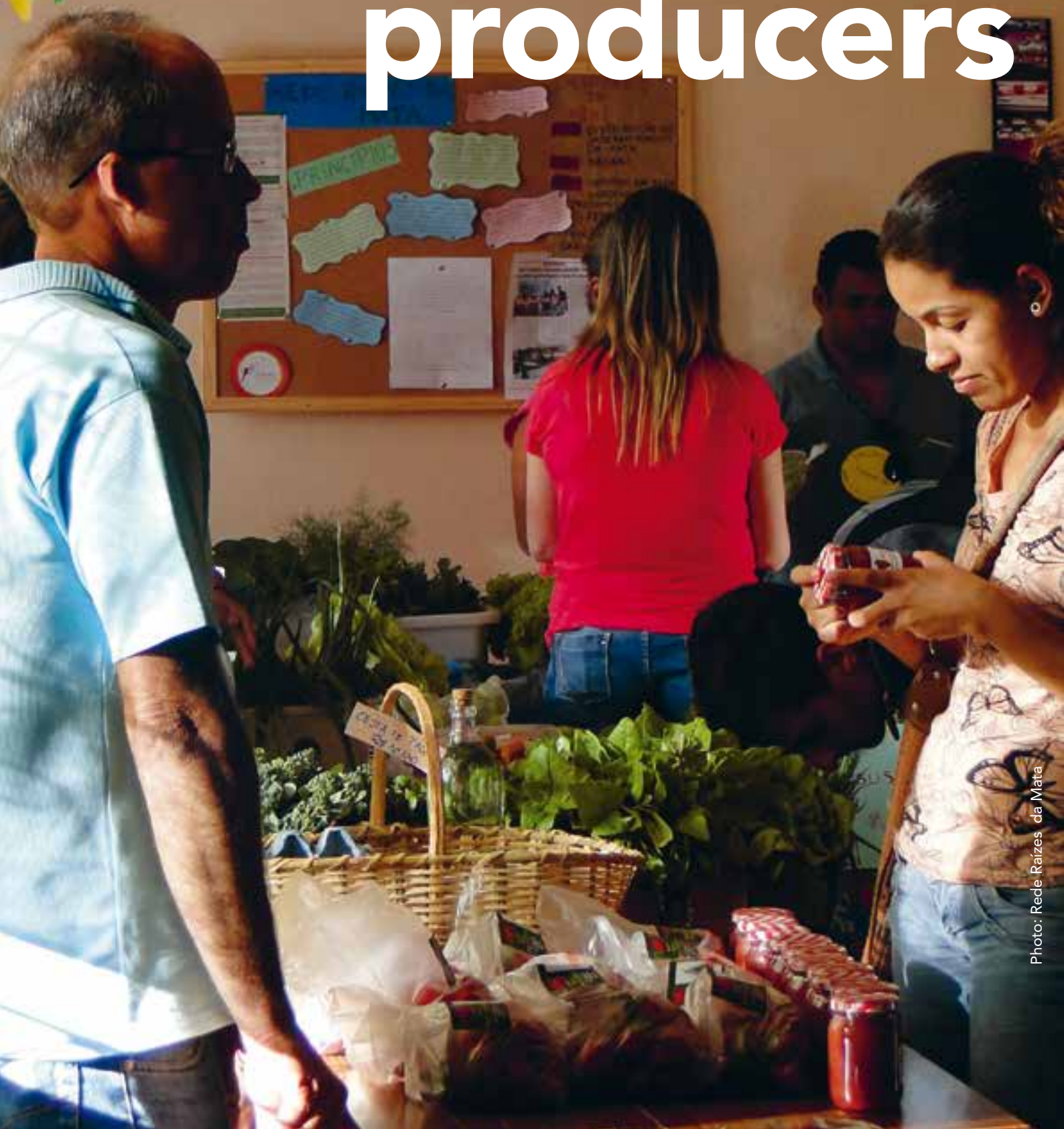


NEW MARKETS > NETWORKS

REDE RAÍZES DA MATA:

Strengthening producers



links between and consumers

As in many other parts of the world, farmers in the Zona da Mata region, in the Brazilian state of Minas Gerais, were encouraged to take up the Green Revolution package. This model also prescribed integration with the international markets. Family farmers, however, have found that this model has not brought the promised benefits. Many different efforts have led to viable alternatives. One of these is *Rede Raízes da Mata*, started in 2011 as a joint initiative by a group of university students and local producers.

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As part of the democratisation process in Brazil at the end of the 1980s, many protests and movements were organised around the problems that existed in the rural areas, promoting the rights of small-scale farmers and seeking alternatives to the mainstream production model. In the Zona da Mata, many of these efforts were driven by the farmers themselves, founding various farmers' unions ("*Sindicatos de Trabalhadores Rurais*") and other rural organisations. They worked together with a group of students and lecturers from the *Universidade Federal de Viçosa* (UFV), and also with technicians and extension agents sensitive to the environmental and social degradation in the region, to create an NGO to promote an alternative ecological approach. This was named CTA-ZM, or the Centre for Alternative Technologies in Zona da Mata.

Twenty-five years later, a visitor to the region can see many positive results, ranging from the ecological

management of soils to the emergence of a strong organisation of women farmers. Throughout this period, the region has seen a drastic change in agricultural production and the way that farmers reach consumers with their products, which now include not only coffee but also dairy products, honey, vegetables, fruits, grains, amongst others. A study conducted by CTA in 2009 identified several marketing possibilities in Zona da Mata, including street markets, farmers' associations and co-operative sales points, door-to-door selling and the interest of different government agencies for locally-sourced products. However, the commercialisation of agro-ecological products remained, and still remains, a great challenge. A lot of products are seasonal, and increasing the total output is difficult, as most farmers grow many different products simultaneously and experience limitations in terms of land and labour. The existence of sanitary regulations which do not match the reality that family farmers face is also a big obstacle. The study mentioned that many of the



Consumers have access to healthy food, and the opportunity to participate actively. Photos: Rede Raízes da Mata

difficulties faced by farmers could be reduced through an educational process based on the exchange of experiences and knowledge, developing farmers' capacities to enhance already existing initiatives and raising their awareness of the mechanisms for achieving certain required market standards. The recommended strategies also included enhancing the value of products through, for example, the use of specific labels and logos and better packaging.

Rede Raízes da Mata After many small-scale attempts, the accumulated lessons learned led to the foundation of *Rede Raízes da Mata* (or the “Forest Roots Network”) in 2011 in a joint effort between producers, consumers, the university and CTA. The main goal of the network is to improve the commercialisation of local agro-ecological produce by establishing stronger links between producers and consumers. During the past two years it has worked on a co-operative basis, with farmers playing an active role in deciding what products will be provided, and determining the quantities and prices for each product. Consumers help to run the network as volunteers and active supporters, gaining both access to healthy, local and diverse food, and the opportunity to share their comments and suggestions.

Work is organised on a weekly basis and facilitated by a team of students from the university. A spreadsheet is made after consulting the farmers about the availability of products: every Monday, a new spreadsheet with the week's offers is sent to all registered customers. They have until Wednesday to return their order by e-mail. All the producers are contacted every Wednesday with the order for their produce, specifying the amount to be delivered. Friday is the delivery day, when the producers bring their products before 3 p.m. to the network's office, which is located inside the university campus (in a space where workshops, debates and several other activities also take place). Here all the produce is put together as individual packages for the customers by 6:30 p.m., when the office is open for people to collect their orders.

There are over three hundred consumers registered in the network today, most of whom pick up a personal package every week. The list from which they can choose currently contains more than two hundred products, including fruits and vegetables as well as fresh teas, coffee, beans, corn flour, artisanal breads and even natural cosmetics. This diverse range of products changes seasonally. The supply of products comes from seven individual farmers and nine different groups of family farmers in the region, including associations, co-operatives and production groups.

One of many efforts While family farmers are working to improve access to markets, they are also benefitting from an increasing demand from an urban population interested in consuming healthier, good quality, food that is not contaminated by pesticides and is free from GMOs. The Forest Roots Network is a small initiative that is very modest in terms of coverage when compared to most agribusinesses, but it is not the only one. Members of the network see themselves as a “complementary tool”. As Edilei Cirilo da Silva, a farmer and member, says, “the

network is an alternative that is helping to overcome the difficulty that farmers have in accessing the market. Of course, it's not the only solution, but this kind of initiative can reach large numbers and play an important role encouraging and supporting farmers to produce food for the market, and also to feed themselves! The role of the network is also to strengthen the dialogue within society about the problems caused by modern agriculture. We need to work together with others and reach a wide variety of audiences, including workers, employees and civil servants, in order to break the myth that our products, because they are organic, are much more expensive than conventional ones."

Such efforts are benefitting from innovative governmental policies. A good example is the PAA programme, established in 2003 by the national government to promote food security and strengthen family farming through the acquisition and distribution of food products. Family farmers can sell their products directly to the government for a fair price without going through a difficult and bureaucratic process. Some of the products are donated to public organisations such as popular restaurants, or to food banks from where they are distributed to vulnerable social groups. The other part is acquired by family farmers' organisations in other regions.

Another interesting measure was taken in 2009, with changes made to the implementation of the National Programme for School Nutrition. This has been running since 1955, supporting students enrolled in the public basic educational system. The law passed in 2009 stipulated that at least 30% of the programme's resources (990 million reais, or 370 million euros, in

2012) must be used for purchasing products from family farmers.

A win-win model The Forest Roots Network serves as a bridge between local production and consumption, and strengthens the links between farmers and consumers. Through the network, farmers are able to sell small quantities of many different products for a fair price. This turns their production on small plots of land into a viable and profitable enterprise, resulting in higher biodiversity levels. Although small, the Forest Roots Network represents a significant movement towards reorganising the agri-food systems, helping to reshape social relations and creating new market structures. The initiative contributes to raising consumer awareness about agro-ecology and local food, and has already inspired the creation of new consumer networks in two other municipalities in the region.

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Every week, more than 200 different products in a list which changes seasonally. Photos: Rede Raízes da Mata

