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Municipal rural development plans in Brazil: working within the politics of participation

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Meeting of CTA-ZM's Local Development Programme to systematise experiences in three municipalities of participatory municipal planning

Background

In Brazil, recent years have seen the growth of the municipal level as a critical focus for action. At State and national levels, municipalities represent a strategic unit of intervention for local development. Representing the lowest level of elected Government (see Table 1), municipal initiatives and partnerships are increasingly the focus of investment by Federal and State Government policies and programmes and the arena of NGO action. The elaboration of municipal development plans and implementation of municipal management councils are preconditions for receiving certain resources from national or State-level agencies.

One organisation at the forefront of developing **participatory** municipal rural development plans (MRDP) is the Centre for Alternative Technologies (CTA), a local NGO working on alternative futures for and with rural smallholders in the Zona da Mata of Minas Gerais, Brazil. Founded in 1987 by marginalized farmers, their trade unions, and committed agricultural professionals, CTA now encompasses many activities, one of which is the Local Development Programme (LDP) that focuses on MRDPs. CTA staff work on this programme in three municipalities:



Photo: CTA-ZM

Araponga, Tombos, and Acaiaca. This article compares the three municipal planning processes, offering them as an exciting alternative methodology for local development in the Brazilian context.

Municipal development plans as a social innovation in Brazil

CTA's working context

The Zona da Mata of Minas Gerais covers 143 municipalities, of which 128 have a population of less than 20,000.

¹ Centro de Tecnologias Alternativas – Zona da Mata (Centre for Alternative Technologies of the Zona da Mata).

Table 1: Levels of local administration in Uganda and their roles

Level	Approx population	Structure	Role
National	170 million.	Directly elected president with a national constituency and a bicameral National Congress (an 81-seat Federal Senate and a 513-seat Chamber of Deputies).	National policies for all sectors, national budgeting.
State	Ranging from 325,000 to 37.3 million.	26 administrative states and the Federal District of Brasília.	Strong Federalist system gives strong powers to State, especially to governors (directly elected) who control budgets and thousands of jobs, with few checks and balances.
Municipal	From several hundred to 10.5 million (Sao Paulo city, the world's fifth largest municipality).	5,581 municipalities, with four-yearly hotly contested elections determining which of the 26 official political parties will provide the (deputy) mayor (who appoints the departmental secretaries) and councillors that form the municipal council.	The only level of local government. Responsible for its own municipal development planning and implementing urban and rural services (health, agriculture, environment, education, infrastructure). Can seek State/national funding. The mayor holds executive power (supported by municipal secretaries) and is considered the local political boss. Legislative power is exercised by the municipal council.

Smallholder agriculture represents a large proportion of production and of the number of properties, although not of total land area given the skewed land tenure relationships. The region is marked by chronic environmental degradation – deforestation, soil erosion, poor sanitation and waste disposal, and intense use of agrotoxins – threatening livelihood security for poor households. Smallholders generally expect little or no support from municipal councils as, in most cases, mayors and secretaries have been large landholders or their supporters and most voters live in the towns and have urban rather than rural concerns.

CTA has worked for 15 years in developing viable alternatives with rural workers unions and their smallholder members (CTA, 2002). Legally a non-profit civil association, the organisation aims to strengthen smallholder organisations, promote equity of social relations, and influence public policy by promoting public debate about sustainable agriculture and documenting good practices.

CTA's evolution to municipal planning

CTA has not always focused on the municipal level. Originally working through farmer groups but with limited impacts, in 1997 it deliberately chose to concentrate on a handful of municipalities to understand how this larger scale of action could lead to more sustained and widespread improvements. By facilitating municipal dialogue

and analysis, the idea is to establish more diverse civil society-government partnerships that can increase the voice of poor local rural communities in designing rural development public policies.

The first steps were taken in Araponga in 1996, when the rural trade union *Sindicato dos Trabalhadores Rurais* (STR)² of Araponga turned its attention to the theme of 'local development' moving beyond the traditional role of ensuring pensions and documents for its members. Their first participatory rural appraisal (PRA) in 1994 (Fária, 1994), facilitated by CTA and local university students, resulted in a 28-point STR-specific plan of action. But the absence of victories for union leaders in municipal council elections provoked an analysis of the limitations of a development plan that was only supported by the union. They recognised the need to collaborate with municipal authorities if a local development plan was to gain a significant level of support and resources.

Two years later, the LDP process started in Tombos when CTA signed a convention with the municipal council and farmers' organisations to facilitate the formulation and implementation of an MRDP and provide technical assistance to farmers. The process in Acaiaca started in 2000, where the embryonic STR invited CTA to help facilitate participatory appraisal and planning for developing a municipal plan that could help guide the newly installed pro-poor municipal council (CTA, 2001).

Currently, CTA sees the LDP work it supports as primarily a 'learning laboratory' to understand, document, and

² STRs are membership organisations, operate at the municipal level (and are federated at State/national levels), and are the most accepted, democratically elected body that represents smallholder agriculture.

Meeting of CTA-ZM's Local Development Programme to systematise experiences in three municipalities of participatory municipal planning



Photo: CTA-ZM

Meeting with Rural Workers union, Municipal Council, councillors and other organizations – Local Development Programme, CTA-ZM.



Photo: CTA-ZM

disseminate different political-methodological experiences that could inspire other municipalities in the region and other NGOs in Brazil in pro-poor local development.

CTA's vision for pro-poor municipal planning

CTA's core strategy is to support pro-poor farmers' organisations in developing and facilitating participatory processes for formulating and implementing an MRDP. Both CTA and its local partners see these plans, and in particular the processes they require, as practical ways to improve the implementation of State and Federal-level programmes of smallholder support. They emphasise methodologies that can improve the often-polarised inter-institutional relationships and help smallholders to articulate needs in forums where decisions are made.

CTA's local development work is based on a deep-rooted political vision of rights, the value of societal debate, environmental sustainability, and the urgency of practical options for poor smallholders. Working initially with PRA and farmer participatory research, CTA and its partners had perceived a ceiling to the impact they were having. Waiting for a pro-poor political party to win council elections became a problematic strategy for scaling-up impact. This fed the idea of MDRPs based on wider partnerships that required creating space for critical reflection, negotiation, and conflict management. Today, the MDRP processes involve continual and elaborate consultation and strategic realignment in which PRA is but one of several important methodologies. Other approaches include political strategising in diverse coalitions, using facilitation skills for engaging effectively with community members, leadership development, participatory popular education programme development, cooperativism and associativism, participatory evaluation and systematisation of experiences, and participatory on-farm technology development.

Building blocks of the CTA-supported MDRP

Participation as a (learning) process

Some critics of PRA paint a caricature of the sloppy and mechanical application of tools within a few days. The practice of CTA staff shows a more elaborate and considered approach to participatory development. They invest up to one year in collective research, negotiation, and debate before priorities for action are formulated.

Many methodologies are woven together – farmer participatory research, PRA, participatory monitoring and evaluation (including socio-economic self-monitoring by farmers) – to develop and implement municipal plans. Each methodology contributes its part, depending on the issue at hand, and is implemented through different structures, which may be more or less permanent.

For example, in Acaiaca, an executive committee was formed to coordinate the PRA and resulting municipal plan. Representatives included EMATER (State agricultural extension agency), CTA, STR, Municipal Council, and the Secretaries of Agriculture, Social Work, and Health. Another example is the participatory systematisation that has been constructed as a temporary series of meetings between local leaders in the three municipalities, facilitated by CTA. It aims to critically review CTA's support to MRDPs and gives union leaders opportunities to refine their strategies of municipal intervention.

Planning process and methodology

Despite the uniqueness of each experience, Araponga, Tombos, and Acaiaca all started with an elaborate three-phase PRA and participatory formulation of an MRDP.

First is a process of getting in touch with potential actors, farming households, and groups in all communities. This 'mobilisation phase' involves contacting communities,

Table 2: Comparing the three municipalities

	Tombos	Araponga	Acaiaca
Area (km ²)	875	304	102
Inhabitants - % rural	11,000 – 30% rural	8,000 – 68% rural	3,900 – 39% rural
Year STR established	1985	1989	1990 (registered in 1994)
Growth in STR membership	875 (1985) to 2,500 (2002)	29 (1993) to 805 (2001)	50 (1990) to 416 (2003)
Role of CTA with STR	Independent of CTA	Established with CTA's help	Independent of CTA
Relationship CTA-STR	Good, long, close ties of mutual help, helped in each other's foundation	Long and close, often with blurred boundaries about respective responsibilities of the two entities	New, with cooperation limited to specific issues. Close, intense links during LDP process.
Main local driver of LDP	APAT (farmers' cooperative created by STR)	STR	Municipal council
Year of (first) municipal PRA	1998	1994, updated in 2001	2001
General state of STR	Centralisation of leadership around same individuals (causing tensions)	Stable, no factions, diversifying leadership (to include youth and women)	Young and fragile, low membership, few leaders

and negotiations and networking between partners to agree on the guiding principles for the local development process and each partner's role. In Acaiaca, this phase took about two months, which led to an executive committee being established and agreement on the methodology.

The second phase, which most people would identify as the 'typical PRA' phase, involves all communities (but not all people!) in the municipality in group meetings and subsequent family interviews. A smaller group, with representatives of various partners, then undertakes the first (sectoral) analysis of issues. In Acaiaca, this took place over a two-month period.

Phase three closes the planning cycle, which involves:

- Providing feedback to each of the communities for additional insights, corrections, debate, and the start of convergence around priorities. In Acaiaca, each community elected three representatives to sit on the Plan Elaboration Committee (a youth, a woman, and a man).
- Deepening, with the committee, the analysis of key problems identified by communities during the initial appraisal phase, identifying causes and consequences of the problems.

- Identifying proposals to resolve problems related to agriculture, environment, infrastructure, health, education, and social assistance.
- Prioritising proposals.

The process and results are documented in a municipal rural development plan, outlining the partners involved, methodology, timeframe, the sector-specific analysis of problems, causes and consequences, and the agreed priority actions. This document becomes the official agreement between civil society organisations and the municipal council.

Working with new partners

In CTA's work, the main players have always been the technical team, the rural workers unions (STRs), and farmer groups. The technical team acted as conveners, methodology-suggesters, and documenters. The STRs take centre stage in the LDP although each has a unique history, maturity, and membership, and maintain different relations with the municipal council (Table 2). Within the LDP, the farmer groups helped research the issues and are now implementing aspects of the plans.

Table 3: Key elements from the three MRDPs

	Araponga	Tombos	Acaiaca
Focus Funding sources	The MRDP is being used by STR to hold the municipal administration accountable to its policies and actions. Agroecological alternatives played a relatively important role in discussions and in formulating proposals.	Income generation via processing and marketing of organic produce (sugarcane and dairy products, coffee).	First attempt to define integrated development strategy. In agriculture, livestock development was key, as was defining the focus of the Secretary of Agriculture and other agricultural partners.
	1st CTA budget for technical agriculture person. 2nd Municipal budget.	1st Municipal budget. 2nd InterAmerican Foundation grant (initially CTA budget for technical agriculture person which later fell under IAF grant).	1st Municipal budget. 2nd Local Agenda 21.

However, as a result of casting the net more widely, the circle of actors has broadened to include a diverse and municipality-specific range of other groups, including in all three cases, the municipal councils themselves. The idea of partnership between a pro-poor union leader and municipal councillors often of the political right has changed so much that in Araponga, the current (right-wing) mayor has invited one of the STR leaders to consider a more formal alliance, already anticipating the votes this may bring in the next elections. While this partnership can be dangerous, it also offers previously unheard of opportunities.

Building accountability structures

A plan, without follow-up, can remain on paper. To ensure continued debate and implementation, CTA and its partners invested in establishing a municipal council for rural development (MCRD), making use of national legislation that encouraged such bodies. The council is responsible for implementing the plan, thus holding everyone accountable to their commitments and monitoring progress. The council also provides a forum where the municipal policies and proposals for rural investment are discussed. The council is composed of representatives from the town council, councillors, agricultural/forestry extension and research services, CTA, STR, and any women's groups or smallholder cooperatives that might exist. Following national guidelines, at least 50% of MCRD members represent smallholder agriculture.

Non-neutral facilitation

CTA was not neutral in the MDRP processes, choosing to invest in pro-poor farmer organisations. During all phases of the appraisal and planning, CTA and the STRs and associations were in constant communication, with CTA working

to build union leaders' capacity to act as effective local protagonists in municipal debates. Various strategies were adopted to enable community representatives, with CTA financial support for transport, to participate in meetings. The participatory methodologies used were designed to facilitate access by farmers to information and enable them to express their concerns.

Learning from diversity

Despite these similarities, the differences were – and continue to be – considerable between Araponga, Tombos, and Acaiaca in terms of initial conditions and evolution. The initial motivation came from different players and involved different numbers of partners, although the STRs were key players in all three. Although PRA and subsequent MRDPs were common methodological elements, the moment at which they were undertaken and the roles of partners in each case varies.

While CTA has maintained the same basic strategy of working via the STRs, local conditions and capacities moulded its role in each process. In Araponga, CTA provided much technical assistance on agroecological innovations and subsequently in the PRA work while, in both Tombos and Acaiaca, the CTA technical team invested more in facilitating the PRA and MRDP processes.

Differences in political relationships, socio-economic, and biophysical variations led in each case to a different role for the plan in terms of rural development (Table 3) and to different opportunities for funding. The Araponga MRDP was viewed by the union movement as an opportunity to hold the municipal council accountable to earlier promises of policies and actions, no longer accepting excuses like 'this can't be done', 'there isn't enough money' from public office holders. In Tombos, the municipal plan was grasped as an

Box 1: Changes in Araponga

Work on an LDP accelerated when CTA contracted a local farmer to take on full-time work for them. As a native of Araponga and familiar with CTA and the STR, he helped close the gap between CTA, STR, and the municipal council. Focusing on a non-political issue – waste disposal – opened the door for other topics to be broached. The STR has grown in respect and is now considered a legitimate civil society partner – resulting in the STR being invited by the municipal council in 2001 to participate in making a MRDP and be a key driver of the MCSRDP. Key tangible impacts include: establishing a farmers' market for organic products and a micro-credit association, increased uptake of organic agriculture, developing a Family Agriculture School, as well as promoting environmental education in 11 primary schools.

opportunity by the union movement to translate their rural income priority into concrete action. In Acaiaca, certain sectors had never had clear policies and actions, so the plan has defined priority actions for the different secretaries.

Key impacts and challenges

From unique beginnings unrolled different processes, each with successes and challenges. Impacts can be found at the political/methodological levels, but also at the concrete in terms of livelihood improvements (see Box 1).

The process of building partnerships and dealing with conflicts, appraisals, and planning is a form of political and methodological capacity-building that is not skill- or issue-specific. These capacities have proven vital to ensure continuity of the participatory spaces needed to implement the MRDP as well as strengthening the management and effectiveness of organisations involved in these participatory processes. Other impacts include: enhancing political maturity beyond the narrow party-bound perspective pervasive throughout Brazil, making viable what were hitherto unlikely partnerships, making the municipal council accountable, developing a collective vision, and increasing the scope of community action to new and more complex issues.

As with any political process, challenges abound. All three municipalities continue to deal with the political, organisational, and financial challenges that they now recognise as shared responsibilities between previously divergent partners. The key political challenge is to ensure that promises are fulfilled, and to maintain alliances (despite the difficulties) and partnerships established during the phase of elaborating the MRDP. The main organisational challenge is to maintain the mechanisms by which families can continue participating in decision-making processes. Financially, they all struggle with ensuring sufficient resources to enable ongoing implementation of the plan.

Meeting to detail one of the municipal level plans in the context of the Local Development Programme of CTA-ZM



Photo: CTA-ZM

Conclusions

CTA is now investing considerable effort in ensuring that these lessons learnt are carried, not just by the technical team, but by all partners. This collective sense-making process has helped to value the unique differences, and thereby avoids the idea that there is a single formula or model that can be followed.

Clearly, the participatory municipal-level planning described here is shaped by the dynamics of political process and the existing social and historical patterns of communication and domination. Of course, one says! But this is significant for those trying to standardise the experience into a set of steps, as will inevitably happen as efforts to scale up such localised experiences emerge. It cannot be 'methodologised' nor can a model be set down for others to follow – beyond the level of some general principles, inspiring examples, and cautions.

Nevertheless, several elements have been effective in these three cases:

- the value of participatory visioning, problems appraisal and solution identification (PRA) when well prepared and embedded in an ongoing planning and implementation process;
- the importance of some form of supervision and decision-making body in which the elected councillors are but one of the actors (in these cases, this body is the MCRD);
- the need for patience by all to ride the ups and downs of conflict **between** municipal actors and **within** each group, including the union movement;
- slow but steady capacity-building of leadership, facilitation, and negotiation skills; and
- the need for clear facilitation at the onset of the process, external in these cases, and the gradual transformation of the role of external bodies (such as CTA) to advisory bodies (technical, strategic, or methodological).

For CTA and the STRs of Tombos and Araponga, it is

clear that simply creating and occupying strategic and physical spaces for participation or taking up existing spaces does not mean that there is participation. Ensuring clear and active diverse voices in these spaces is critical. On the other hand, people's absence does not necessarily represent lack of participation. During a recent evaluation of the LDP process in Araponga (January 2003), the MCRD members noted that no-one can be expected to participate in or even keep track of all the 25 activities they undertake. What is more important is that some strategic players maintain linkages across the activities and communicate key issues to the different social groups.

The three MRDP processes illustrate that participation is inherently about conflict. Dissent forms an opportunity for negotiation and creative inputs in identifying actions. Clearly not everything can be resolved by consensus. Each process includes moments when majority decisions, by voting, have to suffice although this does not close the door to creating consensus in future.

The LPD, with PRA as a critical ingredient, is fundamentally a pedagogic process. The learning is institutional at municipal level in people's organisations and in the seat of municipal power. The participatory processes in Araponga, Tombos, and Acaiaca are examples of democracy in action.

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NOTES

The chapter from which this article is drawn is called 'Participatory Municipal Development Plans in Brazil: divergent partners constructing common futures.' Forthcoming in Hickey, S and G. Mohan (Eds). (2004) *Participation: From Tyranny to Transformation? Exploring New Approaches to Participation*. Zed Books, London.