

Small-scale agriculture and food security policies

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The Pólo Union of Borborema (Pólo) is a network of farmer organizations, including trade unions, associations, and informal groups from 16 municipalities in the interior of the state of Paraíba, in the north-east of Brazil. Pólo's objectives include increasing food and nutritional security, income generation, and improving the quality of life of its members. The network has been working together with grass-roots organisations since 2000, supported by the Brazilian NGO AS-PTA (*Assessoria e Serviços a Projetos em Agricultura Alternativa*).

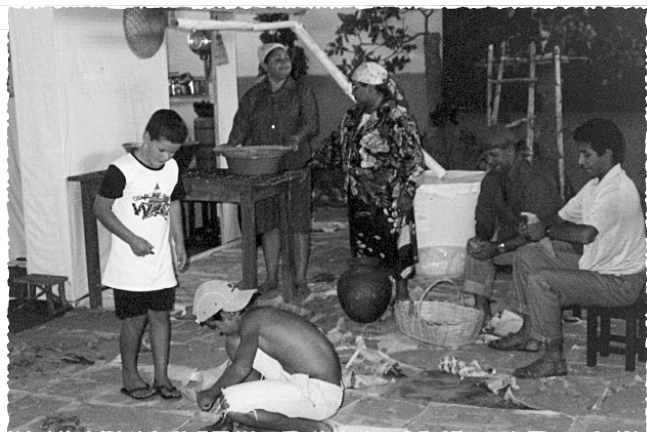


Photo: AS-PTA

"The maize festival at Dona Nene's house" being performed.

Currently, Pólo is working with around four thousand farm families, who are improving their agricultural practices through an intensive process of experimentation and exchange. Small farmers have been rediscovering traditional methods: returning to the use of traditional seed varieties; growing a mixture of crops together; organising community seedbanks; going back to and improving the keeping of chicken; developing vegetable and medicinal plant gardens; planting fruit trees and living fences; producing fodder from indigenous plants so that livestock can produce milk and meat even in the existing adverse conditions; as well as testing and using a range of natural fertilizers and pesticides. In addition, families are developing new ways of harvesting and storing rainwater for drinking and using in the gardens. They appreciate the rich local biodiversity and knowledge which transforms soils and water into an explosion of foods, medicinal plants, fodder and fertilisers. To guarantee that

they do not suffer food shortages during the dry season, they store water in their tanks, as well as storing maize, beans and flour, and making jams and sweets out of fruit. Together, these practices improve food security for the families involved. The long term results are that the families become more independent and place a greater value on their natural resources and local knowledge.

Theatre for awareness-raising

One method used to highlight the issues faced is a play, entitled "The maize festival at Dona Nene's house" (see Box 1). This was written and acted out on various occasions by the small farmers and religious leaders who make up Pólo's Theatre Group. The objective in using the play was to increase awareness of the concept of food security, and establish the connection between food security and the local reality as experienced by small farmers. Although imaginary, the two stories which make up the play reflect the situation of two very different realities. One represents those families who are managing to improve their own food supply with very few resources, by actively participating in agroecological innovation programmes, while the other shows the reality of those who still live in a situation of extreme food insecurity. Reality is understood, and actions can be planned, by letting the facts of daily life of the farm families speak for themselves. As Paulo Freire, the famous Brazilian educationalist, said, "The real theoretical discussion, necessary for critical reflection, has to be had in such a concrete manner as to almost confuse itself with the practical". This process of farmer experimentation and innovation needs a specific learning and teaching method. The theory and practice of new techniques are linked, based on farmers' involvement, experimentation and exchange during the innovation process.

Towards food security policies

To increase the impact of these activities, Pólo joined the *Articulação do Semi-árido Paraibano* (Semi-arid Network of Paraíba State), a network of civil society groups who work to develop supportive policies for the semi-arid region based on local realities and knowledge, related to the promotion of agroecology and food security. By participating in various networks, meetings and activities, Pólo is able to contribute on a wider scale. For example, they organised a meeting in which 70 union and community leaders participated, where policy orientation papers were written in relation to the existing policy environment, which at present is not seen as supportive for increased food security. At a later state-wide meeting, this document was finalised as "Contributions of the civil society of

Box 1. The maize festival at Dona Nene's house

Everyone in Dona Nene's house wakes up early, because today is the maize festival, known as the pamonha. Mr. Chico goes to the garden to harvest some cobs of the pontinha variety of maize, which is very good for making the pamonha, the maize cake after which the festival is named. He inherited this variety of seeds from his grandfather. Dona Nene and her children prepare themselves to receive their neighbours: they collect water from the tank which was constructed near the house with money from a community micro-credit scheme, they harvest vegetables grown with organic fertilisers, and prepare and cook the local chicken. The neighbours arrive exactly at the time when Dona Nene's daughters are watering the medicinal plant garden, re-using water from the kitchen. They learnt this on an exchange visit with other farmers and now they teach it to their own community. One of the neighbours compliments them on the diversity of plants they have in their garden, and the amount of trees they have around their land. For lunch, they can also choose to eat butter beans (*Phaseolus lunatus*) or common beans (*P. vulgaris*), and for dessert they will have sweets made from cashew fruit. Dona Nene is proud to say that "everything on our table is natural and comes from the garden".

At the same time, Mr. José Cosme who lives nearby, decides it is a good day for planting, but he does not have any seeds. On waking up, he asks his eldest son, Zeca, to go and buy some seeds. Dona Corrinha goes to look for water at the water lorry. Before this, she asked her daughter to go to the store to buy couscous for breakfast. The family only has a small property, and they have to rent land from a large farmer, land which becomes less fertile every year. To be able to pay the shop for the seeds, the family had to sell their cow, and now they are waiting for their pension money in order to buy a new calf.

Box 2. Experiences transformed into policies

Water: everyone's right

Today, Pólo supports a system of more than 280 community-based revolving loan funds which have already enabled the construction of 3200 domestic tanks, guaranteeing easy access to good quality water. The construction of the tanks was incorporated as a public policy in the government's Programme of a Million Tanks. This programme, which is managed by the Brazilian Semi-arid Network with federal government funds, demonstrates the capacity of civil society to formulate, negotiate and implement wide-reaching policies. Successful water harvesting, using simple, cheap and technically proven methods, demonstrates the importance of the decentralisation of water supply, for food and water security of the population of the rural areas of Paraíba.

Cultivating life: a garden planted with the seeds of passion

Pólo is part of the State Network of Seedbanks of the Semi-Arid Network of Paraíba State. Since 1998, they have been establishing agreements with the state government of Paraíba for supplying the seedbanks with indigenous varieties, and in 2004, thanks to a partnership with the National Supply Company, 161 tonnes of seeds of indigenous varieties were supplied. Today there are 80 community seedbanks which directly benefit 3000 families. This is another example of the capacity of civil society organizations to develop and implement technical solutions to meet the needs of farming families in the semi-arid region. Through these banks, families are guaranteed quality seeds at the right time for planting, liberating them of the risks of food insecurity by missing the best planting dates and losing the agricultural year. The banks and stocks held by families also function as strategic guardians of adapted varieties, known as 'seeds of passion'. Conserving them is an important service that the small farmer provides towards the food security of the society in general.

Paraíba to the Zero Hunger Programme". The Zero Hunger programme is a government initiative aimed at combating hunger, misery and the roots of social exclusion. It was conceived in order to guarantee food security for all Brazilians. It operates at the three levels of government (municipal, state and federal) and civil society. The contributions made to the Zero Hunger Programme were based on the valuing of local initiatives, farmer-experimenter exchanges, fairs to exchange products and agricultural practices, and the documentation and publication of practices and techniques. These ideas and debates were successful in reaching wider audiences; from the interior of Borborema, they reached the whole of the state of Paraíba, to finally be heard by the entire semi-arid region of Brazil.

In November 2003, Paraíba hosted the Fourth Meeting of the Brazilian Semi-arid Network, which was attended by approximately 600 people, the majority being farmer-experimenters from eleven states which make up the semi-arid areas of Brazil. The theme was 'Family agriculture developing food security in the semi-arid regions', and many experiences of life and livelihoods in the semi-arid region were presented. This gave evidence to a rich collection of practices and acted as a source of inspiration to many debates. The event resulted in the writing of the Political Letter of the Brazilian Semi-arid Network, which highlighted the importance of valuing alternatives being developed by civil society, and the formulation of policies related to the promotion of food sovereignty. This was an open letter addressed to the President, and all levels of government.

With its many experiences within the theme of food security, the Semi-arid Network of Paraíba State was invited to assist in constructing policy proposals for the State Conference on Food and Nutritional Security. Here they performed their play. This, and the publications of Pólo and the Semi-Arid Network of Paraíba State, shows the maturity and growth of the innovations of the small farmers of Paraíba, and the clarity with which these

people express their issues. The play was even performed during the National Food and Nutritional Security Conference in Olinda, Pernambuco, in March 2004. Although there was little opportunity for the voice of civil society to be heard at this conference, the message was delivered, showing the strength of community mobilization and organization, and the intelligence and creativity of farmers and farm families.

These incremental steps of reaching wider audiences and having the opportunity to influence policy formulation have meant that Pólo has seen its work used in some of the literature produced by the government explaining what the Zero Hunger and related programmes are (see illustration).



A cartoon strip telling the story of "Seeds of Passion: A community strategy to conserve local varieties in the semi-arid regions" from Paraíba.

Food security: not just a technical issue

By actively participating in the Semi-arid Network of Paraíba and the Semi-arid Network of Brazil, and engaging in dialogue with governmental policy-making at the state and federal level, Pólo has been successful in influencing the public policies related to food and nutritional security. This can be seen in particular in the Zero Hunger Programme, and the Programme of One Million Tanks. Some of Pólo's member organizations participated actively in the state and national conferences on food and nutritional security, where various directives were defined. This whole process has shown that issues surrounding increased food security are not just technical, and that the policy environment can be influenced using the skill and creativity of individuals, groups and networks to contribute to the improvement of their own lives.

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