# BUILDING PARTICIPATIVE PROCESSES: THE CASE OF THE "REDE ECOVIDA DE ACROECOLOGIA" IN THE SOUTHERN REGION OF BRAZIL

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## Abstract

Even though the Southern Region of Brazil has been one of the main focuses for the implementation of the model of modern agriculture with the destruction of an important amount of biomass, this region has also witnessed some of the most interesting experiences in terms of alternative agriculture. This situation is mainly due to the fact that this region concentrates a considerable number of family-owned farming exploitations, which were excluded from the processes of modern agriculture and therefore decided to discuss the economic, social, political and environmental impact of the agricultural system in force. The involvement of different strands of the Brazilian society in this debate led to many initiatives of implementation of ecological agriculture, which had to face and presently still face several technical problems, and other socio-economic, political and environmental issues. These obstacles were fought by means of creating organisations of family farmers, consulting institutions, autonomous professionals, consumers, and generally speaking all the stakeholders involved in the field of agroecology with well-defined aims and principles. All these associations and groups work hard for the promotion of discussions and solutions for the problems related to the production and marketing of ecological food and products. In this particular context, the "Rede Ecovida de Agroecology" (Agroecology Ecolife Network) appears in the Southern Region of Brazil, including farmers, technicians and consumers in a pedagogical and participative process in the search for the public expression of the quality of the tasks they presently carry out.

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## Presentation

The main aim of this text is to analyse the social relationships established amongst the different stakeholders along the production chain in the context of the development of ecological agriculture in Brazil, by means of explaining the experiences we have recorded from the first production steps to the marketing process of the products obtained by the farmers that have created organised networks. Our idea is to convince the reader to reflect on the importance of the development of relationships based in values such as confidence, ethical commitment and solidarity, as tools of ecological agriculture.

## Introduction

According to the Brazilian Institute for Geography and Statistics (IBGE), the Southern Region of Brazil presents the following characteristics: a surface of 576,300 $km^2$, 25,089,783 inhabitants (which is 14.79% of the national population), which means that there is a demographic density of 43.54 inhabitants per $km^2$. From this population, only 19.06% live in the rural areas in the 1,002,912 farming exploitations existing in the Southern Region of Brazil. Of these, 90.5% are run by families representing a surface of 17,000 hectares. The participation rate of these farming families in the production of certain products is quite high with regard to the overall figures in the Southern Region of Brazil: 62% of beans, 61% of corn and 65% of milk.

Alternative technologies in agriculture in the Southern Region of Brazil were “reinvented” from the 80’s, mainly thanks to the technical advisory of NGO’s and governmental agents committed with agroecological actions. However, it was not only a technical initiative, but also an important movement of the Brazilian civil society, who started to cast doubts on the socio-economic, political and environmental impact of the agricultural model implemented in Brazil.

The experiences of ecological production in the Southern Region of Brazil are based on the reluctance of rural populations to accept modern capitalist exploitation models in the field. This is proven by a remarkable reduction in the rural population of this region by 10.7%, by the percentage of people working on farming activities in the region, which is 9.8%, or by the growth rate of households with a minimum salary, in the period from 1999 to 2001, which was of 7.9%. Another striking

figure is the illiteracy rate of the national rural population, which amounts to 30%.

Alternative practices were strongly supported by certain sectors of the Catholic and Lutheran Church, by the trade unions of rural workers and by the movements who struggle to protect the rural environment. However, the involvement of consumers and people from urban areas defending environmentalist principles has been extremely important for the consolidation of ecological production in the South of Brazil. Even more recently, the debate on transgenic products has been critical to raise social awareness about the importance of a healthy and balanced nutrition.

From the historical point of view, experiences with ecological agriculture have been carried out by familiar farming exploitations, especially in the south of the country, which amounts for 90% of the farming establishments (in accordance with the 1995-1996 official census). We could even daresay that 8,000 to 10,000 families in this region are presently incorporating to environmental management principles to their production schemes.

Despite the fact that these families are less than 1% of the familiar farming establishments in the region, it is important to highlight that theses experiences are of strategic importance as far as the alternatives for rural development in the region are concerned, with different productive situations that have become an important laboratory, where technologies are created and exchanged and where organizational processes are tested.

From the 90's Brazilian exporters and European importers started to require a certification of ecological products, which led to the foundation of the first national certifying institutions: Instituto Biodinâmico de Desenvolvimento Rural (IBD) (Biodynamic Institute for Rural Development) and Associação de Agricultura Orgânica (AAO) (Organic Agriculture Association), both with headquarters in São Paulo-SP.

Nevertheless, this kind of certification is too expensive for family-run farming exploitations since it is still difficult for them to access external markets and/or big supermarket networks. Apart from this, the bureaucratic structure, which controls the evolution of the certification process with periodical inspections, does not comply with the protection of farmers as main stakeholders of the productive process.

In order to improve and extend this situation, some farmer organisations, NGO's, the aforementioned certifying institutions, processing industries and exporters lobbied the Ministry for Agriculture in order to regulate the situation of organic agriculture in Brazil. The result thereof was the approval of the Statutory Regulations No. 7, in 1999, whereby the main regulations for organic production are established, alongside two different certification systems: by means of an audit or through a participative process, which is also known as the Credibility-raising Network.

However, the Statutory Regulations No. 006, from 2002, based on the ISO 65 Regulation and created by the same Ministry in order to regulate the certification process and the Law Project, which is being discussed at the National Congress for its final approval, contradict the possibility of coexistence of these two systems. The same regulations create the National Institute of Organic Products in order to certify, supervise and control the certifying institutions.

Presently, apart form the aforementioned National Institute, the first National certifying institution by means of an auditing process is pending to be approved. However, this process is in standby due to the complaints of different institutions and farmers during the 1st National Conference on Agroecology, held in Rio de Janeiro in 2002. This public demonstration aims at preventing the final approval of this Law Project by the conservative party at the National Congress.

## Agroecological Transition: A self-organisation process in the marketing of agricultural products

The Southern States are known for being one of the most important focuses for the modernisation of agriculture in Brazil, which also entailed in many regions the destruction of natural ecosystems. From the 60's the intensive use of fossil fuels, agro-toxic chemical fertilisers, highly productive genetic materials, hormones, antibiotics, etc., promoted by the rural expansion and credit policies, created several environmental problems, such as the loss of the initial vegetal surface (Atlantic Forests), the decrease of underground water reserves or the pollution of the environment.

Technicians and farmers working in agroecology face today several problems as a result of the Green Revolution: the specialisation, the dependency on external supplies, the loss of local varieties, the decrease in knowledge about local biodiversity, the degradation of soil and water, the lack of appreciation on behalf of farmers of productive

activities aiming at the reproduction of agricultural systems, access to the market, exclusion from public policies, amongst many other issues.

The important work started by both farmers and technicians in the field of ecological agriculture in the last 15 years led to the development and adaptation of a series of technological practices with an excellent utilisation potential in the management of the different culture and breeding systems.

However, experience proves that the sustainability of the process of technological change in agriculture does not only mean the successful application of a series of techniques; it is more than that. We need a socio-economic and cultural context, which sees to it that farmers turn, both individually and collectively, into the main stakeholders of the transitional process towards agroecology.

This new context many entail changes in the roles played by men, women, young, elderly people and adults within families. It can even lead to certain conflicts within communities, when certain relationships are questioned in order to enlarge the autonomy of farmers and their organisations in productive processes.

The crisis endured by the families of farmers in the south of the country turned into an incentive to disseminate the agroecological proposal. Not only due to technical aspects related to the fall in culture profitability, but also due to the awareness of the negative impact of modern technologies on their working and living conditions, especially with regard to health, social inclusion and the protection of the inhabitants of rural areas.

The socio-economic and ecological feasibility of family agriculture and of the agricultural reform through agroecology is presently understood and assumed by most of the associations of rural workers in the South of the country, such as the Movimento dos Trabalhadores Rurais sem Terra (MST) (Movement of Landless Rural Workers), the Federação dos Trabalhadores na Agricultura Familiar da Região Sul (FETAG-Sul/CUT) (Federation of Family Agriculture Workers in the Southern Region) and the Movimento dos Pequenos Agricultores (MPA) (Movement of Small-scale Farmers).

However, feasibility has a series of political barriers as a concrete strategy. One of the greatest challenges is to adjust public policies and the intervention in the field of production in order to improve the

organisations involved in the dissemination of an agriculture based on the principles of agroecology.

## The Networks

In the last few years new forms of dynamism have appeared in the markets of agricultural products, not only in Brazil, but also in many other countries around the world: the stakeholders involved in the process change, as well as the roles that they play from the first production stages to the moment when the product is consumed by the final customers. This fact takes place in a wider transition context in rural economies. Some authors have referred to this transition as a change from a productive agricultural framework to a new post-productive environment (Ilberry & Bowler, 1998), while others talk about a change in the paradigm, in other words, the evolution of the paradigm of agricultural modernisation to a new paradigm of rural development (Van der Ploeg, 2000). Finally, from the point of view of underdeveloped rural economies, the prevailing idea is the transition from conventional agriculture to agroecology (Caporal, 1998). In any case, the creation and development of new marketing channels for agricultural products is one of the key elements in the global process of transition in rural economies.

In the policies of agricultural development derived form the pre-existing paradigm (productive, modernising or conventional), agricultural producers were just simple producers of cheap raw materials, which were transformed and/or distributed in target markets by other agents (go-betweens, processing companies, distributing companies…). As far as prices are concerned, this means that producers will receive less money every time, while consumers are charged higher prices.

But the consequences of the agricultural model are not only social, but also environmental. Although the *in situ* pollution stemming from the agricultural system has been very high, this has not been enough to trigger a hostile response to products on behalf of consumers. However the recent and numerous scandals due to food pollution, whose consequences were beyond “local”, and the consolidation and progress of socio-environmental awareness, are other factors that promote the development of Short Marketing Chains (SMC).

Since the model does not guarantee the social reproduction of the rural world and the food quality is far from what is socially considered as optimal, the appearance of new channels or marketing networks for

farming products has been one of the most important solutions for these problems.

In fact, the appearance of these new exchange systems can be analysed both from the standpoint of the consumer and the producer.

In the last few years, consumers have changed their perception about food and the ways of obtaining it. This has been enhanced not only by the general social values, amongst which ecology was one of the most important one for citizens, but also due to the recent food scandals (milk dioxins, BSE, genetically modified organisms, etc.), which worsen the image that consumers have about conventional agricultural models. These two factors provoke a relative lack of confidence in conventional systems of production and distribution, which leads to the appearance of alternative systems. In this sense, in the last few years in Brazil and in other parts of the world, new exchange systems appear where the food quality is mainly based on the personal observation of consumers and in the social networks created at a local level. In other words, food quality is not an externally generated datum, but a socially conceived concept.

From the point of view of producers, the appearance of SMCs could be seen as the answer to the continuous loss of income and purchasing power. On the one hand, the control exerted by Western countries on the international markets of farming products, where subsidised overproduction is an easily observable fact, prevents poor and “not competitive” producers from accessing these markets, which are so controlled and manipulated by transnational companies. On the other hand, production costs are considerably increased, but as a consequence of the necessary investment in new technologies and the need to adjust to the new market requirements (product appearance, just-in-time distribution systems, etc.). The final outcome for most producers is less income.

If we join the two extremes of this circuit, consumers and producers, we will immediately realise that the answer will never be found in the conventional system. In fact, in this piece of work we present a system, which is innovative form the institutional point of view and seeks solutions to promote high-quality products, thanks to which the income of producers can fairly grow, without having to pay more.

It is also important to highlight that the implementation of SMCs favour the creation of new interactions between agriculture and the society that depends thereon. In fact, SMCs shy away from compartmentalised visions of society, which tell the rural world from the urban one, as if

they were independent. SMCs allow consumers to take a closer look at the rural world, from which food products stem, by means of the relocation and socialisation of agro-nutritional systems; in other words, urban consumers can be involved in quality diagnosis procedures with their own knowledge and experience, determining quality sources and productive units (Renting et al., 2001).

Finally, it is also interesting to mention the origin of these "new" markets. In the face of the vision of neoclassical economy, where markets are something external to society, in which private vices turn in to public virtues thanks to the intervention of an "invisible hand", the appearance of SMCs is the result of the participative work of different stakeholders (consumers, producers, NGOs, etc.). As a consequence thereof, the results of these SMCs will be linked to the degree and kind of involvement achieved.

The experiences in agroecology in the south of the country are based on the organisation of groups and associations and on the creation of formal or informal networks. The main aim of these groups is to show that their members are now aware of their rights, to promote the active involvement of new social stakeholders in the socio-political scenario in search for a deep change of the present situation and to stimulate the application of new ethics not only to agricultural production, but also to family relationships and consumption.

Due to the fact that they are not institutionalised, networks have become an important enlargement tool of the work carried out by the organisations involved in agroecology, making it possible to disseminate practices and knowledge and to exchange different experiences, increasing the capacity of resistance and self-organisation of the farmers involved in different local initiatives.

## **Marketing**

Environmentalist farmers from the south of the country have already understood that the transformation process of family agriculture productive processes must within the context of modernised agriculture. They must firmly endeavour to redesign the ways to process, market and certify the ecological product.

There are many different kinds of relations with the market. Some groups market their products in conventional circuits, which go against the belief that differentiated prices are the main element promoting the incorporation of ecological principles to the management of productive

systems. The remaining groups sell their products directly to the consumer in fairs, points of sale, home deliveries or cooperatives of consumers. Very few groups with high production volume market part of their products in big shops or supermarkets.

These different marketing schemes are a consequence of a task of active construction of the market, which seeks to eliminate or to minimise the presence of go-betweens in the marketing process, reducing the distance between producers and consumers, strengthening participative systems in order to increase the credibility of their products and to develop local supply networks.

The creation and strengthening of these alternative marketing channels, which takes into account the needs of different types of farmers and simultaneously turns ecological products into an alternative for the population, can be considered as a strategic element for the enlargement of the agroecological proposal to the three states in the south of Brazil.

## Public Policies

Several studies have observed that civil lobbies are present in national politics and are actively involved in decision-making processes. Sometimes the role they have to play is hard and complicated, as happens to MST, but they are the most practical way to represent the interests of the civil society.

Farmer networks also play a very important role in the improvement of the political and legal context for the initiatives, since most agricultural policies are focused on the increase of production and are usually linked to external supplies and technical interventions. In most cases, these policies are the main obstacles for the dissemination of more sustainable and productive agricultural systems.

The formulation of public policies aiming at the development of agroecology is a very recent phenomenon in the southern region of the country. Despite the actions of certain isolated groups, aware of the importance of ecological agriculture, the first specific programmes in support of the transition to agroecology have only appeared in the last few years, both promoted by the federal and state governments.

The Government of the State of Rio Grande do Sul, during the political mandate of the “Frente Popular”, was the only one in the Southern region of Brazil to support and to strengthen family-run farming

exploitations and agroecology as government priorities, which were reaffirmed by popular consultations with regard to the Participative Budget.

We could mention the “Programme of Support to New Farming Products” (PANPA), which is part of the RS Rural Programme, developed by the Secretary of Agriculture and Supply of the State of Rio Grande do Sul. The execution of the PANPA Programme is under the responsibility of the Supply Central of Rio Grande do Sul – CEASA/RS – which will try to promote the diversification of activities of small familiar rural exploitations, in order to create marketing alternatives and proposals of for new agricultural and industrial business activities. Its main aims are the following: creating data and make them available about the market and experiences about new farming products, financing market studies and of financial feasibility of new farming products, organising and financing activities of commercial promotion. The PANPA helped to improve the infrastructures of cattle fairs and exhibitions by buying scales, plastic boxes for transportation purposes, by building stands and by publishing dissemination material. It also contributed to the realisation of market surveys, such as the one, which assessed the market for ecological rice amongst the consumers in the State. The actions developed by the PANPA were supported by “Rede Ecovida”.

Another Programme implemented by the Secretary of Agriculture and Supply of the State is the Programme for Production, Industrialisation and Marketing of Ecological Products – O RIO GRANDE ECOLÓGICO (The Ecological Region of Rio Grande). O RIO GRANDE ECOLÓGICO aims at stimulating and supporting the initiatives related to Agroecology, in the fields of production, industrialisation and marketing of ecological products. It also aims at strengthening local organisations and initiatives and the active involvement of citizens. Amongst its experiences, we could highlight the ecological production by some farmers of fruits, medicinal plants, sugarcane, alongside the industrialisation of these products in almost all the regions of the State. Several training courses on the refurbishment of rural property by means of purchasing supplies and equipments were also delivered. This programme also supported the actions of Rede Ecovida, but it was harshly criticised by NGO’s, because it was impossible for them to realize the projects that were under the government’s responsibility, through the Company of Technical Assistance and Rural Extension – EMATER/RS, but they could create partnerships.

The Pró-Guaíba Programme – PROGUAIBA, also implemented some actions. This programme was developed by the Government of the State

of Rio Grande do Sul in order to promote the environmentally sustainable and socially fair development of the Hydrographical Region of Guaíba. The PROGUAIBA financed ecologically adequate practices on the field in order to achieve the reforestation of the area and the protection of conservational areas in rural properties, by means of creating a partnership with EMATER/RS and the Inter-American Bank of Development - BID.

All these experiences of the Southern region of the country allow us to withdraw a series of lessons. One of them is that the programmes of public policies promoting agroecology are important tools, sometimes critical in the transition towards a new technological model. Policies in support of the production, processing and marketing of ecological products and of the sustainable management of ecosystems thanks to the specialised training delivered to farmers promote and strengthen the initiatives of ecological production underway.

Another issue we should not forget about is that the promotion of agroecology involves the recognition of socio-cultural and ecological diversity of local contexts. Therefore, it is essential to achieve the active involvement of rural communities and autonomous organisations of farmers in the process of definition, implementation and assessment of these programmes and public policies.

Nevertheless, it is important to highlight that apart form the institutional side of these programmes, it is very important to implement and control them in an appropriate way in order to achieve the active involvement of farmers and the existing intervention tools.

**Rede Ecovida de Agroecologia (Agroecology Ecolife Network)**

In 1998, the creation process of Rede Ecovida de Agroecology was started in the south of Brazil. On the one hand, it aimed at strengthening and legitimising the pre-existing certifying processes and fulfilling the requirements of the Ministry for Agriculture with regard to production, marketing and certification of organic products. On the other hand, it tried to create a meeting forum for farming families and their organisations, consulting bodies, professionals and people involved in the production, processing, marketing and consumption of ecological food. The network works with well-defined principles and aims and it endeavours to strengthen agroecology in its most varied aspects, by making information available for the people involved and creating legitimate mechanisms to increase the credibility and guarantee of the processes developed by its members.

Principles:

- ✓ Taking agroecology as the basis for sustainable development;
- ✓ Guaranteeing the quality of the process by means of participative certification;
- ✓ Working with families of farmers and their organisations;
- ✓ Being in compliance with the national organic production regulations;
- ✓ Having their own operational and production regulations.

Aims:

- ✓ Developing and multiplying the existing agroecological initiatives;
- ✓ Encouraging associative work in the production and consumption of ecological food;
- ✓ Creating information and making it available for organisations and people in general;
- ✓ Creating solidarity links between farmers and consumers;
- ✓ Having a brand-label expressing the process, commitment and quality of this network.

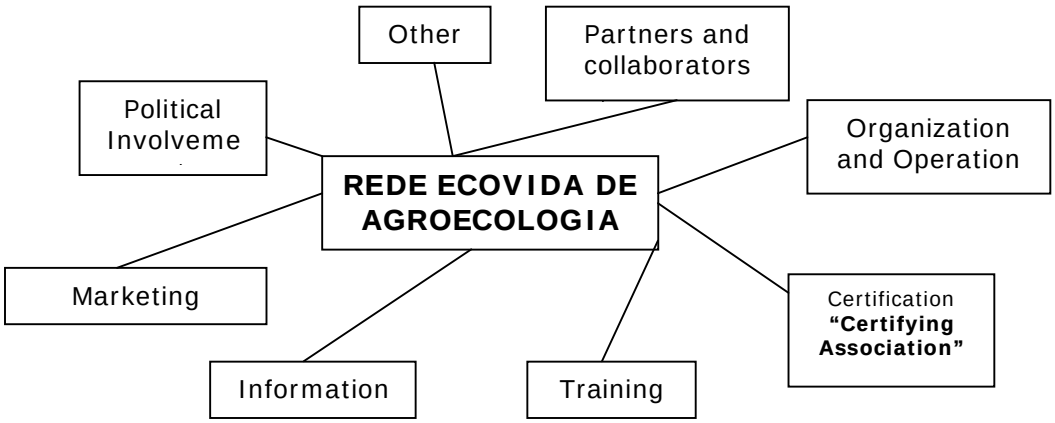
The said principles and objectives aim at guaranteeing the continuity of the historical construction of Agroecology as the basis for sustainable development, taking into account socio-economic, environmental, cultural and technological issues. They also aim at implementing and enforcing public policies for the improvement of the quality of life of the Brazilian society.

These regulations are constantly reassessed and reformulated by Rede Ecovida and they try to be the faithful reflection of the historical agroecological practice of the organisations that are included in the said network, in order to attain a real transformation of the conventional productive process towards social justice, adequate maintenance and/or improvement of the environment where we live and quality guarantee for ecological food.

It is known that regulations *per se* cannot induce a change in attitudes with regard to the environment, social justice and the transformation of production systems and they will not change the deficiencies in power relationships in the marketing system. However, regulations must be understood as a homogenisation effort of certain processes and products that entail an ethical and responsible commitment.

In order for Rede Ecovida de Agroecologia to develop in a harmonious fashion, it is necessary to take into account and equally support social, economic, cultural and technological aspects so that the movement has an integral character.

Rede Ecovida de Agroecologia Organisation Flowchart




The network "Rede Ecovida" has registered members in accordance with its own regulations in order to increase its credibility and mutual recognition throughout the process. The following are the main stakeholders' involved (potential members):

- ✓ Environmentalist family farmers and their organisations: groups, associations, cooperatives, etc.;
- ✓ Consultancy associations in the field of agroecology: NGO's, associations;
- ✓ Consumers and their organisations: associations, consumption cooperatives;
- ✓ Professionals and organisations involved in the field of agroecology;
- ✓ Processors of ecological food (micro-companies);
- ✓ Marketers of ecological food (micro-companies).

As for the structure and composition of the network, it does not have its own headquarters, so the infrastructures of member organisations are being used in case of need. This actually allows the maximum involvement of the stakeholders, since every person and organisation has its specific role to play, which overall contributes to adequate

evolution of the process. On the other hand, this preserves the original intention of not centralising all the work under the responsibility of just one person.

The different tasks are activated by means of structures like core organisations, coordination bodies, treasury, “certifying association”, etc.

“Rede Ecovida de Agroecologia” is a “virtual” non-profit making organisation. Thus, the financial resources obtained are used to achieve its aims by means of financing the different tasks programmed, organising events – like seminars, meetings, assemblies, etc. – and promoting the production and dissemination of didactic and informative materials. The financial administration of the network is carried out by a treasury, which is appointed every 2 (two) years in the main network meeting.

An annual fee is collected by the treasury department and therefore it is necessary to frequently update an accountancy book reflecting the changes in the annual accounts (which will be presented in the main meeting).

Presently the network consists of 18 regional nuclei and 23 consultancy institutions in the three Southern States, gathering more than 150 organisations of farming families (groups and associations), which amount to approximately 1,500 families involved. In the Southern region, there are roughly 100 fairs and other marketing events, which are certified by the Ecovida network.

## Certifying Association

The participative association has to do with local markets, where the producer has a very close and direct relation with the consumer, which makes it possible for both to know each other quite well increasing the confidence and credibility of the stakeholders involved. All this happens as part of a social, productive, environmental and economic exchange. It is essential that the producers explain to the consumers how their ecological production system works, organising visits to their property, where consumers will receive these explanations. In other words, consumers must know and understand the system logics.

In the participative certifying process, a quality label or seal is used to identify and recognised the organic product. The seal is established by the organisations of farmers and institutions involved and it is awarded

to the farmers that meet the internal agroecological production regulations.

For certification purposes, in the case of this Ecovida network, the responsible legal institution is the *Associação Ecovida de Certificação Participativa* (Ecolife Association of Participative Certification), which is the only one encompassing all the states that are part of the network (presently Rio Grande do Sul, Santa Catarina and Paraná).

The said association was founded in February 2001 and is ruled by the Social Statute, the Internal Regulations and other documents, which aim at having agroecology as the basis for sustainable development, working with close organisations and institutions and with familiar initiatives of production, transformation and marketing of ecological products.

The Association regulations include, apart from the Internal Statute and Regulations, by the Guidelines for obtaining Ecological Quality, the Statutory Regulations No. 7 issued by the Ministry for Agriculture and the organisational and operational regulations of the Ecovida Network, to which it is politically subjected, since it is the organisation and representation body of the farmers involved in agroecology.

The functional structure of the Association, apart from the General Assembly, which is the main management body, consists of the Administrative Coordination Body, the Fiscal Council, the Technical Commission, the Resource and Ethics Council and the Certification Council.

All of these structures must act in a coordinated manner and hand in hand with the structure of the Ecovida network, especially with the nuclei, whose functions are defined in the Statute.

Each state has its own coordination body, which is responsible for the activities of coordination of the different nuclei, as political and administrative units of the Ecovida network.

The Coordination of the Association is the same as for the Ecovida Network and the number of representatives per State can be modified if the number of states involved grows in order to make work easier and faster.

The main aim of the Association is to the guarantee the certification and control of the ecological quality of the products produced by its partners and third parties, as long as they are members of the Ecovida Network.

All this must be done in compliance with the “Guidelines for obtaining Ecological Quality” established by the Association and with the procedures and functions corresponding to each part of the Association, as established by the Statute.

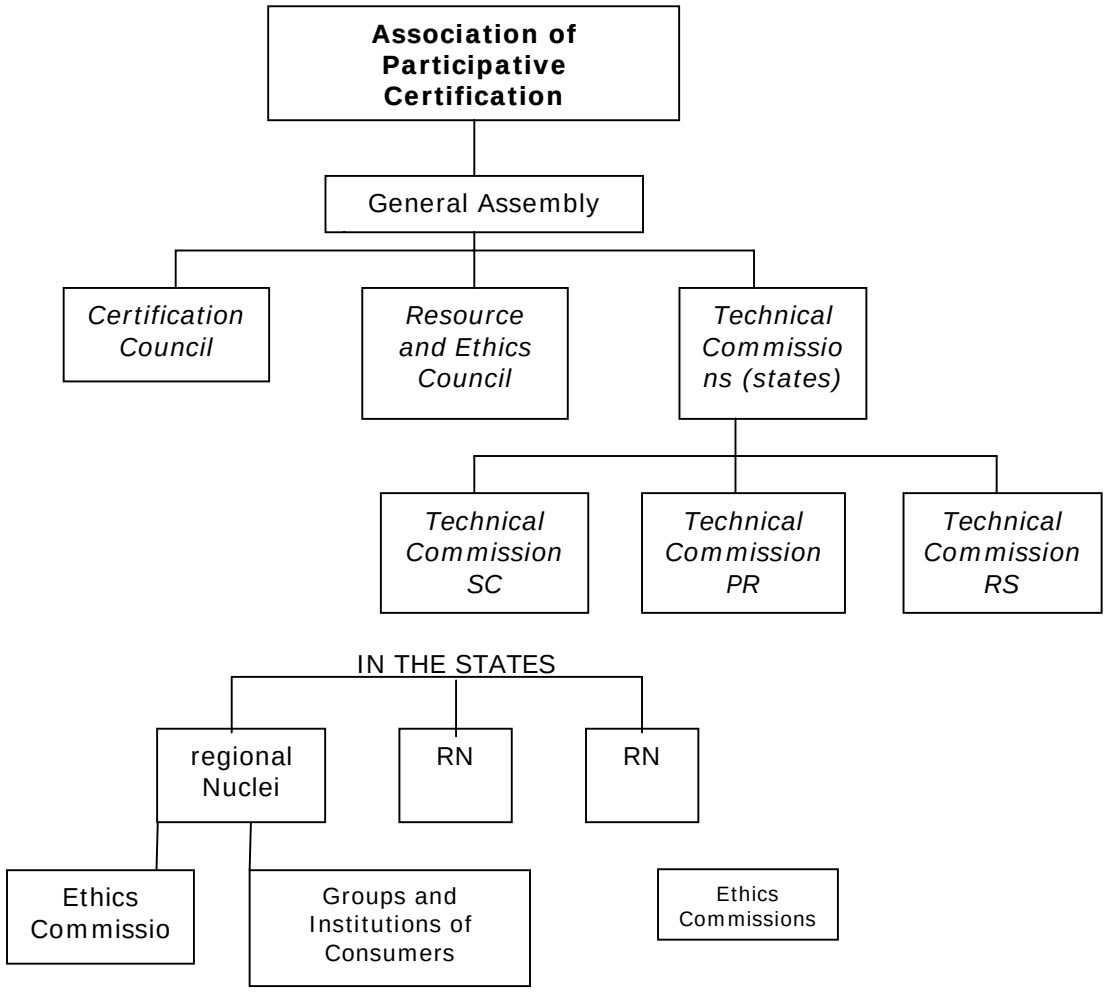
It must fulfil the Statutory Regulations No. 7, approved by the Ministry for Agriculture on May 17th 1999.

It must keep its records updated in cooperation with the State Association of Organic Agriculture and the National Association of Organic Agriculture.

The aspects related to the regulations on the production, use, storage and transportation of products are proposed and approved within the Ecovida Association.

The Association will be solely and exclusively responsible for the actions related to the legalisation of the certification process taking into account the regulations established by the National Association of Organic Agriculture.

Organisational Flowchart of the Association of Participative Certification




Within the regional nuclei, certification structures, such as the Certification Council or the Ethics Commission are created in accordance with the local reality and the needs of each nucleon.

The Ethics Commission (in the groups of farmers and/or regional nuclei) consists of farmers and group technicians and its main aim is to enforce the technical regulations of ecological production in the network; to supervise the system of agroecological production of the group members; to approve or not of the procedures implemented of the group members; to define the quality standards for food products and other criteria applicable to the group.

The Technical Commissions are created at state level and consist of consultancy organisations of the Ecovida network. Their role is to revise and to come up with periodical update proposals for the technical regulations on ecological/organic production of food products within the Association and to technically assess the quality of production and manipulation processes of food and other products.

The certification council analyses the opinions of the technical commissions and regional nuclei, suggest the necessary modifications and adjustments, approves the final certification, organises and updates the censuses of environmentalist farmers and their organisations and organises the supply of seals and certificates.

The resource and ethics council is responsible for the establishment of punishments for those that are not in compliance with the established regulations and it also makes the final decision about the appeals lodged by certification applicants.

## Conclusion

The alternatives that are presently arising with regard to the different activities of family-run agriculture in the Southern region of Brazil, from the production system to the marketing process of the obtained products, are the result of the lack of satisfaction and the creative need of the stakeholders involved with regard to the economic, social, political and environmental impact provoked by the agricultural model established in Brazil.

However, this is not only a matter of technological changes, but also in the roles played by men, women, young and elderly people within the communities they belong to, promoting the autonomy of farmers and their organisations in the productive processes.

Within this particular context, networks become a dynamic tool for transition of the rural economy by means of the development of Short Marketing Chains (SMCs). SMCs are active building process of the market, which eliminate or minimise the presence of go-betweens. They enrich participative credibility-raising systems and they promote local supply networks.

Halfway through 1998, the *Rede Ecovida de Agroecologia* was created in order to strengthen and legitimise pre-existing certifying processes and to comply with the requirements of the Ministry for Agriculture with regard to production, marketing and certification of organic products.

Nevertheless, it is also a network for the organisation of family farmers and their organisations, consultancy bodies, professionals, and people involved or supporting the production, processing, marketing and consumption of ecological food. One of its main aims is to create legitimate credibility-raising mechanisms, which will guarantee and support the processes developed by its members.

In the political field, which is considered the main obstacle for the dissemination of more sustainable and productive agricultural systems, there is still a lot to do. However, the State of Rio Grande do Sul was the only one in the southern region of the country to prioritise family-run farming and agroecology by means of programmes developed by the Secretary of Agriculture and Supply. Examples of programmes, such as PANPA (improvement of fair and exhibition infrastructures, publication of dissemination material, market surveys and research work), RIO GRANDE ECOLÓGICO (training courses, property restructuring) and PRO-GUAÍBA (reforestation, conservation areas) prove the commitment of the public administrations to help to achieve a transition towards ecological agriculture.

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