

**Beyond the GMO Discourse:  
Reformation of institutional science and technology in southern Brazil**

Shuji Hisano\* and Simone M. Altoé\*\*

An attached paper is originally prepared for a publication with the title of ‘Brazilian Farmers at a Crossroads: Biotech Industrialisation of Agriculture or New Alternatives for Family Farmers?’ which is based on the field surveys conducted by authors in August 2000, December 2001 and July 2002. Instead of rewriting it to fit the conference, we’ve decided to put this supplementary note on it aiming to clarify some relevant points at issue.

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As already mentioned in the abstract circulated beforehand, a main point of this paper is that the GMO issues should be contextualised in ongoing realities not only at the global level, but rather the local level. The small soybean farmers, a major and averaged rural actor in the southern states of Brazil, are getting marginalised in the globalisation and industrialisation of agri-food system, at the same time they are faced with and entangled in the GMO politics. The dispute over GMOs in Brazil has been developed mainly among the elite actors; the federal government and multinationals on the one side, and Greenpeace and the IDEC, a domestic consumers’ organisation on the other, while MST, a landless farmers’ movement, also takes part in an anti-GMOs movement to some extent. But still, we believe that we need to address the local realities surrounding small family farmers who are prompted to respond the external realities as a matter of their business and live lihoods.

Another point is that the role of an extension agency in organising and facilitating small family farmers to shift their farming from conventional (for export market) to agroecological (for local market) by adopting the participatory and educative approach. This extension agenda is not only implemented for the purpose of conserving natural resources, but also helping small family farmers stay in their farmland while keeping them away from the GMO contamination along with the competitive conventional market. The idea of agroecology itself is nothing new and has been already practiced locally all over the world, in many cases initiated by NGOs and rural community or farmers groups though. The experience in the state of Rio Grande do Sul above all is highlighted in our paper on the ground that public institutions (EMATER/RS, an extension agency, and the state and local governments) are playing a critical role contrary to prevailing sceptical views on institutional engagements in alternative development processes. Although our paper is not intended to disregard a broadly-

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\* Dr. Hisano is an assistant professor at the Dept. of Agricultural Economics, Graduate School of Agriculture, Hokkaido University, Japan, and now a visiting research fellow at Wageningen University, The Netherlands.

\*\* Ms. Altoé is a PhD student at the Graduate School of Agriculture, Hokkaido University, Japan.

shared attention to the emerging role of civil society, or its key components but controversial subjects “citizens”, we’d like to emphasise that this line of thought should be carefully applied to rural realities of developing countries.

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While we struggle to theoretically streamline our original paper, several relevant literatures were reviewed. Among them, Houtzager (2001) introduces the concepts “institutional hosts” and “structural linkages” to contrast the rural realities in Brazil with relatively stable Western democracies in which dominant theories of collective action are developed. Institutional hosts such as the churches and the state “draw unorganized peoples into their organizational and ideological fields, help redefine them as social groups, and sponsor their constitution as new collective actors” (Houtzager 2001: 3). Differently from his suggestion that “disruptive socioeconomic change or a declining standard of living is neither a sufficient nor a necessary condition for rural mobilization” (Ibid. 32-33), the experimental activity of the EMATER/RS couldn’t mark any successful shifts in localities without rural actors’ awareness of the difficulties they are actually facing. None the less, his attention to the role of institutional actors to mobilise, politicise and legitimise rural actors’ collective action must be adaptable for our discussion.

Coelho et al. (2002) also reminds us of difficulties to introduce “deliberative democracy” in Brazil without reinforcing the relations between the state and civil society. Brazil has some courageous experiences in social policies, which are particularly exemplified by the Municipal Health Council and the Participatory Budgeting process. Although there are some remarkable results achieved in some states as well as initiatives taken place at the local level all over the country, it is undoubtedly true that the vast majority of Brazilian localities and rural actors are still left behind the scene. Given the fact that the excluded, marginalised, disadvantaged people cannot access to appropriate information and resources, neither come together by articulating their problems while participating in the process of deliberative democracy, we need to rethink the concept of “citizenship” especially according to the rural settings of developing countries.

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This is true even of the state of Rio Grande do Sul, while the state is well known for its well-organised and the most democratically and equally distributed localities in Brazil (mainly due to well-developed agricultural co-operatives across the southern states based on the immigrant small farmer communities). When it comes to the socially weak-base for alternative consciousness, we can show some examples.

First, in Santa Rosa of the state, where we made interviews with extension staffs, agricultural co-operatives, and local farmers, only one co-operative (Cotrimaio, as discussed in our paper), out of eight co-operatives working in the region, is aware of the importance of alternatives and working together with the EMATER/RS for encouraging farmers to shift to agroecology. Other co-operatives, in some cases, still pursue the industrialisation of agriculture, promoting Roundup® herbicide which is criticised by the extension agency on the ground of the adverse effect on the soil, and for the worse allegedly smuggling Roundup Ready® soybean seeds into the farmland. Given that small family farmers trust the agricultural co-operatives other than the extension’s local staffs, it is not surprising that the reflexive

activities of the EMATER/RS regional and local staffs would be limited in such areas, whereas the fact that the extension agency collectively and many extension staffs individually are reflexive actors in terms of alternative thinking implies the possibility to change the situation entirely.

Second, some municipalities where the local governments and local elite actors (i.e. politicians and other influential people) are strongly opposing to the state government and its line of thought, even the EMATER/RS is regarded as a political ally of the PT (workers' party, a ruling party of the state and some local governments) and refrained from reaching to the farmers. In this sense, we have to admit that addressing the issue of the arenas of "governance" must be a question that inevitably arises in further discussion of citizenship and democracy especially in the setting of rurality (Gaventa 2002).

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A remaining question is how the reflexive extension agency is constructed or shaped in rural Brazil. Without answering this question, we cannot envisage any pictures to democratically create "another" society in localities so long as the critical role of institutional actors is concerned. Instead of tracing back Brazil's and the southern region's political culture in general, we'd like to refer to Pelaez & Schmidt (forth coming) drawing attention to the importance of the anti-establishment action of the agronomists group during 1970s and 80s, such as the Brazilian Encounters for an Alternative Agriculture (EBAA) organised by the Federation of Agronomists and some NGOs such as the Alternative Technologies Project (PTA). It is quite understandable that a considerable number of students of agronomy and Brazilian agronomists strongly influenced by the alternative way of thinking have been playing a significant role in reforming the pertinent public institutions.

## References

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