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Agroecological transitions: a case study of the Terra Vista Settlement

Master Thesis

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Abstract

Agroecology is widely considered a powerful tool for transforming food systems and a key element for a growing emancipatory movement that seeks to strengthen rural people's power and control over their own production systems. Using the case of a successful transition to agroecology in Brazil, I combined theoretical concepts on rural social movements and agroecology to analyse the transition process and the scaling potential. The case study focuses on the Terra Vista Settlement, located in north-eastern Brazil, and one of the members of the Landless Rural Workers Movement (MST). The land, a former cocoa monoculture, was occupied in 1992 and the settlers pursued an industrial agricultural model, producing conventionally and consequently further degrading the settlement's environment. Faced with a social, economic, and environmental crisis, the settlement started the agroecological transition in 2000. This research aimed at understanding how did the settlement transition to agroecology, identifying main enablers and challenges, how do different actors perceived agroecology and whether the settlement has the potential to scale agroecology. The research is a qualitative case study approach and used Participatory Rural Appraisal (PRA) techniques. Data collection consisted of 14 narrative interviews and 14 days of fieldwork. To elicit the transition process, I used a time spiral. Grounded theory concepts were applied to data analysis. The time spiral showed that the transition has been a very long process in which education, collective and women's emancipation played a special role. Rather than being a linear process, it is cyclical and ongoing and now moves towards seeking for autonomy and sovereignties (food, energy, and water). The findings show that agroecology is a way of life and a fight against hegemonic powers, rather than a set of agricultural practices. Results also demonstrated that the settlement has the potential to scale agroecology, however there is a lack of public policies promoting agroecological production and a lack of favourable markets (e.g., alternative food networks). Finally, agroecology was crucial in overcoming a crisis; it is political and has proven to be key for building a resilient food system. For further research, I recommend in-depth studies on the agronomic and ecological factors in the agroecological transition of the Terra Vista Settlement.

Key words: Agroecology, agroecological transitions, MST, rural social movements, scaling agroecology, food systems, food sovereignty.