The Xique-Xique Network towards sustainability and solidarity

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Abstract. The industrialized food system holds considerable power over some of the most important aspects of our societies, such as health, environment, economy, culture and politics, though their main focus is private profit. In response to issues related to the production and distribution of goods alternative initiatives are emerging all over the world related to the creation of a food systems that promotes solidarity, diversity, democracy. This paper looked at an organization emerged from a group of women members of the Landless Movement called Rede Xique-Xique. The study presents data from a recent interview conducted with a community organizer involved with the Network, also includes records from previous unpublished research, consisting of a participant observation conducted in 2011. The study found that the network organization brought improvements to the living conditions of farmers and voice to a rather invisible portion of the population.

1. Introduction

The Northeast is a region of Brazil that has been marked by a longstanding history of exclusion history. The last Census from the Instituto Brasileiro de Geografia e Estatística-IBGE [1], revealed once more that the lowest wages in Brazil comes from this region. The reason for these regional disparities will not be discussed in this paper as they are complex and are rooted in the Brazilian colonization and industrialization processes, the last of which was took place when with national efforts to buy a ready to be implemented industry was concentrated, and resulted in the industrialization of only a few regions in the southeast supporting inequality. Some areas in the countryside of the northeast have suffered from severe water shortage for decades. According to Almeida, Tavares and De Jesus et al [2], this is due to a natural desertification process of the area, accompanied by excessive activity of exploitation and depletion of natural resources. The lack of infrastructure and public policies to support better living conditions and to deal with these long periods of droughts in the semi-arid regions have contributed to the continuous impoverishment of this area.

In spite of the odds, something is booming in the region, the mapping of solidarity economy enterprises published by the IBGE [3] reveals that the Northeast accounts for 40% of all the solidarity economy organizations in the country. In addition, the study shows that the majority of these organizations are located in rural areas, suggesting solidarity economy as an alternative answer to struggling communities.

This case study aims to look at the aspects of how community organization happened in response to the effects of exclusion and capital accumulation in the industrialized food system, focusing in the grassroots organization that emerged from a group of women member of the Landless Movement.
called Rede Xique-Xique de Economia Solidaria Xique-Xique Network of Solidarity Economy - XXN located in the semi-arid region of Brazil in the state of Rio Grande do Norte – RN.

2. Methodology
This paper is composed of a literature review to introduce the the effects of the globalized food industry particularly in Brazil and the solidarity economy alternative models that emerged and developed in response to crises. The study presents data from an interview conducted via Google hangout with a community organizer and popular educator currently involved with the XXN through a rural development agency called Association for Assistance of Peasants Communities - AACC. In addition, also includes records from previous research, which consisted of a participant observation and a survey conducted in 2011 [4], with family farmers members of the Xique Xique network, from the settlement of São Miguel do Gostoso also located in the state of RN.

This paper is presented in five parts: The introduction, the methodology, the Thesis Statement, the Literature review, The Data and Fieldwork and Final Considerations.

2.1. Thesis Statement
The ‘Food’ topic has become very popular in the media, market adds, academia, environmentalist discourses and lately even the first lady Michelle Obama’s agenda, making its significance obvious. In fact, if I could name one system that holds considerable power over some of the most important aspects of our societies, such as health, environment, economy, culture and politics, it would be our complex and highly industrialized and globalized food system.

In this sense this article observed the effects of the development of the agroindustry sector in the world and more specially in Brazil and how the solidarity economy alternative models have been responding to the issues in the northeast of the country, particularly regarding sustainability in the family farming practices of a group of farm workers from the Landless Movement - MST called Rede Xique-xique.

3. Literature Review
A need for a globalized food system is usually sold as the only way to feed a rapidly growing population. Based on monoculture, by high technology and large scale production they can achieve high profitability and sell products at lower prices. However, at what social, moral, economic and environmental costs?

3.1. Effects of a Globalized Food System in the Economy, Health, Environment, Culture and Politics.
“The agro-industrial farming system has been spectacularly successful at encouraging uniformity, destroying diversity, polluting soil and water, corroding human health and impoverishing farm labour” [5].

Sandy Brown and Christy Getz [6] described the cruel contradiction within California agribusiness in which hunger affects the very people who work in the production of food of the most productive state in the United States. Inequality and scarcity have nothing to do with the amount of production, it is the distribution that causes hunger to even the food-producing workers and other low income population. Brown and Getz [6] concluded that these conditions are the result of the agrarian capital accumulation that has been constructed within our economic and political system though neoliberal trade policies such as free trade agreements and immigration politics.

Food Alienation is also a characteristic of the society in the globalized food era. Where does food come from? The supermarkets! Human disconnection with the food cycle was promoted by the market with the help of government authorities. Alworth [7] discourses about the surge of the ‘supermarket centers’ as part of the ‘Marshall Plan’ after World War II, the period of “the industrialization, fragmentation, and anomie of modernity” [7], The supermarket was designed and continually evolved to became a place that promoted entertainment and emotionally satisfying activities in order to trigger more consumption and time expenditure, reorganizing the social interactions of production, distribution and sales of goods.
Although they are still largely ignored by policymakers and mainstream media and other agencies who deal with agricultural and environmental issues they continue to grow in past 3 decades. In response to crises and in an attempt to regain social connections, related to the production and distribution of goods, small farmworkers, indigenous people and other members of civil society all over the world have been building alternative food systems that promotes solidarity, diversity, democracy and food justice, although they are still largely ignored by policymakers and mainstream media and other agencies who deal with agricultural and environmental issues they continue to grow and gain attention as grassroots movements. Singer [11] talks about popular movements for agrarian reform that had been on going for a long time in Brazil, it was heavily repressed and lost power during the dictatorial coup that took place between 1964 and 1985 and regain strength between the latest 1970s and the beginning of the 1980s as the military regime weakened, as a result in 1984 the Landless Workers Movement - MST was created initially with the main focus of resolving the land distribution issues on individual bases, through land settlement, however the soon realized that turning landless workers into small holders of land in an inefficient manner and usually only in response to popular manifestation. The country suffers from infrastructure problems especially outside the major cities and that gives place to precarious agricultural working conditions that contributes to the rural exodus and increases social inequality in the cities. The agribusiness sector does not contribute to poverty reduction or to improve food and nutrition security in the country, since agribusiness in Brazil adopts large scale approach and export orientation [10]. Family farming in the other hand, employs almost 75% of the rural labor and is responsible for Brazilians’ food safety, as it provides the basic food products consumed by most [1]. According to the 2006 Census the agribusiness held 15.6% of the total number of farm establishments that occupied 75.7% of the cultivable area in the country. Family farmers presented similar inverted numbers, they accounted for 84.4% of the total number of establishments and occupied 24.3% area of arable area of the country. The average size of family farms was 18.37 ha, and the traditional, of 309.18 ha. The results of Census showed the concentrated agrarian structure.

3.2. Alternatives Approaches to the Industrial Food System
In response to crises and in an attempt to to regain social connections, related to the production and distribution of goods, small farmworkers, indigenous people and other members of civil society all over the world have been building alternative food systems that promotes solidarity, diversity, democracy and food justice, although they are still largely ignored by policymakers and mainstream media and other agencies who deal with agricultural and environmental issues they continue to grow and gain attention as grassroots movements. Singer [11] talks about popular movements for agrarian reform that had been on going for a long time in Brazil, it was heavily repressed and lost power during the dictatorial coup that took place between 1964 and 1985 and regain strength between the latest 1970s and the beginning of the 1980s as the military regime weakened, as a result in 1984 the Landless Workers Movement - MST was created initially with the main focus of resolving the land distribution issues on individual bases, through land settlement, however the soon realized that turning landless workers into small holders of land in an isolated family farmer unit, made production, sales and even subsistence difficult, thus not enough to improve the lives of the rural workers, and some of the settled had to give up their land. Thereafter, in 1989 started promoting organization and market of settlements thru formation of associations and cooperatives, subsequently the MST deemed settlement organization as important as land distribution. Presently the rural settlements in Brazil, especially the ones organized by the MST, represents spaces for the adoption of agro ecological principles and practices as as they have an agrarian social structure based on the family unit, associative and cooperative practices and ecological-environmental concerns.
4. Case Study Presentation and Discussion

The XXN is an solidarity economy association, founded on the semi-arid region of Northeast Brazil. The network started in 1999, with a group of women from a land settlement called Mulungunzinho in Mossoro, Rio Grande do Norte - RN, it began as many solidarity initiatives, brainstorming ideas on how to generate income through collective production to overcome hardship. Agriculture was part of their daily lives and traditions, thus they opted for the production and market of organic goods. According to the association online portal, the network today has urban and rural workers from settlements across the RN state, organized in more than fifty production groups articulated in 19 municipal market centers (Org. Portal: Rede Xiquexique).

4.1. Xique-xique Network in the Farmer’S Voices

In 2011, I and a fellow popular educator Gerlane Silva [4] conducted a research aimed at identifying the social impacts of the participation of farmers in the XXN from the farmers’ point of view, at one of the network’s center, the São Miguel do Gostoso Center, in a small rural municipality of RN which in 2008 the census assessed of having a population of 9,093 inhabitants [1].

We talked to members of small production groups from the Xique-Xique Network, one of the groups we approached worked with catering services and told us that the political support of the network ensured the quota of 30% of the municipal public school meal program be provided by members of the network. By law at least 30% the municipal public school meals, when available, should be provided by local producers, however often times the local producers are not aware of the law or how to contract with the public authorities and the program does not fulfill its purpose.

Another member shared the experience of continuous learning through the meetings between members of the network and attributed her daughter’s admission in the State University of Rio Grande do Norte - UERN to her participation in these meetings, she added that her daughter was the first in her family to ever attend an University. A group formed by family farmers stated that been part of the network had enabled them to sell their produce directly to the customers in the Xique-Xique farmers market. Separately their production would be to small and they had been accustomed to sell the surplus of production to middlemen.

In one of the conversations, a farmer talked about feminism and how the participation in the network changed her life as she could now actively participate in the community, in her own words, “We are happy because now we know ourselves… we are real women who did not know what we were before”. One of the Xique-xique’s network principles is feminism, and it reaches remote areas where women still ask the permission of their husband to talk in public. Apparently the discovery of respect and of women's rights brought a search for independence and recognition to some feminine members of this community.

Overall the participants declared that the network brought improvements to their living conditions, however, they still facing many issues related to basic infra-structure and access to health and education they also complained about the lack of technical support in some areas, for instance in the process of producing and saving organic seeds.

4.2. Xique-xique Network from a Development Agent’S View

The second part of this case study is based on an interview conducted on April 12th 2015, with Lidiane Freire a popular educator graduated in social economy that gives support to the XXN as a community development agent, she is commissioned by the AACC – Association for Assistance of Peasants Communities, a non profit organization that has partnership with the federal government, they obtain funds from public and private sources. The interview was conducted in Portuguese, then translated and edited to allow for better understanding.

She was asked about her experience as an agent of community development and solidarity economy within the XXN. Lidiane Freire started by recalling how the terms popular education and social economy seemed to be strange for the farmers. “They do not use these terms, we have begun to discuss them in workshops just recently”. However, in the agent’s view their construction of knowledge comes from sharing experiences and collective work. The management process is horizontal, not because they know the concepts of popular education and social economy, but because
of their constitution as working owners. “It is just their cultural attitude” (my own translation of quote from the interview with Lidiane Freire).

Lately Freire have been working with the National Register for the Development of Solidarity Economy, as the agency AACC have recognized the need to give an identity to small groups, both formal and informal, so they can be recognized by the government and have access to new social policies focused at the solidarity economy sector. She also facilitates workshops with the communities involved in the XXN groups. These workshops involve reflections about their quotidian, the demands to be solved throughout collective development of strategies to overcome the issues. “They invite me to facilitate workshops about solidarity economy, based on work I have done with other production groups, sometimes, I feel like they expect I will bring salvation.” (my own translation of quote from the interview with Lidiane Freire)

When Lidiane started working with the network some members said they had never heard about the term solidarity economy. However, as they talked about their experience and the ways they relate to each other, She showed them that they already knew, because they rely on each other, they unify to overcome community demands, and that is the basis of solidarity economy. For Lidiane “Solidarity economy does not come from rich people, it comes from people who do not feel included in the capitalist system, although they do not make this analysis, and do not appoint capitalism itself as a problem, they seek collectively to overcome the difficulties that resulted from their exclusion of this economic organization.” (my own translation of quote from the interview with Lidiane Freire). In addition, in relation to capitalism there is a difference between the groups located in cities and the ones in rural areas. In the cities there is an oscillation between employment rates and the solidarity economy when there is higher unemployment there is a boom in social economy. In the urban areas, the groups are usually composed of young participants who are unemployed for a period, they seek solidarity economy as an immediate remedy for the lack of resources. However, as soon as opportunity arises for a job, even if it is not a good one, they usually go for it. She reported: “We lost almost all groups in the capital Natal, because the cost to do business is too high and people get scared.” Solidarity economy is seen as a tool for generating immediate income. In Freire’s opinion a down point is there is still no political understanding that Solidarity is simply a better way to organize society, a way to establish a kind of relation with the economy, which rescues principles of justice that were denied and hidden by capitalism. However she points out that this issue occurs mostly in urban groups, as in rural communities the members are naturally organized in solidarity, “I think that is because the situation of exclusion of small farmers is historical” (my own translation of quote from the interview with Lidiane Freire).

The network started with a group of women from the Mulunguzinho settlement they decided to produce greens and the network was thought as a space to commercialize the production, they sought articulation with other production groups to gather resources to make it a possibility. Later on, they saw the need and the opportunity to have more variety on the same market place, therefore they invited groups from other MST settlements with different type products and became a network. The majority of the participants are women, especially in the small production groups. Within the network cultural differences and knowledge are generally welcomed. However, when a participant’s practices go against the network’s principles, it generates conflict. Usually it happens when one family decides to produce in a conventional way to decrease loss by using pesticides, or when someone decides to lower their prices generating unfair competition between members. The problems are brought into the round table discussion at the local meetings at municipal center. After the discussion, the center deliberates time limits for the violations to be corrected, and perhaps attend to the needs and support the participants in solving the problems cause. Lidiane concludes that what happens in these cases is that the participant either leaves the network or corrects the infractions, thus decisions are always made at the round table.

This year the XXN completed ten years of operation and according to Lidiane Freire, the feelings of the participants at the anniversary forum were of optimism. They have grown stronger, and the network is now a reference of solidarity economy in the northeast because of its democratic form of organization.
5. Final Considerations

The creation and development of the globalized industrial agricultural system in much of the last hundred years has made people disconnected to nature and the cycle associated with the production and distribution of food. A competitive market for profit and the accumulation of capital at any cost is no longer the means to an end but humanity socio-economic goal itself. In this process many groups have been excluded and some sought to create alternative to this form of organization.

Unlike many top down policies intended to support family farmers, but unable to reach the most remote communities, in a larger country such as Brazil, the Xique-xique Network’s reach, appear to have given voice to people that otherwise would be invisible, specially women. However, this reach is limited. The settlement visited was still visibly marginalized and uses rudimentary tools and no machinery in their trade, some families still have limited access to electricity. They complained about the lack of technical support related to production, specially to produced organic seeds. Small scale family farming in organic agriculture needs as much access to technology and infrastructure as the industrial system does and it is available today but inaccessible to most. I agree with Halweil, when he states that “organic farming is a sophisticated combination of old wisdom and modern ecological innovations… It's heavily dependent on technology just not the technology that comes out of a chemical plant.”[12].

The farm workers from Xique-xique network, reached to solidarity economy as a last resource to withstand hardship and exclusion, driven by a long period of oppression, prejudice and disinformation. However, it seems that the people observed in this study, see their practices as a way to overcome their marginalized condition, but not so much as a logical, even honorable and sustainable way to organize societies and natural resources. This may be due to the absence of entrepreneurship and the fear of co-responsibility. Self-management sometimes does not seem as easy task. Thus without understanding that solidarity is not only a emergency alternative, some prefer to go back to the dependence of a superior entity, even if they do not have their best interest in mind. Historically, most have been educated to have employers and to serve them as they need it. Thus, without the understanding that solidarity economy is not just a temporarily fix it up, is in fact a better way to participate in society, I am afraid the alternative will never become the main stream.

Although this case study does not represent an generalization of the profile of members of the MST, is worth mentioning the fact that the production groups from XXN came from land settlements of the MST, an characteristic itself that presents difficulties and possibilities. Difficulties because without means of production land acquisition itself is just the first step of a long journey into self-determination, therefore the government and civil society have to play a large role for its successful realization. The possibilities in other hand are related to the nature of the agricultural reform pursued by the MST and observed in this case study. One of the conditions for the redistribution of the parcels of land to families is that the land must be used for agriculture purposes. Also, these parcels are usually part of a larger acreage that is then divided between families from the same social movement [13]. Thus by default, this process of agrarian reform is creating communities of small-scale producers that in some way share the MST values, which includes solidarity economy and agro-ecology, two very important features to create a sustainable food system. According to the MST online portal, so far, three hundred and fifty thousand families have been granted land. This number signifies the importance of the success of this land reorganization to a reconfiguration of the communities in the society.

Food systems are a social whole and are the forefront of our society organization, capable of bringing both the wellbeing and the demise of the human race and the environment. “Food is not simply the outcome of the agricultural system, is rarely just body fuel; rather, it is something which drastically separates us and fundamentally brings us together”[14].

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