

Documenting agroecology: a competition in Brazil

Francisco Roberto Caporal

In 2003, the Ministry of Agrarian Development in Brazil launched a new national policy on technical assistance and rural extension. The policy was developed through a democratic and participatory process which included consultations, public meetings and workshops, involving representatives from social movements, small scale farm families, governmental and non-governmental agricultural extension workers as well as other stakeholders. The process involved more than 100 interested organisations and more than 500 people contributed to the policy. The policy is based on the following five principles:

- To ensure that rural extension and technical assistance are provided as a public service for small scale farmers and other producers in order to strengthen family based agriculture. The service should be free of charge and of high quality.
- To contribute to sustainable rural development.
- To make use of a multidisciplinary and interdisciplinary approach to agricultural development; building on participatory approaches and the principles of agroecology.
- To establish a managerial approach which allows for more democratic decision-making processes and contributes to the strengthening of civil society.
- To develop lasting educational processes for everyone involved in sustainable agriculture.

These principles reflect the government's new vision of sustainable agriculture and development, embracing local knowledge and participatory approaches. This drastic change was partly a response to unsatisfactory experiences with the Green Revolution "packages" of farming technologies. Although based on scientific findings, tested on research stations, and promoted by the extension service, they often were not suitable options for the specific circumstances of small farmers, nor were they based in their reality. The aim of this new policy is also to contribute to the empowerment of rural communities and to change the relationships between farmer families and extension agents to one that allows mutual sharing and learning from everyday experiences. This is, however, only possible if there is a shift in the way people think. The Department of Technical Assistance and Rural Extension therefore developed a series of training initiatives for extension agents, making additional and alternative knowledge and skills available to them. To date, at least 5500 extension agents, representing all states across Brazil, have taken part in some form of training on the basic concepts and principles of the new national policy.

Finding field experiences

In 2004, it was realised that additional strategies were necessary to speed up the implementation of the new policy. As a result, the Department developed an agroecological programme to directly support family-based ecological agriculture. As part of this programme, a nationwide competition for documenting alternative experiences in agriculture was held. Through this competition, which was the first of its kind to be organised by the Federal Government, it was hoped to identify many field experiences related to the implementation of the principles of agroecology. Experiences in agriculture, livestock, small-scale fishery and other aquaculture enterprises implemented

throughout the country, were all welcome. Ultimately, this would provide a comprehensive collection of relevant, real-life experiences and references which could be made available to everyone interested.

Together with the announcement of the competition, the Department provided basic guidelines as well as some definitions. It was explained that the "documentation of an experience" meant a critical reflection on an experience or

Box 1. Criteria for judging entries in the documentation competition

1. Quality of the text (flow, clarity, structure)
2. The methodology used in all phases of the experience is logical and coherent
3. The experience demonstrates that it is technically and/or economically viable
4. The methodology used contributed to the increased participation of the community (e.g. increased empowerment, involvement in decision-making, and implementation)
5. Level of community involvement in the documenting of this experience – this document expresses the knowledge of all those involved
6. Experience was carried out in partnership between government and non-governmental organisation (s)
7. The experience has potential to be a reference point for others working in this theme
8. The experience shows innovations related to environmental sustainability
9. The experience values the participation of social actors in every phase of implementation
10. The experience values the knowledge of all social actors
11. Social importance of the experience – demonstrates improvement to the life of the community involved
12. Economic importance of the experience – demonstrates improvements in food security, income and job opportunities
13. Environmental importance of the experience – demonstrates evidence of how many of the following gains: a) soil management, with increased fertility and reduction of erosion, b) improvement of water, c) better use of locally available resources, d) reduction in clearing of land or trees, or recuperation of unused land and e) reduction or elimination of the use of fire)

Each criteria was judged on a scale of 0 to 2. For example:

The experience shows innovations related to environmental sustainability

No evidence: 0 points

Some evidence: 1 point

Clear evidence: 2 points.

Box 2. Examples of winning entries

Project: Production and improvement of local variety maize seeds "Crioulo" in family agriculture in Santa Catarina
Organisation: Centro Vianei de Educação Popular

Project: Communal Medicinal Plant Garden
Organisation: MST/AESCA Agricultural Cooperation Association of Minas Gerais

Project: Sustainable Forest management in the interior with small rural producers in Moxotó
Organisation: APNE- Associação de Plantas do Nordeste, Pernambuco

Project: Technical Course in Agroecology and sustainable development – A methodological proposal for vocational training
Organisation: ASSESSOAR – Associação de Estudos, Orientação e Assistência Rural, Paraíba

Project: System of collective commercialisation based in Cooperation and Agroecology
Organisation: ECOTERRA Associação Regional da Cooperação e Agroecologia, Rio Grande do Sul

activity. It would also include examining the steps followed during the experience, and analysing and presenting the material and results logically and clearly, in order to learn from the experience as a whole.

Documentation competition

The competition was announced on the Department's website, and sent to more than 3000 of the Department's e-mail contacts, including almost all of the NGOs working in the rural development sector and organisations in their networks, as well as governmental agencies, university lecturers and some farmer representatives. The fifty best experiences would be awarded a respectable prize of 20 000 reais (approximately US\$ 9000) each. The prize was intended to support the continuation of activities in line with the documented agro-ecological experience, and would be made available to the group or organisation behind the experience after the presentation of a proposal for the continuation.

During the four months that the competition was open, a total of 127 documented experiences were received, prepared by 82 different organisations. The assessment of these entries began in August 2005. With assistance from professionals in this field, a format with thirteen evaluation criteria was developed to support the assessment (see Box 1). In this way, the transparency of the process and the assessments was also ensured. Several people working in the field of agroecology in Brazil, and who had experience with documentation, were contacted by the Department and invited to take up the responsibility of assessing the experiences. Each of the documents submitted for the competition was assessed by two different persons. If these two persons had given widely differing scores, a decisive opinion of a third person was sought. The process of assessing all 127 documents took longer than expected as most of the evaluators had to do this voluntary task alongside their regular daily work.

Sharing the knowledge

Eventually, the 50 winning entries of the documentation competition were announced. The documents were made available on the Department's website, and there are also plans to produce a publication with some selected highlights. All the 127 documents entered in this competition will be made available on the website of *Agroecologia em Rede*, which contains a database with information on research and field experiences in agroecology.

Lessons learnt

The relatively small number of entries in relation to the large number of projects implemented in Brazil indicates that the majority of organisations connected to the Department, whether governmental or non-governmental, are not in the habit of recording the processes that they are carrying out. A contributing factor to the low number of entries may also have been that the competition was only announced on the internet. In a country like Brazil, where many organisations still do not have access to this means of communication, this was clearly not sufficient.

The documented experiences did not, in general, express the participation of the farmers in the process. This shows that the participative processes are not effective, something which deserves greater attention in the training of extension agents.

However, aside from the initial difficulties experienced with any first attempt, this initiative has demonstrated that the government can contribute to encouraging the processes of documentation and dissemination of knowledge based on agroecological experiences. Nevertheless, we think that the government, as promoter of a new competition such as this, should work together with the *Articulação Nacional de Agroecologia* (National Network of Agroecology) and the *Associação Brasileira de Agroecologia* (Brazilian Association of Agroecology).

We believe that the initiative was valid and deserves to be repeated. It is important to continue with initiatives that encourage the documentation and dissemination of experiences in agroecology to increase the awareness of this important theme.

Finally, it is important to point out that initiatives like this can, through an effective method of participatory documentation, contribute to giving a voice those directly involved in agroecological activities, such as social activists, farmers, and technicians. ■

Francisco Roberto Caporal. General Coordinator, Department of Technical Assistance and Rural Extension, Ministry of Agrarian Development, Government of Brazil. E-mail: francisco.caporal@mda.gov.br

The results of the documentation competition with the 50 winners listed are available at <http://www.pronaf.gov.br/dater>, as "Resultado do Concurso Nacional de Sistematização de Experiências".