

Case study 12

The Food Acquisition Programme in Brazil: contributions to biodiversity, food security and nutrition

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The Food Acquisition Programme¹ (PAA)

Former Brazilian President Lula da Silva's first term was marked by the incorporation of hunger, food security and nutrition as key themes in the policy agenda, particularly after the launch of the *Zero Hunger Programme*. This programme provided a set of structural and emergency actions aimed at ensuring human right to food and at eradicating the structural causes of poverty. The creation of the PAA, which encompassed in the same policy instrument consumption subsidies to people suffering from food insecurity and support to family farming,² was an innovative measure, and part of the contemporary structuring of an integrated food security policy framework in Brazil (Delgado et al., 2005; Schmitt, 2005).

The programme acquires family farm products and forwards them to public programmes and social organizations supporting people with limited access to food or suffering from food insecurity, thus enabling the establishment of different production–consumption patterns. The PAA operates using different purchasing schemes that enable: i) the setting up of local food networks that support the distribution of family farm products to food insecure populations through a number of social programmes; ii) price regulation of specific products destined to form public security food stocks; iii) the acquisition of food during the growing season to be stored and subsequently sold through farmer organizations (i.e. associations and cooperatives) that can, thereby, position themselves on the market under more favourable terms and; iv) the purchase and donation of milk to socially vulnerable families via a public distribution circuit. The implementation of these mechanisms involves a range of actors, including the federal and state governments, municipalities, as well as farmer and social service organizations. The different buying modalities that operate at different scales, can be used as a toolbox of sorts, and adapted to fit the different local contexts.

From 2003 to 2010, more than US\$2.03 billion (3.5 billion reais) were spent on the purchase of approximately 3.1 million tonnes of food (Brasil, 2011); and between 2008 and 2010, the number of farming families involved in the PAA reached 160,000 per year – only a small percentage (3.7 per cent) considering the total number of family farms existing in Brazil (4.3 million, according to



Figure C12.1 A child eating food from the Food Acquisition Programme. Source: CONAB

the Agricultural Census of 2006). The PAA is currently being implemented in approximately 40 per cent of Brazilian municipalities, reaching more than 25,000 governmental and non-governmental organizations per year, including schools, child care organizations, nursing homes and community kitchens among others, with 15 million people benefiting from food distribution every year (Brasil, 2011).

Promoting diversification and the sustainable management of biodiversity for food and nutrition: PAA's contribution

In many contexts, the PAA has promoted changes in the productive matrix of family farming as well as in the links between farm units and markets. Public procurement schemes are helping to strengthen polyculture, historically a traditional feature of a “farmer’s way of life” in Brazil (Wanderley, 1999). This is happening because in many regions of Brazil, the “modernization of agriculture” has led farmers to specialize in the production of a limited number of commodity crops and to adopt unsustainable agricultural practices based on the intensive use of pesticides and other chemical inputs, which, in turn, has exposed these families to economic, social and health vulnerability. Furthermore, the PAA has encouraged the diversification of production, thus connecting agricultural supply to a diversified demand. For example, in a survey conducted in the state of Paraná (southern region of Brazil), Ghizelini (2010)

noted that products that farmers were unaccustomed to selling on the market, or that had little commercial value, were included in a wide range of “marketable” products. Prior to implementation of the PAA only 4 per cent of family farms included in the survey used to market their vegetables; after accessing the programme, 98 per cent of the surveyed households included these crops in their social reproduction strategies.

In addition to providing incentives for diversification, the PAA is also rescuing, recovering and commercially promoting forgotten regional and local products, some of which had never been marketed before. The result of this work is the revitalization and preservation of traditional knowledge, food customs and local cultures associated with these foods that had been lost over generations because of the negative perceptions associated with them; foods that were considered “old-fashioned” or had been eroded by the mercantilization of agriculture (Ploeg, 2008; 2003). Within the state of Rio Grande do Sul (Southern Brazil), which was partly colonized by European settlers, the PAA helped revitalize colonial mills. According to Pandolfo (2008), these mills carry the historical legacy of generations of family farmers and have an important role in preserving the culture and the food habits of rural households. This example illustrates a broader process of recovery of regional food practices that is being carried out in different regions of Brazil. Foods such as hominy (dried maize), babassu palm (*Attalea speciosa*) flour, pine nuts, coconut oil, baru nut (*Dipteryx alata*) flour, cupuaçu (*Theobroma grandiflora*), palm hearts, umbu (*Spondias* sp.), maxixe (*Cucumis anguria*) and jambú (*Syzygium* sp.), among others, are being served more frequently in schools and social care organizations.

Some of these regional foods purchased by the PAA derive from sustainable extractivist practices. In 2008, the PAA acquired 28 types of extractivist products, benefiting over 8,000 extractivist families, especially women who are often the main collectors of these products. Furthermore, the acquisition of extractivist products – such as those derived from the babassu palm (oil and flour) – has multiple benefits: on the one hand, it promotes the conservation and sustainable use of this palm tree; on the other, it grants children, the elderly and socially vulnerable groups access to food with high nutritional value. In the state of Acre, in the Amazon, before the PAA programme was established, Brazil nut extractivists depended entirely on the market opportunities provided by brokers, who would mostly buy the nuts below their market value. Under the PAA programme, extractivists are guaranteed the sale of their production and have seen the price of the nuts almost double (Cordeiro, 2007). The above-mentioned examples demonstrate that positive interactions between social and ecological processes can be achieved while conserving and sustainably managing biodiversity for food and nutrition.

In order to provide healthy, pesticide-free food to socially vulnerable groups, the PAA also promotes the commercialization of agro-ecological or organic food by supporting production systems that embrace sustainable and biodiversity conservation practices, while emphasizing the use of local resources. To this end, the programme provides a price premium of 30 per cent for environmentally-



Figure C12.2 Children at school eating babassu coconut derived food. Source: CONAB

sound food products. However, the main challenge for policy makers and farm organizations remains the provision of incentives for the expansion of these agro-ecological practices and the development of mechanisms of conformity assessment that can be easily accessed by family farmers and adapted to different local contexts.

It is also worth mentioning that the PAA allows the purchase, donation and exchange of traditional and local seed varieties, as well as commercial non-hybrid seeds. The aim is to rescue and preserve biodiversity, stimulate the production and exchange of such seeds and promote the autonomy and sustainability of farming practices. These seeds carry with them the history of generations, connecting ecological processes, agricultural practices, knowledge and culture, while enabling farmers to become less dependent on external inputs and more empowered in their relations with technical experts and traders (Londres and Almeida, 2009). Several family farming organizations and technical advising non-governmental organizations (NGOs) are relying on institutional markets as an effective support mechanism for initiatives focusing on biodiversity conservation and management.

Changing the menus: PAA's contribution to food security and nutrition

The PAA contributes to enhancing food and nutritional security on both sides of the food chain by improving diets at the farm level, while ensuring that

vulnerable groups have access to good quality food. Evidence of the nutritional impacts of the PAA is still limited; however, a number of surveys indicate important changes in dietary diversity and health status of families benefiting from the PAA programme.

In families producing food for the PAA, research has shown increases in dietary diversity, as well as in quantity and quality of food for self-consumption (Becker, 2010; Costa, 2010; Delgado et al., 2005). In general, products marketed through the programme are those normally consumed by households, and promoting the commercialization of these food stuffs seems to positively affect production for self-consumption. As pointed out by Zimmermann and Ferreira (2008), the PAA has been responsible for including fresh fruit and vegetables in the diets of family farmers. Before the programme, many farmers had no fruit trees in their farms and did not value native fruits. Similarly, Costa (2010) noted that families who took part in the PAA scheme were changing eating habits, incorporating vegetables into their diets and expanding their knowledge about healthy eating. Research carried out on organizations involved in the PAA distribution scheme showed an increase in the quality and diversity of food offered to scheme recipients (Triches, 2010; Costa, 2010; Zimmermann and Ferreira, 2008).

Despite the fact that PAA provides only a portion of the food needs of these social programmes, savings resulting from donations have helped expand the food supply capacity of social service organizations and helped them invest in dietary diversification. In schools, for instance, the PAA now ensures that fresh, locally-produced, often organic food is made available in the canteens, as opposed to the processed meals that were previously served and that were incompatible with regional food cultures. Preliminary observations seem to confirm that the initiative is contributing to the attendance, performance and well-being of school children (Zimmermann and Ferreira, 2008; Ortega, Jesus and Só, 2006).

Lessons learned

As discussed above, the implementation of the PAA has demonstrated that public policy can simultaneously support family farming while addressing food security and nutrition as well as biodiversity conservation. The knowledge and experience accumulated and the positive results of the PAA have inspired other initiatives dealing with institutional markets. In 2009, for example, the Brazilian National School Meals Programme (PNAE) decreed that at least 30 per cent of the food purchased through its programme should be acquired directly from family farmers through simplified acquisition procedures.

Despite this success, the Brazilian government has faced a number of challenges during the design and implementation of the PAA. The inclusion of underprivileged farmers, in general, and specific groups of farmers (such as agrarian reform settlers, indigenous groups, *quilombolas*,³ babassu and coconut harvesters, etc.), is still limited due to their fragile organizational structure.

In many cases, information gaps and limited access to public institutions – an expression of the social inequalities that still prevail in Brazilian society – prevent farmers from fully benefiting from the programme. However, it should be highlighted that the PAA has demonstrated in a wide variety of settings its worth as a powerful tool to promote market access by family farmers while supporting ecologically-friendly agriculture and extractivist activities.

Notes

- 1 In Portuguese, *Programa de Aquisição de Alimentos* (PAA).
- 2 Within Brazilian public policy, the term family farming designates a heterogeneous universe composed by rural farmers, modernized family farmers, agrarian reform settlers, quilombolas, extractivists and indigenous peoples, among others.
- 3 The Associação Brasileira de Antropologia (Brazilian Anthropology Association) defines *quilombola* communities as “groups who resist changing their traditional way of life”. Living in temporary settlements, most *quilombolas* descend from the African slaves who were shipped to Brazil at the beginning of the 16th century to work on plantations until the abolition of slavery in 1888.

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