

INNOVATIONS IN EXTENSION AND ADVISORY  
SERVICES FOR ALLEVIATING POVERTY AND  
HUNGER: LESSONS FROM BRAZIL

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**ABSTRACT**

After being neglected for over a decade, in 2003, the Brazilian Rural Extension Services were once again included among the national government's priorities. The introduction of a national policy and increased public funding contributed to reviving these services for addressing family farming and sustainable rural development. Partnership between national and state governments, and family-farmer organisations and social movements became the pillars of a decentralised and pluralistic extension system, which includes participatory governance and governmental and non-governmental organisations. This was consolidated by a new federal law, which created national consensus and introduced a demand-orientated funding mechanism for extension

services. The remarkable growth of policies fostering social inclusion, food and nutritional security, and income generation stretched the extension services far beyond their capacity. New links between extension and research facilitated extension agents' and family farmers' access to technological innovations. In addition, the training of extension agents emphasises vanguard concepts and approaches – such as participatory methods, capacity-building, sustainable agriculture, the value chain and non-farming activities – tailored to the diversity of family farming. Rural extension in Brazil faces the challenge of increasing its capacity to respond to the demand of public policies and family farmers, while evaluating its quality, cost-effectiveness, sustainability and impact.

**KEY WORDS:** RURAL EXTENSION, PLURALISM, SOCIAL INCLUSION, FOOD AND NUTRITIONAL SECURITY, FAMILY FARMING, PARTICIPATION

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## **RURAL EXTENSION AND AGRICULTURAL DEVELOPMENT: A BRIEF BACKGROUND CONTEXT**

Brazil is a vast and diverse country in terms of climate, natural resources and people. The colonisation process shaped the rural sector predominantly with large estates, which facilitated the establishment of sugar-cane and coffee plantations and cattle ranching, aimed at the external market. Smallholders and squatters were forced to live within or at the margins of the large estates, in the most hilly and remote areas and on the poorest soils. After World War II, the country's rural sector underwent major changes as a result of import-substitution policies aimed at promoting economic growth through industrial development. The agricultural sector developed modern farming systems based on labour-saving and industrial technologies (e.g., tractors, machinery and agro-chemicals) to produce commodities for exports, such as soya bean, cotton and livestock. Also, it released labour from the countryside to the industrial sector and contributed to reducing the foreign trade deficit.

Rural extension services have been operating in Brazil since the 1940s and their history coincides to a great extent with the country's agricultural development. The first rural extension service organisation, *Associação de Crédito e Assistência Rural* (ACAR) was created in 1948; by 1956, Brazil had a national rural extension service

system, with ACARs in all States, under the coordination of a national organisation, *Associação Brasileira de Crédito e Assistência Rural* (ABCAR). These were private organisations financed by the government. In 1974, the government created a public extension system, which comprised a co-ordinating organisation, *Empresa Brasileira de Assistência Técnica e Extensão Rural* (EMBRATER) and organisations in each state, the *Empresas de Assistência Técnica e Extensão Rural* (EMATERs). This system, and the *Empresa Brasileira de Pesquisa Agropecuária* (EMBRAPA), constituted the *Sistema Brasileiro de Pesquisa e Extensão Rural* (SIBRATER) (Brazilian Agricultural Research and Rural Extension System). During this period, the rural extension services reached their peak in terms of political relevance, technical capacity and coverage.

By the 1980s, modernisation policies had, to a large extent, succeeded in developing modern agriculture and an agro-industrial sector, based on a monoculture of commodities for export. Brazil became a major exporter of soya bean, livestock, sugar, tobacco and orange juice and pioneered the use of alcohol in motor fuel. However, those policies failed in various respects. The type of agriculture had a tremendous impact on the country's natural resources, eroding and impoverishing the soil and polluting the air and water. This promoted extensive rural–urban migration and aggravated the skewed distribution

of land ownership and wealth, by increasing poverty in both rural and urban areas.

This situation fuelled most Brazilians' aspirations to see a return to democracy in their country. It also highlighted the relevance of rural extension initiatives focused on alternatives to the modernisation (green revolution) policy, in terms of audience, technology, farming systems, types of crops, extension methods and farmer organisations (among other elements). These alternative rural extension services were led by non-governmental organisations (NGOs) who worked with small-scale and resource poor farmers and were financed mainly by international donors, churches involved in development work and small-scale farmer organisations and movements, in particular the landless workers' movement (MST). It counted on the strong support of the extension agents' newly created trade unions, and was also adopted by some governmental organisations (GOs).

In the 1990s, in common with most countries in the South, Brazil struggled to convey the policies of the so-called Washington Consensus: privatisation, outsourcing, deregulation, the end of subsidies and the shrinking of the State apparatus. This took place along with the re-democratisation of the country, which resulted in free elections after more than three decades of military rule. Although people elected their representatives at all levels, including the presidency, public policies mainly



privileged the financial sector and large national and multinational monopolies. In this decade, the national government terminated EMBRATER and the funding of public extension. The State Governments that faced financial crises were forced to either reduce their technical capacity or close down their EMATERs. The dismantling of extension services was greatest in the Amazon and semi-arid regions, which are the less developed regions containing about 70% of the family-farming<sup>2</sup> population.

Brazil entered the third millennium with a strengthening democracy, economic growth after more than two decades of economic stagnation and 'compensatory' policies aimed at promoting social inclusion. For the first time, the latter included subsidised credit to family farmers. The Ministry of Agrarian Development (MDA) was created to address policies in favour of agrarian reform and family farming. Despite demands from social movements, trade unions and political parties, the rural extension services were not included in the new policies that addressed the rural sector. Thus, the meagre initiatives undertaken by the national government consisted of financing NGOs with the aim of creating some technical capacity, mainly to assist land settlement projects. After being forgotten for over a decade, the rural extension services were inadequate and largely outdated and unable to respond to the demands of the new policies and millions of family

farmers. As a result, the policies the family farmers demanded largely failed to reach them.

### **PNATER DEMANDS CONTEMPORARY RURAL EXTENSION SERVICES IN BRAZIL**

In 2003, the election of a government promising popular policies allowed Brazil to review its development model especially for the most vulnerable sectors of its population, and to address historic inequalities among regions and people. As a result, the government took up new responsibilities, services and policies in favour of those previously excluded from development. These included the creation of new departments: the Secretariat of Women, the Secretariat of Racial Equality, the Ministry of Social Development, and the introduction of policies designed to fight hunger and overcome poverty.

Rural extension services were again included in the national government agenda. A new National Rural Extension Department (DATER) was created within the Family Farming Secretariat of the MDA. The rural extension policy was placed side by side with other policies (e.g., subsidised credit, crop and income insurance, price guarantees, State purchase and income-generation and value-addition programmes) addressing processing, packaging and marketing activities, craft work, rural tourism and value chains of products relevant to family farming. As a strategy to ensure the continuance of these

policies, the government regulated them through national laws.

A new national rural extension policy, *Política Nacional de Assistência Técnica e Extensão Rural* (PNATER), was created through a participatory process led by DATER, which involved six workshops (five regional and one national) with rural extension representatives. PNATER incorporated the knowledge acquired over several decades by GOs, NGOs, family-farmer organisations, formal and informal education organisations and others from all parts of the country. As a result, it included contemporary concepts of rural extension, agriculture and development. This policy facilitated the implementation of a new rural extension system in the country, and empowered both GOs and NGOs to deliver these services with public funding. It appointed MDA, through DATER, as the national co-

<sup>2</sup> In Brazil, the concept of 'family farming' refers to smallholdings based on family labour and administration, which produce either for subsistence or for the market. A national Law of August of 2006 establishes the criteria that define 'family farming'. The smallholders who comply with these criteria can be registered as 'family farmers', which entitles them to access credit, crop insurance, price guarantees, and other public policies and social benefits.



ordinating body in charge of implementing PNATER and introduced the existing councils as the mechanisms of social control at State level – the National Rural Extension Committee and the National Sustainable Rural Development Council (CONDRAF). These councils played an important role in the accreditation system for extension organisations.

PNATER defined family farmers as the target audience for extension. There are over 4 million farming families in the country, comprising 80% of farmers. In 2006, family farming was regulated by a national law, which defined rural family enterprises and the various categories of this population, including traditional family farmers, indigenous people, the *quilombolas* (traditional populations of former slaves), forest people and small-scale fishermen, among others. For the first time, the Brazilian State acknowledged this population with policies tailored to their needs. These farmers produce more than 70% of the country's staple food and account for 80% of the rural labour, although they farm less than 30% of the total farmland.

The guidelines of PNATER include gender, racial equality and work with youth – groups who were largely neglected in previous extension and public policies. Concerning agriculture, this policy includes agro-ecology, as a way of promoting sustainable production systems, the protection of the environment and achieving food and nutritional security. It prescribes participatory extension

methodology and dialogue to build new knowledge and develop technological innovations, taking into consideration both indigenous and formal knowledge. The role of the extension agent is defined as facilitator, organiser and educator. PNATER sets up guidelines for the promotion of income generation and value addition and uses the value chain approach. The accreditation mechanism for extension organisations is also included in this policy.

In 2008, DATER organised rural extension seminars in each of Brazil's 27 States and a national rural extension seminar, with the aim of hearing the views of the various actors involved in the process of PNATER implementation. More than 15,000 people participated in these events which contributed to rural extension services being introduced in the national budget in 2009, and making PNATER national law in 2010. This also helped strengthen the Rural Development Councils in each State and CONDRAF at national level, who accredited extension organisations to access official funding and established a national rural extension programme (PRONATER) and a 4-yearly conference to suggest guidelines for PRONATER.

The funding from the national government increased significantly, but has not yet reached the levels seen in the past. About 80% of the total budget for the State rural extension organisations comes from State governments, most of which is spent on personnel. The funding from the national

government is allocated to logistics and infrastructure, such as cars, computers, fuel and inputs for extension activities in the field.

PNATER has the support of important political organisations, such as the National Confederation of Rural Workers (CONTAG), the National Federation of Family Farmers (FETRAF), the Small Farmers Movement (MPA), agrarian reform movements, the alternative-pedagogy schools for rural youth, as well as the National Association of Rural Extension Organisations (ASBRAER), the National Confederation of Trade Unions of Rural Extension Workers (FASER), and the rural NGO networks. There is consensus among the different sectors on the success of the government's efforts to rebuild a public rural extension system in the country.

There are over 20,000 extension agents in the country, working within 16 rural extension networks, including the Government Extension Network (ASBRAER). These extension agents occupy over 5,000 offices, which cover 95% of the country's municipalities. Fifteen NGO networks operate in different parts of the country and account for about 5,000 extension agents. This technical capacity reaches about 1.5 million family farmers, and has an annual budget of over US\$1 billion. It plays an important role in implementing public policies, such as family-farming credit that amounts to over US\$5.5 billion.

DATER re-established links with, and allocated funding to, the national and state agricultural





research organisations, universities and family farmers' organisations, to promote training of extension agents on agricultural technology innovations and develop extension methodology. It also created 16 Thematic Networks (<http://www.territoriosdacidadania.gov.br/principal>). It addresses subjects on family farmers and extension work, such as 'dairy', 'participatory methodology', 'agricultural and non-agricultural products of Brazil's biodiversity' and 'rural tourism'. More than 500 extension agents, from the 26 States and the Federal District, are responsible for co-ordinating these networks.

### **MAIN CONSTRAINTS OF THE NEW RURAL EXTENSION SERVICES**

Despite the progress of the national rural extension services, they still need to overcome various barriers in order to meet the demands of the majority of family farmers. The main constraint is the limited coverage, which leaves over 3 million family farmers without access to extension services and public policies. The proliferation of new public policies addressing audiences that are new to extension is an extra demand on extension services. Limited coverage of extension results in a two-fold problem: limited financing and lack of capacity to operate a large budget.

Concerning the training of extension agents and new professionals to work on rural extension, in general the universities are still training their

students based on the former rural extension approach adapted to green revolution policies. This is compounded by the long-term absence of in-service training and government funding for training. The implementation of PNATER addresses the lack of technical capacity, especially for new concepts (agro-ecology, gender and participation) and new audiences. This lack of capacity reduces Brazil's ability to change the current agriculture pattern, by increasing the production of staple foods, and preserving natural resources and the environment.

Other constraints that extension faces include the lack of research on family farming. The links between research and extension are frail and rely mainly on personal interest or specific small projects. This also limits the progress of the Thematic Networks, and prevents the formulation and spread of information and knowledge among extension agents. The institutional framework of extension, at national and State level, is unable to ensure continuous funding or co-ordination of extension activities, thus compromising the idea of working as a system.

### **THE LESSONS OF PNATER: A NEW RURAL EXTENSION SERVICE EMERGES**

In 2003, democracy and the strength of social movements (e.g., the landless, family farmers, rural women) contributed to the election of a trade unionist of the Workers' Party as President, which

led to the creation of new policies. This helped to bring rural extension to the centre of the political agenda in Brazil. Policies such as social and economic inclusion, the fight against hunger, family benefit (*Bolsa Família*), State purchase, credit and insurance, brought the challenge of reaching a vast rural population for the first time. Despite its current fragile state, extension has been identified by the government and farmers as a system capable of delivering information and knowledge to this population. This was mainly due to the profile of extension, in terms of technical expertise and presence in the most remote areas of the country. The fact that Brazil reconsidered the role of the State as a service provider and promoter was decisive.

The legal and institutional framework played an important role in the delivery of services. The National Congress and the government have been encouraged by ASBRAER and social movements to create a new system of rural extension services. This can consolidate what has been built since 2003 and can bring about long-awaited reforms such as integrating the national and State governments' rural extension capacities, strengthening the mechanisms of social control, increasing funding and technical capacity, networking, and building linkages with research, formal education and family-farmer organisations. As a result, extension will deliver more appropriate services and reach all Brazilian family farmers.

The training of extension agents requires the



introduction of modern concepts of development and extension in the formal education system. In addition, training must be continuous and consider the situation of end-users. Conservatism and traditionalism among extension organisations and agents are major constraints to introducing new knowledge, particularly in terms of agricultural systems, participation and networking. NGOs are better prepared to operate in line with the concepts of PNATER; despite their limited coverage, their main role is to innovate and develop extension methods and strategies (according to PNATER guidelines).

The agricultural research organisations still focus mainly on commercial farming. The bulk of technological innovations address monoculture commodities, which are of little relevance to family-farming agriculture systems. Furthermore, research organisations and researchers are largely biased against family farming, because they are not prepared to deliver technology for family farming, which has diverse production systems.

The current national government, which took office in 2011, set the goal of overcoming extreme poverty in the country. There are 16 million people living in extreme poverty in Brazil, and about 50% of them live in rural areas. Although there are other policy delivery mechanisms, it is the rural extension services that have the expertise to work in the rural areas, although they have had little impact on the rural poor to date.

## **PNATER, AN OPTIMISTIC SCENARIO FOR RURAL EXTENSION IN BRAZIL**

After being almost wiped from the political arena of the country, rural extension services return to the centre of the national political arena (congress, government, and social movements). This was mainly a result of the introduction of democracy and new policies enacted to promote social and economic inclusion. The increase in coverage and technical capacity of extension depends on the political will of the national government to create a new rural extension system in the country, which will benefit from developments in the sector, in particular from PNATER, the Law of Extension, and the inclusion of GOs and NGOs in the national extension services. The challenge is paramount, given that over 3 million families do not yet have access to rural extension services, and about 1 million of these are poor.

The policies adopted by the government since 2003 lifted about 28 million people out of poverty, of whom 5 million live in rural areas. The goal of overcoming extreme poverty in the country is an important motivation for the government to invest in rural extension services, as this service can facilitate this diverse population to gain access to public policies. If the government decides to give the national extension services their former political importance, and strengthens the institutional and technical capacities of extension, then family farmers will finally have a chance to be included in

the country's development. PNATER will succeed in changing the agricultural pattern and contribute to the preservation of Brazil's natural resources.