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LOCAL INSTITUTIONS AND INITIATIVES TOWARDS VULNERABLE POPULATION IN A CONTEXT OF A REDEFINED RURALITY

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Abstract —In the Pampas region, deep changes in rurality and agrarian structure can be associated with the development of self-employment initiatives of agricultural production on the part of vulnerable population living in small towns. The aim of this paper is to examine the nature of these initiatives in their interplay with institutional aspects, taken into account qualitative and quantitative data generated by a research project carried on four localities, which are non-core and low population areas. The resistant and innovative nature of the initiatives developed in relation to the modernization paradigm currently in place in the Pampas region is also considered. At the micro level, research has shown the different strategies deployed by vulnerable agents to face barriers of entrance to agriculture, highlighting the importance of additional sources of income that allow them to cope with family expenses and reinvest the surplus obtained during the initial cycles of production, as well as the different types of relationships that make some key resources available to them. At the meso level, research has put forward the role of some local institutions (municipalities and agrarian high schools) in supporting initiatives through different means, as well as the competences depicted by agents who transcend traditional role prescriptions. However at the macro level the hegemonic production model currently in place in the Pampas region, as well as the weakness of differentiated policies oriented to family production pose limits on the viability of these initiatives in the medium term.

Key words: Local development processes-- Microenterprises- Pampas region

Résumé — Les institutions locales et les initiatives en faveur de populations vulnérables dans un contexte de ruralité redéfinie. Dans la région des Pampas, des profonds changements dans la ruralité et la structure agraire peuvent-être associés au développement de initiatives d'auto-emploi agricole de part de population vulnérable qui habite dans les petites villes. L'objectif de ce document est d'examiner la nature de ces initiatives dans leur interaction avec des aspects institutionnels, prise en compte des données qualitatives et quantitatives générées par un projet de recherche mené sur quatre localités de la région, qui ne sont pas centraux et ont une faible population. Le caractère à la fois résistent et innovant des initiatives développées en ce qui concerne le paradigme de la modernisation aujourd'hui en vigueur dans la région des Pampas est également envisagée. Au niveau micro, la recherche a montré les différentes stratégies déployées par les agents vulnérables pour faire face à des barrières d'entrée à l'agriculture, soulignant l'importance des sources supplémentaires de revenus - qui leur permettent de affronter les dépenses familiales et réinvestir les bénéfices obtenus au cours des premiers cycles de production - ainsi que des différent types de rapports en leur mettant à la disposition des ressources clés pour développer ses activités. Au niveau méso, la recherche a mis en avant le rôle de quelques institutions locales (notamment les municipalités et lycées agraires) en appuyant les initiatives par des différent moyens, ainsi que les compétences développées par des agents qui transcendent des prescriptions de rôle traditionnelles. Toutefois, au niveau macroéconomique, le modèle hégémonique de production actuellement en place dans la région des Pampas, ainsi que la faiblesse des politiques différenciées orientées à l'agriculture familiale conditionnent la viabilité de ces initiatives dans le moyen terme.

Mots clés: Processus de developement local- Microenterprises- Region des Pampas

INTRODUCTION

In the past two decades, agri-food activities have undergone a significant redefinition in Argentina, combining technological change processes, the strengthening of agents located at the key stages of the main food chains and the increasing globalization of markets and regulations. In the case of the Pampas region - which supplied nearly 80% of Argentine agricultural exports in 2004 - the deepening of the modernization process has resulted in an agricultural production mainly based on four annual crops (especially soybeans), the movement of livestock into marginal areas, and an increased use of technology packages which, in the case of soybeans, combines transgenic varieties with direct seeding (no-till) and the use of a broad-spectrum herbicide (glyphosate). Moreover, flexible forms of organization have spread, which allow the inflow of foreign capital to agriculture and the dissemination of "at a distance" forms of control.

Impacts have been significant on several levels, one of which has been the deepening of concentration of production. In the province of Buenos Aires - heart of the Pampas region - 32% of farms have disappeared in the period 1988-2002 as well as 43 % of the smaller units (up to 200 hectares); in parallel, the average farm size has increased by 40%. The population working in agriculture has fallen by almost a third, and the weight of wage workers in the occupational structure of the sector has augmented.

The productive dynamics in the Pampas region and the accumulation rationale of the core agents of most agri-food activities have redefined the conditions of employment of rural labor, increasing the number of workers involved on a seasonal or casual basis. Changes in land occupation, combined with the scarcity of new non-farm employment opportunities are outstanding issues in most towns and villages of the province of Buenos Aires, which are going through a sharp process of depopulation (Gorenstein et al., 2006).

From another point of view, the increasing dwelling of workers in villages close to the productive areas contributes to a redefinition of rurality, covering not only scattered areas and villages but also medium-sized cities, strongly linked to the dynamics of agriculture.¹ The "urbanization" of producers grew strongly during the 60s-70s, hand in hand with the early stages of the modernization process, while the settlement of rural workers in towns and cities is a more recent phenomenon. This poses requirements of actions contributing to mitigate the vulnerability of these people as well as of other inhabitants of villages who lack stable employment throughout the year.

Some local institutions have assumed a role in local development actions, including supporting initiatives for self-employment in agricultural activities on the part of vulnerable people residing in small towns. The aim of this paper is to examine the nature of these initiatives, analyzing them in their interplay with institutional aspects and introducing some reflections about their innovative or resistant condition in relation to the intensification "model" today hegemonic in the Pampas region.

Our work is based on a research project funded by the National Agency of Scientific and Technological Promotion of Argentina (ANPCyT), which studied newcomer situations in farming on the part of individuals characterized by a precarious insertion in the labor market.

¹ According to the 2001 Census, in the province of Buenos Aires the rural population (defined by INDEC as the one that lives in dispersed areas and towns below 2000 inhabitants) is of 503,000 inhabitants, representing 3.6% of the provincial population and 9.8%, if the conurbation of the city of Buenos Aires is excluded. The rural population in small towns has increased in the period 1991-2001 while the scattered population has fallen dramatically (MAA, 2005). Also, there has been an increase of the urban network of cities (with population over 10,000 inhabitants) from 69 in 1991 to 76 in 2001 (Gorenstein et al, 2006).

Research work is rather scarce in this area, as well as in terms of addressing the changes in urban spaces emerging from their redefined relationships with rurality.

The methodological strategy employed was multidimensional, combining the reprocessing of statistical data with qualitative techniques for gathering and analyzing information - in-depth interviews with various types of qualified informants at the national and local level, and with cases of producers who began individual or associative agricultural activities for the market based on low capital and family work -. Fieldwork was conducted in four localities of the province of Buenos Aires, which are non-core areas with a small population size and a low industrial development, not showing new dynamics that may offset the effects of agricultural restructuring. Selection procedures were not guided towards finding "successful" cases; rather, the purpose was to analyze the various paths followed self employment initiatives in the particular contexts in which they emerged.

Our initial questions focused on the mechanisms developed to face the barriers of entrance to agriculture (in the context of the Pampas region, characterized by high land prices and a strong "competition" for this resource), the feasibility of micro-enterprises and their meaning in the framework of family life strategies. One of the hypotheses that guided our work was that the stability of vulnerable newcomers as agrarian producers depended on the variety of the social networks in which they participated, as well as on the institutional support and the opportunities found at the local level.

We adopted the economic sociology perspective on *embeddness*, which stresses that economic action is socially impregnated and depends on the interpersonal relationships that individuals develop (García Macías, 2002). It was assumed that local areas are produced and reproduced through the actions of specific social groups and organizations but also work within wider structures of accumulation and regulation. The local level is not free of conflicts arising from the divergent interests and power asymmetries that exist among the agents.² From another point of view, this fact reinforces the idea of considering as local development initiatives those that have been generated and processed within a system of negotiation among the different actors forming a local society, and that aim to improve the well-being of local population (Arocena, 1995).

NEWCOMER STRATEGIES FOR THE BEGINNING AND THE DEVELOPMENT OF AGRICULTURAL ACTIVITIES

The specific requirements of agricultural activities pose significant barriers of entrance, which differ from the ones set by other autonomous activities, such as the need to have some type of access to land, availability of financial resources to cover expenditures during the period of time involved between the beginning of production activities and the crop, delivery and sale of products in the markets, and to countervail the effects of climatic factors in production and the seasonal character of income. Also the bromatological requirements to be met in order to sale food must be considered.

Thus, the preeminence of certain production activities on the part of vulnerable newcomers may be due to circumstantial factors – such as the existence of support coming from state programs -, while others relate to the above mentioned restrictions. The prevalence of beekeeping is thus not surprising, as it is an activity that does not require land - only the agreement of the owners of the fields where the hives are located -. Other activities found

² Territories are "fields" in which social interaction takes place and where different groups of actors struggle to sustain or transform local social orders, backed by different positions of power, which in turn depend on their control of strategic resources (Abramovay, 2006, Portes, 2006; Cumbers et al. 2008).

were non-traditional for the studied areas, such as rabbit and broiler breeding and associative horticulture. Several of them allow for low scales of production and have the particularity of enabling the extension of the initial lot from the reinvestment of the proceeds generated by the enterprise itself.

Among the strategies employed by the agents to start and stay in agriculture, it can be highlighted the role of selective social bonds, based on the *territoriality* of interactions (Lowe et al, 1997). In the cases that have been able to persist or even have capitalized their initial assets it is noteworthy the establishment of different kinds of ties –“binding”, “bonding” and “bridging” relationships- that have allowed them access to key resources³. These links played an important role for the start of agrarian production. Besides, an effort to maintain and build new relationships based on its particular requirements was also found.

However, it can be stated that the organizational processes deployed by vulnerable newcomers are rather weak. There is a low creation of new organizations or participation within the existing sectoral ones at the local level, in which land possession and family tradition in agriculture are fundamental identity resources.⁴ Informal and largely *dyadic* ties contrast with the operational mechanisms set by the majority of public support programs, which require the association of a minimum of applicants as a prerequisite to apply for certain benefits. This requirement tends to produce artificial, short-lived associations, which are likely to disintegrate in the long run.

Moreover, analysis shows that the beginning of an agricultural activity with limited assets is a long and gradual process that usually requires other occupations that provide sources of income to cope with family expenses and that help to face the costs demanded by the venture in its early stages. The negative side of this multiple job holding is the postponement of the labor demands of micro-enterprises, including participation in related activities (such as training, organization, etc.).

From another point of view, the role of supplementary incomes accounts for the restrictions present in most of the programs directed towards small producers, who generally provide support in the form of initial investments and inputs but do not consider their requirements to the point where they are sustainable. In some associative microenterprises this obstacle has been overcome thanks to the design of devices – such as a “reserve fund” - which aim to ensure continuity of income for producers and to meet the costs demanded by the restart of the production cycle, without affecting the normal development of tasks. The role of technical and institutional support is essential in this respect, but may condition the autonomy of producers.

³ Binding social relations can be characterized as those socially close, generally based on inherited points of coincidence or created as a result of lifelong commitments and frequent personal contact. Bonding social relations can be defined as those fairly close, which rely on built commitments. Bridging relationships may arise among people who have few points of agreement, a limited personal contact and often significant differences in terms of the resources they possess. These links involve a “vertical” dimension absent from previous types (Robison et al, 2003).

⁴ Participation in economic organizations (such as cooperatives) was found in some of the studied cases, but it acquired an instrumental character. Its purpose was to enable the sale of production according to current regulations.

Table 1. Strategies deployed by microentrepreneurs to address access barriers to agriculture

Barriers	Individual/dyadic strategies	Group and / or institutional support
Access to land	"Free" access to land (sometimes in exchange for a small contribution of production). Use of land /sheds available in the household. Processing facilities lent by family or more established producers.	Land and/or sheds lent by agricultural schools and municipalities. Support obtained from national programs to build community facilities for processing.
Access to other physical assets	Use of previous savings or incomes derived from the salaried work of the entrepreneur. Tools obtained in return for work with more established producers. Facilities built by the entrepreneur to cut costs.	Support coming from national programs or large companies with corporate social responsibility programs. Access to soft loans (albeit marginally)
Access to working capital	Salaried work of the entrepreneur. Donations of unsold merchandises by acquaintances, which are used for preparing feeds. Payment of inputs at the time of sale of production (financing of the input supplier). Minimization of monetary expenditures.	Initial inputs covered by state programs. Cash advances by local public institutions, which are replenished by the sale of production. Constitution of a "reserve fund" from initial sales to meet the expenses demanded by the restart of the production cycle. Running costs (electricity) in charge of agricultural schools. Common purchase of inputs.
Access to labor for harvest and other labor-demanding tasks	Help of acquaintances. Work exchanges between entrepreneurs. Help of acquaintances.	
Market access	Sale of production through more established producers.	Common freight between producers. Use of municipalities' trucks. Purchase of production by local public institutions. Participation of municipalities in establishing links with customers, and in promotional campaigns. Municipal tolerance regarding the facilities employed for food processing. Use of receipts issued by management bodies of agriculture high schools.

Source: Author based on interviews conducted.

Institutional support can also be seen in other aspects: Some activities carried by micro-entrepreneurs have originated as productive projects of agrarian schools aimed at schoolchildren. Afterwards their parents got involved in them, benefiting from the technical assistance provided by the schools. In several cases, local public institutions have also developed actions to facilitate the connection with the market (e.g. promotion; search of clients and participation in establishing business arrangements; implementation of "institutional" procurements). Also, in face of an obstacle difficult to overcome for the start of agricultural activities such as landlessness, these institutions have made available small plots of land and/or facilities to develop them. Nevertheless, it should be noted that the absence of a systematic policy devoted to facilitating access to this strategic resource has limited the scale and replicability of microenterprises.

THE ROLE OF LOCAL ORGANIZATIONS IN THE PROMOTION OF SELF-EMPLOYMENT INITIATIVES

A review of the role performed by some of the organizations existing in the Pampas region-taking into account the findings of the research project as well as other contributions - shows the involvement of several key actors at the local level (municipalities and middle-level agricultural schools) in these initiatives and simultaneously, the lack of interest of sectoral organizations (such as producers organizations).⁵ One possible explanation of this is related to their difficulty to "process" the changes associated with the redefinition of rurality and the conditions under which agricultural production takes place in the Pampas region, under which a rethinking of their actions could arise. This hampers the inclusion of people who do not fit the profile of the "traditional" farmer, although they are linked to rurality in broader terms.

In the case of municipalities, the implementation of decentralization policies and targeted programs for poverty alleviation (that took place in the context of the State retreat of the nineties) allowed them to develop some tools for the promotion of productive activities, albeit in a partial and heterogeneous way.⁶ After the political and institutional crisis faced by the country in late 2001⁷, some of them initiated local development plans and other initiatives to promote employment, generating instruments of consultation with other actors which in some cases have been ephemeral while in others have persisted.

Among the organizations involved in these multi-actor schemes ("councils", "tables", etc), are middle-level agricultural schools, some of them formerly national institutions. Several of them had already incorporated innovative spaces de liaison with the territories where they belong, since the defunding of the education system motivated them to seek alliances with different actors (including extra-local ones) to provide answers and in some cases, to be able to carry on their activities (Plencovich et al., 2009).

Also, some of these schools have become involved in local development issues; in the case of the CEPTs (*Centros Educativos para la Producción Total*) this fact arises from their very foundations, because unlike other types of educational institutions they are created on rural communities demand.⁸ These schools have Local Development Committees whose functions include proposing plans and programs. The theme is a basic framework for education and recognizes the importance of organizing to promote concrete action lines, assuming the central role of local actors (Lopez, 2008). More recently CEPTs have participated through the federation that brings them together (FACEPT) in the formulation of Provincial Law 13,251 for the Promotion of Small Towns, enacted in 2004.

The FACEPT defines itself as an organization of rural dwellers. Similarly, principals and teachers of the centers interviewed under our research project aim to give a territorial scope

⁵ The role of national institutions is not considered in this paper.

⁶ In this regard, Clement and Girolami (2006) believe that despite the negative consequences of the decentralization model in terms of deepening regional inequalities, it enabled municipalities to develop some kind of experience in designing and implementing social programs and in posing joint strategies with other local organizations. However, this should not lead to overlook the constraints that local governments face taking into account their scarcity of financial resources, an issue that particularly affects small municipalities (Craviotti, 2008).

⁷ This led to the resignation of the then President, and the change of economic policy, including a sharp devaluation of the peso and the abandonment of the 1 to 1 parity with the dollar.

⁸ These centers, based on experience of French Maisons Familiales have an educational and community development proposal. Education in these schools holds some innovative aspects that differentiate them from traditional schools: Pedagogy is based on the alternation system, they are co-managed by the communities and the state; they have Local Development Committees (CDL) integrated by producers, teachers and alumni (Barsky et al., 2007).

for their actions instead of a strictly sectoral one, by stating in their testimonies that *"We're a CEPT ... plus a center first, then a school ..." we can not stay only with the productive issues "... We want to educate autonomous and independent people, who can choose between what is good, what is bad; that have a way of life and fight for their rights and for the countryside."* Thus, these schools seek to create opportunities beyond the classroom, helping to organize rural people and to build negotiation and management capacities, for *"when we speak of people to join together, they regard us as a link, and if we are not there [it] is more difficult"*.

Other agricultural schools that have been recently involved in local development issues are the CEAs (*Centros de Educación Agrícola*) which together with CEPTs, exist only in the province of Buenos Aires. CEAs differ from the latter in that their scope is more referred to agriculture; also they are located closer to urban centers. These schools offer technical education additional to the one provided by middle schools and non-formal education as well. Their management bodies (*asociación cooperadora*) integrate various representatives of the community. In some cases they are required to join the dialogue table established by the municipality to promote local development and they are responsible for accompanying the self-employment ventures that are developed in their establishments. As defined by one of their principals, *"the idea is to build projects. Well, we are going to be there ...we sit in each agricultural table that exists, and we take part in each project that is related to us."*⁹

In these institutions, a personal involvement of some technicians and officials in the day-to-day efforts to launch ventures and assist them can be found. The tasks performed include finding funding sources, developing projects, obtaining advice and organizing training courses. All this requires time and different skills, including a good dose of creativity to overcome constraints and to create new institutional arrangements, as well as flexibility to eventually redefine the projects. These actors transcend their traditional role prescriptions, because of their personal commitment to the activities promoted.

In the most established situations new synergies arise, resulting from the coordination between different actors, where they try to generate or identify the instruments that from their specific standpoint may contribute to overcome some of the barriers of entrance to agriculture or in order to integrate the different initiatives in more comprehensive strategies. Networks are formed in which common meanings are agreed upon and whose main purpose is to encourage the permanence (*arraigo*) of people in the territory. Also informal links between actors that go beyond the formalized structures of consultation and allow their maintenance can be found. A specific social *embeddedness* supports these initiatives, in which a substantive rationality rather than a formal or instrumental one is present.

DISCUSSION

The cases that support this analysis are far from the landowner (*estanciero*) that shaped the beginning of Argentina as a nation, the farmer (*chacarero*) who was part of the country's proposed image as the "breadbasket of the world", and the latest machinery contractor (*contratista*) who leases land to bring it into production by one or two crops, or provides services to other producers. They are rather small beekeepers or rabbit breeders, horticulture or chicken farmers, who do not reach such a social visibility. Most national agriculture programs do not consider them, as they frequently adopt a narrow definition of beneficiaries of their actions. Besides, they have no organizations that represent them.

⁹ In a similar vein, a recent paper defines the local CEA as a "broker of external opportunities," namely projects coming from the provincial or the national government aiming to promote local enterprises (Albaladejo et al, 2008).

Neither the people nor the local framework of support can be seen as consolidated; however, it can be seen that some of the organizations existing in the local areas have assumed new roles in local development, underpinned by new structures of territorial regulation. Thus, they have been able to mobilize and animate local processes and act as social factories of new initiatives. The role of technicians is relevant within them, although the issues to be attended sometimes exceed their scope of action and possibilities. Since, as noted by Coraggio (2005), sustainability of these ventures can not be conceived exclusively at the "micro" level. That is, they require cross-sectional work between different institutions, including the ones that are more focused on the provision of social services. An approach that combines the social with the productive sphere has for a long time been claimed by people belonging to small communities and rural areas.

The involvement of municipalities and agricultural schools in local development issues does not occur by chance, as they are territorial institutions "par excellence", unlike interest organizations and cooperatives which are more focused on the agricultural sector. Though in the case of the latter, they include fostering links with the community within their doctrinal principles, an issue that could be activated for the purposes of local development.

However, the differential nature of organizations affects their ways of intervention. The municipal authorities are elective and are subject to periodic renewal, while officials of middle-level schools have a greater continuity that allows them to build their legitimacy from a place that is less tied to political-party issues and also from their daily proximity to the needs of vulnerable rural populations. In some cases they have been able to outline a target sector for their actions that is not necessarily the farmer or the land owner (rather it is the rural dweller / producer) and to pose a huge repertoire of concerns. They also participate in local consultation bodies.

A challenge to overcome is the lack or limited participation in these schemes of some of the key actors who intervene in the local scene, as well as the competition that may arise between organizations, since the "field" of the intervention (in the sense of Bourdieu), as well as territories, are areas of dispute in which organizations take part with differential resources and logics of action. Beyond the construction of a common set of purposes (the permanence in the territory), the agreements on the means to make them possible necessarily involve negotiation between different positions. In this sense we agree with Gallichio (2003), in that local development is more a socio-political than a strictly economic process.

As for the content of the actions carried out in supporting vulnerable newcomers, they can be seen both as resistant and innovative in relation to the production model currently in place in the Pampas region. First, because they involve resistance to the rural exclusion that this model entails (both in terms of farmers and workers). However, they also introduce innovative elements, such as trying to extend the agrarian structure with new actors (expanding the public of "traditional" rural development initiatives), as well as their *embeddedness* in networks rooted in territories, either devoted to using local resources and/or to diversifying the productive base of the local economy. Another innovative aspect is their ability to convert "educational" resources into "productive" ones.

It should be noted however that the hegemonic production model in the Pampas region - based on a flexible organization of production and the increase of operational scales - conditions the feasibility of such initiatives, if regulations in the use of resources and their environmental impacts are not considered, and if differential policies towards strengthening household production are not strengthened. As noted by Lattuada et al (2006), policies focused on the local level turn into transient or bounded solutions if structural conditions or economic and sectoral policies are either adverse or neutral. This raises the need for tools to influence the "meso" and "macro" levels, oriented to the central issues of promoting access to critical resources and of reshaping the relationships between the different actors who currently take part of a redefined rurality.

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