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**Territorial dynamics and agro-ecology**  
**Food production and the construction of local markets in Misiones**  
**(Northeast Argentina)<sup>1</sup>**

María Andrea Nardi<sup>2</sup>

## **Introduction**

During the 1990's, Latin America went through an important structural transformation. The processes of restructuring included not only macro-economic reforms and state decentralization but also the emergence of a completely different way to understand development. In fact, the continent experienced a profound alteration in the relations between the state, the society, the market and the natural environment.

These “adjustments” carried out by Latin American governments must be understood in the context of the Washington Consensus and the pro-market approach promulgated by the International Monetary Fund (IMF) and the World Bank to foster growth and development. This new paradigm to enhance development stands out the importance assigned to market in bringing about economic and social wellbeing, the emphasis on public sector reduction and privatization and de-regulation. Many authors have referred to this paradigm as neo-liberalism. The resulting reduction in the power of the state and the new functions assigned to civil society, the market and the environment has been framed as “neoliberal” development.<sup>3</sup>

The evidence shows that Latin American societies have been trying to accommodate, contest and resist this restructuring, particularly once its negative effects on poverty reduction and the increase social and geographical inequalities became apparent (Salama and Valier, 1996; Filguera, 2009; Leiva, 2008, among others). The aftermath of structural adjustment programmes shows that poverty and inequality have not only persisted but also increased in the continent since the introduction of these policies. However, this remark should not be misinterpreted as a validation of the ability of the previous development model - based on strong state intervention, industrial and endogenous development - to achieve growth and equality.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> Gwynne and Kay (1999: 13) state that “[t]he use of the term neoliberal has numerous problems because of its ideological connotations”, so for example some people refer to the term Washington consensus “indicating virtually the same package of reforms”. Amongst Latin American social scientists, this development template is denoted as ‘neoliberalism’ and this is the use given in the present study.

<sup>4</sup> In this sense, I agree with Filguera (2009: 146) when he states that “The old model was effectively finished, and was not able to operate in the new globalized world. Nonetheless, what is being affirmed here is that the present model of global and regional accumulation increases inequality in comparison to that one produced by the old model during its period of viability”. Originally in Spanish. Translation of the author.

Against this backdrop of great dissatisfaction with the neoliberal approach, many social protests, riots and civil mobilizations in countries such as Bolivia, Ecuador, Brazil, Colombia, Mexico or Argentina occurred and continue to occur today. Alternative development strategies, policies and paradigms are under construction as a way to overcome this discontent (Santos, 2006; Leff, 2005, Escobar, 2010, among others).

In Argentina, the introduction of policies aiming at reforming the state and internationalizing the economy was conducted by the government of Carlos Menem (1989-1999). From 1991 a set of laws were passed in order to launch a process of transformation of the state and the market, and therefore also the society. In 1994, a modification of the national constitution had important consequences for society, the state, environment and market.<sup>5</sup> In general terms, the adjustment in the country consisted of the privatization of public service companies (telecommunications, natural gas, energy, roads, railways, water and sewer systems); de-regulation of domestic economy and opening to global markets; peg of the national currency to the US dollar; decentralization of public services to the provinces, and outsourcing of public sector functions to companies, among other changes.

The adjustment process was nominally intended to introducing Argentina into the dynamic and competitive world market. While the national and sub-national (provincial) states prepared to welcome foreign investment, no comprehensive policies were arranged to tackle the negative consequences of rapid de-regulation, exposure to the competitive markets, public functions decentralization, etc.

This way, within this new model of development in Argentina, some geographical regions and social sectors (urban workers, unemployed, small-scale farmers, agriculture workers for instance) were excluded. This was notably the case for some of the economic and social sectors located in the regional economies that were previously linked to the domestic market.<sup>6</sup>

The structural transformation has re-organized territories and societies around the country and in most parts of Latin America. Probably these dynamics are more easily observed in rural areas and/or small urban localities. Indeed, the introduction of new technologies to make agriculture more competitive and to change the sluggish farming model re-arranged rural territories on many different levels and over different periods of time. While some geographical areas and some socio-economic sectors were able to successfully compete in the global market, many areas and sectors were left aside.

It is against this backdrop of these dramatically re-organized territories and excluded sectors that daily practices of resistance but also adaptation can be observed and analysed. Indeed, in the case of the province of Misiones, in the Northeast of Argentina, neoliberal-inspired territorial transformations occurred in the 1990's and 2000's which fostered the promotion of activities oriented to the international market (Manzanal *et. al.*, 2010).<sup>7</sup> The clearest case is

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<sup>5</sup> For instance, it recognized the pre-state existence of native communities, and therefore their legal rights to the territories they occupy.

<sup>6</sup> The regional economies have been conceptualized in Argentina as those economies outside the fertile lowlands of the pampas and the commodity crop production.

<sup>7</sup> This is a small province bordering Paraguay and Brazil that presents an important number of family farms at the time that shows one of the highest numbers of rural poverty in the country. Its economy is inserted to the national one as provider of yerba mate, tobacco and wood. The territory of Misiones presents the major area covert with the last remain of the Atlantic rainforest in the Southern Cone.

the expansion of the area dedicated to large scale forestry, to tobacco growing and to nature conservation linked to biodiversity preservation and tourism.<sup>8</sup>

The territory of the province of Misiones is relatively small in comparison with the rest of the Argentinean provinces. It is situated in the northeaster extreme of the country, sharing 90% of its borders with Paraguay to the west and Brazil to the east. In 2001, Misiones was one of the highest dense populated provinces of the country. Due to its climate and vegetation it can be found here one of the most diverse subtropical ecosystems. Most of the current territory of the province (87%) was one covered by the Atlantic rainforest (Rolón and Chebez, 1998) which stretched to the south along the Paraná and Uruguay rivers.

A strong national promotion of forestry through subsidies and tax exemptions caused significant growth in the area of land under large scale forestry production by local and international companies. The paradigmatic case was the privatization of a provincial pulp and paper company and its acquisition first by a national holding and later by an international one, because it led to a process of land concentration in some areas of the province. This occurred simultaneously with a strong provincial concern for nature preservation. Indeed, between 1987 and 1997, with the creation of twelve nature parks, the total area under conservation grew from 2.9% to 7.4% (Ferrero, 2005).

The above processes concurred as well with other social and territorial transformations. From the 1980's, tobacco growing by families of small scale farmers became increasingly motorized once they were inserted in the tobacco chain of production under the control of international companies (Schiavoni, 1998). This expansion proved that the agriculture frontier was encroaching upon not only remaining public land but also large scale private properties.

Decades of soil overexploitation, crop mismanagement and deregulation of the provincial crops decreased yields, productivity and farmers' monetary incomes. In this sense, Montiel (2001: 94) affirms that "farmers are in a context of crisis in the regional economy, which is increased by the fall in prices of the main crops (yerba mate, tea, tobacco) and the retirement of the state from its role of regulator of the productive system".<sup>9</sup>

In some areas of the province, a process of expulsion of families off their land caused migration to small cities, where their stock of capital was soon translated into urban poverty. The rural population that was not migrating away from their land was pushing the agriculture frontier towards the northeast, area of large scale properties.

On the whole, these transformations (mainly large scale forestry and nature conservation) have meant a drastic reduction of land available for family agriculture and the deterioration of prices of provincial agriculture produce. Eventually, different conflicts over land were catalysed and the whole new economic development model based on the opening up of the provincial economy into wider markets started to be questioned by many actors linked to the farming sector.

In this context, since the middle of the 1990's, some Rural Development Programmes (RDP) implemented by the national and provincial public sector along with some other organizations

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<sup>8</sup> The development of Misiones contrasts very much with the nearby regions. In fact, while the province has inserted its economy to the Argentinean economy as a provider of yerba mate to the domestic market and timber, tea and tobacco to the international, the neighbouring areas of Paraguay and Brazil are the main regions within their national economies for the production of commodities (soya mainly). Moreover, the agrarian structure that characterizes this regional economy is regarded in Argentina as having one of the largest numbers of family farms.

<sup>9</sup> Originally in Spanish. Translation of the author.

began to promote “rural development” with family farmers. In general terms, their strategies were not centred on the improvement of the traditional industrial crops (yerba, tea, tobacco) but on an “alternative agriculture”, based on food production (horticulture, grains, small husbandry, poultry, etc.). Their activities and discourses are motivated in part by the following: (i) the need to foster food security in the countryside and food sovereignty in the province (food production as opposed to industrial crops), (ii) the importance of fostering farmers’ autonomy to decide what to produce, how to produce it, whom to trade with (agriculture produce with adapted technology, organic production without agro-chemicals, as a way to be independent from big corporations), home-made industrialization (marmalades, pickles, etc.), (iii) the possibility to commercialize food production (small animals, horticulture, dairy products, etc.) surpluses in local markets, (iv) the necessity of creating new channels of commercialization and new patterns of consumption, (v) the imperative to manage farms in an integrated way, with an agro-ecological perspective, and (vi) the urgent need for legal tenure of land (Nardi, 2008).

Activities framed in the above mentioned discourse have gradually been creating new territorial dynamics in rural areas, which revolve around agriculture family and rural development. Gradually, a rural development arena has emerged where actors as diverse as farmers’ organizations, public agencies from different levels of state, social organizations, and grass-root groups converge. This arena can be described as a space for social and political participation for debates about the farming sector, and which forms the basis for an “alternative” rural development (Schiavoni *et al.*, 2006). This was set in opposition to the liberal model of agriculture that has been promoted, with a particular antagonism towards the “conventional” rural development model that has marked the history of land occupation and economic growth linked to a kind of “green revolution” in the province. Schiavoni *et al.* (2006: 251) affirm that

“...the new paradigm arises in opposition to the productivist model and the standardizing and deterministic tendencies of capitalism in the agriculture. It rejects the specialization and the segregation of the agriculture sector, favouring the linking of multiples activities in a same rural space. It promotes decentralized actions with the aim of reinforcing ecological, social and cultural capital”.<sup>10</sup>

In this way, from the mid 1990’s, the alternative strategies conducted have fuelled interesting territorial dynamics that do not pursue “insertion to the international market” but rather focus on the creation of new local ways of life, agricultures and markets. It is possible to observe therefore the introduction of innovative agro-ecological techniques and farm management, the collective construction of original channels of commercialization and markets, and novel social and political mobilizations aiming to secure access to land and legal land tenure.<sup>11</sup>

The local farmers’ markets (*ferias francas*) are a paradigmatic example. They are well-known institutions that have garnered the attention of public policy makers and researchers in the area of family agriculture (Cametti, n/d; PSA, 1997; Carballo, 2000; Schvorcer, 2003; Lapegna, 2005; Nardi and Pereira, 2006 and 2007 among others). They have created new rural–urban linkages and at the same time facilitated women farmers’ participation in public life among other things.

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<sup>10</sup> Originally in Spanish. Translation of the author.

<sup>11</sup> The terminologies on land tenure are taken from Bruce (1998: 5-8) who defines *access* as “the ability to use land or another resource”; *land tenure* as the “rights in land” and *security of tenure (tenure security)* as tenure held without risk or without risk of loss.

In this context, I seek to describe, analyse and reflect in this paper on the territorial dynamics generated as a consequence of promoting agro-ecology and food production in Misiones. In particular, I focus on the discourses and practices around food production that seek to sustain agriculture and families in the rural space. What kind of territorial dynamics are put forward by these new ideas and practices of agriculture production, environmental concern and small-scale family agriculture? More specifically, what kind of society - nature relation is intended to be constructed and what does it mean in terms of space - power production?

In order to respond these questions, I explain the importance attributed to the discourse of food production and agro-ecology by local actors and how they link it to poverty reduction and alternative rural development. I present the actors involved, their discourses, practices and contradictions. I take into consideration as well the collective spaces created and the constraints to put forward this proposal.

Certainly, the promotion of food production in Misiones takes place and need to be understood in the context of internationalization of the provincial economy and landscape (international agreements of biodiversity preservation) among other processes that link the local economies and politics to international interests (“globalization”). The advance of international capitals in the forestry and tourism sectors along with the increase in tobacco plantation commanded by international tobacco corporation and the end of public land to be occupied by family farmers have created different conflicts over natural resources (particularly land) that the alternative strategies of rural development and food production seek to address.

I conclude by showing how this new approach to development is creating new social and physical spaces, constructing diverse territorial dynamics by contesting the current way of doing agriculture in Misiones and the forces of “globalization”. Even if at the moment this does not mean a structural change, activities around food agro-ecology are fostering territorial dynamics important to understand and to take into consideration when delineating rural development policies for small-scale agriculture and rural families.

## **The agro-ecology perspective in Misiones**

In Misiones the agro-ecology perspective is framed not only in terms of an economic and environmental concern, but political. Even though there are different rationales, in general all actors involved in alternative rural development agree on the need to question the slash and burn agriculture and the production chains where farmers are engaged. The discourse is not only about how to do agriculture, but also how to pursue food security and sovereignty. The concern about natural resources management is put in a wider context, the re-organization of agriculture itself: *what to produce, how to do it, where to commercialize, who to trade with, what should be the role of the state, the participatory intervention*, among others issues are in the centre of the agro-ecological proposal. As one of the local extensionist from the provincial public sector mentions:

“Agro-ecology is much more than that [soil and forest conservation for production and productivity]. There is a discussion on the social aspects of agriculture, the struggle for prices, social organization, the political question, the discussion about this model, the representativeness of farmers. All these is agro ecology, you are discussing those things, not only the productive question” (Posadas, November 2008).

The empirical evidence collected during the present research shows that in Misiones, the agro-ecological perspective for the re-organization of agriculture production seeks: (a)

sustainable management of natural resources (soil, water, forest and genetic material), (b) an agriculture free of pesticides and other chemical inputs to eliminate pollution of soil and water and (c) more autonomy from extra-local actors (providers of seeds, soil fertilizers and pesticides, etc.), (d) an increase in farm productivity (not only crop productivity), (e) healthier production and consumption to improve family nutrition intake at the farm and local level, (f) a sustainable farm in the long term, (g) the construction of local markets, and (h) the creation of new channels of commercialization, among other items.

The discourse and practice around agro-ecology were reinforced during the 1990's by actors linked to new rural development programmes from the public and NGO sectors. Some local farmers were aware of the ongoing degradation of natural resource degradation, decrease in yields, decline in farm incomes, rural-urban migration and the pressure of the agrarian frontier on the last remains of native forest and public land. These lead to the creation in 1993 of a local network for organic agriculture (Network of Organic Agriculture of Misiones, RAOM).<sup>12</sup>

In the last decade, these negative effects became more evident, due to the decreased state regulation of the agriculture sector, the increase of investment in industrial agriculture (mainly large scale forestry, but also tobacco), the gradual expulsion of farmers from their land, the creation of vast areas for nature conservation and the incursion of international corporations in rural areas (which has increased the use of chemicals and water and soil pollution).

When the Social Agriculture Programme (PSA) was introduced in the province in 1993, agro-ecological practices were fostered as a different way for farmers and land, water and forest to interact. The understanding that land degradation caused low incomes and productivity and pushed farmers off their land led to the inclusion of environmental concerns into the developmental agenda. The staff programme in Misiones linked this impoverishment with "chemical agriculture". In fact, PSA explains the introduction and entrenchment of the industrial agriculture model as a cause of natural resource degradation and farmers impoverishment. In this sense, the following state is very illustrative:

"The use of chemical agriculture based on the destruction of the jungle, monocultures and use of agro-chemicals brought the impoverishment of the soils, poisoning of water and people, loss of biodiversity and, in some cases, pushed families to migrate in search of virgin lands. The increasing use of inputs made many farmers effectively debt slaves". Other migrated to the city looking for a job. It was and it is urgent to return to an organic agriculture that fits nature cycles, is based on solidarity and equality, which stands for life and not death. A [kind of] agriculture that acts upon the causes and not its effects. [A kind of agriculture] that respects life in the soil, forest and peasant families" (PSA, 1999: 22).

Since PSA was a participatory RDP, the idea of creating a more sustainable agriculture, transforming tobacco plantation into food production, constructing new markets and new political and economic alliances was increasingly shared between local NGO and farmers' organizations.

The latent conflict between agriculture and biodiversity conservation seems to have been conciliated here with this approach. Instead of continuing encroaching on the forest, farmers need to stabilize their agriculture by crop and income diversification, applying techniques of soil and water management (green covers, terracing, intercropping, crop rotation, application of organic fertilizer, use of locally adapted seeds and other genetic material etc.).

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<sup>12</sup> *Red de Agricultura Orgánica de Misiones.*

It is important to frame this kind of sustainable agriculture in the context of legal access to land and the need to regularize land tenure. The notion of creating a more sustainable agriculture model is particularly relevant in the north-eastern of the province, where many families occupying private land are in the process of acquiring legal access to land. Many NGO agree that it is not only the legal tenure of land that is important; it is also crucial that farmers are truly able to put it to whatever use they choose and live off it. The following comment illustrates this point:

“Legal possession of land is as important as generating economic and productive strategies that could allow sustainable management of land and natural resources such as water and forest. [It is also important] to generate decent living conditions on the farms to make people stay and not sell. We believe that is the only [way a secure livelihood can be achieved] in the middle term. That’s the reason we believe that the intervention should complementarily [involve] those two fields: management to secure legal access to land, and generation of productive and sustainable strategies. [We must] create markets [and] development activities that add value to the produce... to strengthen family food consumption, the production of their own food, and sources of energy” (staff member, NGO, Posadas, 2008).

It can be observed that the discourse goes beyond the actual problem of biodiversity loss, putting the families in the centre of the concern, and pointing out their right to live in the countryside, their right to continue living from agriculture, the right to have a good quality of life in the rural space and the right to chose what kind of development should be promoted by the majority.

According to those actors in the rural development arena in Misiones, the “resistance” is not against an abstract and distant model of agriculture. It is against a model of agriculture in which families and environment have engaged since the 1970’s, particularly with the Burley tobacco “boom”. International companies introduced a different way of doing agriculture completely standardized in its proceedings, with a high level of chemical use, in which “expert knowledge” is central but is located within the spheres of the companies and not the farmers:

“The whole technological package is managed by the cooperative through a service company: spraying, calendar of spraying, time, what to use, how to use it, the harvest, everything. The farmer contributes the land and his labour at some point, and then the rest is decided by the cooperative. And afterwards they discount all these costs. Then the farmers sign... an amount from the machine, and amount from the liquid, and the farmers don’t know what that is. If you ask, they don’t know what it contains. Then it comes the harvest, they arrive to the collection place, they get their product classified, it comes the classification resume. And the classification resume always is bad. They harvest 3.000 kilos, 20 [kilos] first category, the rest... then the prices are according to categories, they get an amount for it. They retain the costs and finally they deliver what is left. But always a misery [very very little]” (local extensionist, MAyP, Posadas, 2008).

In this context, most of those adhering to an agro-ecological strategy for family agriculture promote it as a way to improve the position of farmers by increasing their autonomy from tobacco companies. These companies are observed as instruments of large scale capital entering the provincial agriculture sector and transforming the farm economy by means of excluding farmers from or subordinating them to the agro-industrial complex. Some farmers from the municipality of San Pedro commented on the importance of taking care of soil fertility or cultivating their own seeds, because the alternative is the use of agro-chemicals, an increasing cost of production and a lack of autonomy from the fertilizer corporations:

“We understand that there is increasing pressure from outside, from large companies that produce seeds, [that have] monopolies of seed. The seeds as such, if we are talking about family agriculture... if a farmer cannot get access to seed, for instance... without seed he doesn’t do agriculture. And what happens if tomorrow he loses all the genetic material, how do we start? To



start planting we'll have to depend on somebody else. With transgenic seed, with the 'terminator' seed, once it's harvested, it doesn't grow anymore. To bring this [here is not good idea] knowing that in some cases... open pollination can occur; for instance corn is very easy to get crossed... So to bring that to our territory, to a certain geographical space, seeds will cross and gradually seeds will be finished, because they are not going to germinate anymore. In the future then, they can ask for any price for the seeds" (farmer and local extensionist, San Pedro, 2008).

Nevertheless, the agro-ecology understood by the extensionists (public agencies, RDP and NGO) might differ from the concept as understood by the farmers. Certainly, it was technicians who have actively started the promotion of this kind of agriculture. Since the beginning of last century when agriculture was introduced in Misiones, family farmers have been doing agriculture almost in the same way (as conventional farming, clearing the forest). It has been the current situation described before which has showed the limits of this organization, therefore it is not only tobacco then but the whole farm and economic system under question. However, this more general comprehension has been analysed not by farmers but by those intervening in the sector.

According to some local extensionists, the concepts in the agro-ecology perspective are very abstract for farmers to understand. They need to observe how it works on their own land; they need to see the technical workings of it, not the theory. They believe that farmers can understand and incorporate agro-ecological practices better when they have to produce and manage their own production.

### **The agro-ecology approach from the actors' point of view**

"Within the organizations that work with ecological agriculture there are also different visions"  
(local extensionist, Posadas, 2008)

The agro-ecological discourse varies depending on the actors who reproduce it and the strategies they are able and willing to put forward in order to make it concrete. While for some local actors it is merely a proposal for sustainable management of natural resources for others it is more a political and economic statement: for them, agro-ecology means the autonomy of the farmers from markets where they have no power for price formation, and versus the construction of new markets where they retain more power and the ability to participate in policy making and in setting the agenda for the agricultural sector. Here I elaborate about these diverse actors: their visions, strategies, cooperation and conflicts.

The main organization to promote agro-ecology in the province and to spread its principles in other rural development strategies was the PSA. When the programme started its intervention in 1993 the provincial coordinator and its staff gave it a particular characteristic in the context of Argentina: an environmental concern when approaching development in rural areas.

Nevertheless, it is important to mention that in the province, in the same year that the PSA was launched, a local organization of farmers was institutionalized. The RAOM is an association of farmers and rural families that present itself as being an open, plural and democratic movement from diverse social organizations that promotes organic family agriculture as a proposal to development and a way of life for the province of Misiones. The members agree that the conventional agriculture production characterized by the use of agro-toxics monoculture, dependence from extra local inputs and a lack of respect to nature and peoples. This means that even though PSA was important in helping the diffusion of agro-

ecological practices and to put it into other public agencies and NGO agendas, there was in the province already a network of agro-ecologists.<sup>13</sup>

### **Public sector**

The PSA (and its second phase the PROINDER<sup>14</sup>) introduced the agro-ecological proposal to other local agencies and organizations when granting and dispensing subsidies and credits to farmers, extending water and soil management technology, training people in farm management, etc. Gradually, most of the agencies and grass-root organizations in the rural development arena in Misiones commune with the agro-ecology principles.

Since the programme was the only comprehensive policy of rural development and it was opened to social participation, all the coordination strategies made with NGO and farmers' organizations were somehow framed within this approach/methodology. The PSA is the still one of the main actors - together with the Food Security Programme (PROHUERTA) - with the financial resources to spread agro-ecology.

The PSA-PROINDER understand that in the same way the biodiversity needs to be preserved due to the fragile environment of Misiones, the farmers should construct a more diversify farm. In fact, the programme understands that agro-ecology comprises the following ideas: (i) it is imperative to go back to an agriculture production that fits the natural cycles and do not incorporate chemicals into the environment, (ii) it is necessary to diversify the farms not only for as a way to sustain and increase incomes and reduce risks but also to increase productivity from an ecological perspective, (iii) it is very important to perform an agriculture which is base in concepts of solidarity and equity (PSA, 1999).

The programme organized training courses and interchange of information with Brazil to observe how the neighbouring farmers were doing agriculture with ecological care. Interesting here to mention is that the proposal was a gradually adding followers because it was a participatory approach, it was not top-down but a jointly construction between farmers and extensionists.

There is another agency intervening in rural development in Misiones from the national government, the National Institute of Agriculture Technology (INTA). The Institute runs many programmes, one of them PROHUERTA, which deals with the distribution of seeds and the construction of vegetal gardens and small animals farms. The programme mainly works with women groups and promotes organic vegetal gardens because it is a "natural" and "economic" way to produce "healthy" horticulture during the whole year around: "Natural because it imitates the processes of nature, economic because we save money when producing our own food, healthy because we produce without chemicals" (PROHUERTA, 2005: 3). In order to create more fertile and productive soil and healthy crops, the programme proposes to use the following techniques: associations, rotation and compost (organic fertilizers). The crop association is used as a way to "imitate the processes of the nature".

Regarding now to the provincial government, even though there is a law from 1999 that promotes "ecological production for family agriculture", the public sector does not

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<sup>13</sup> PSA recognized this when it states that: "Farmers and extensionist all around the province were working silently in an organic proposal. In May 1993 it was born the Network of Organic Agriculture of Misiones that unites them and gives them strength. From the PSA what we did and we continue doing is to rescue what the smallholders had been doing for an organic agriculture. To support through credit, training and technical assistance and to communicate the proposal to the rest of the families" (PSA, 1999: 22).

<sup>14</sup> Project of Development for Agriculture Smallholders (PROINDER).

contemplate resources to intervene in rural areas with farmers. Despite the creation of new legislation and institutions, the provincial government is characterized by the lack of policies framed within the agro-ecological discourse. Their strategy limits to deliver seed in some areas of the province and to give credits through some provincial programmes (for cattle, honey production, fish, and fruits). These programmes have no persistence in the long term and when an administration is changed, they stop functioning. The exception is those programmes that count with national budget and technical support. The discourse from the provincial government contemplates family agriculture linked to food production but also pine and cattle.

The provincial government differs from the national government in its intervention because the discourse toward family agriculture and rural development is framed more in “productivist” model. Even though, from 2008 there is a tendency to incorporate the discourse of food security and sovereignty. The following comment from public servant is very critical in this sense:

“And the discourse changed. They join to more progress discourse, so now we talk about food security (...) we have a programme of food security that if you analyse, it has a huge contradiction. For 4 years we have delivered seeds to the farmers. It is claimed the need for autonomy, that the farmers hold the seed and do not need the government giving them seed every year. These contradictions are very... for those that have certain... cannot be sustained. We cannot talk about food security and sufficiency if we say what the farmers has to produce, giving them the seed. Food security has to be decided bottom-up, has to be decided from the farmer sector, the peasants” (provincial public servant, Posadas, 2008)

### ***Nongovernmental organizations (NGO)***

The more radical discourse regarding agro-ecology emanates from some local NGO. They are able to adopt this approach because they are funded by international actors that allow them to confront the state in certain issues. This is at least possible at the level of discourse. In the practice they may encounter problems in making the proposal a reality. These NGO tackle a more contentious political issue: that of autonomy highly concentrated capitals and the markets in which farmers are engaged. In this sense, their claims are in the same vein as those of the *Via Campesina*. In order to resist what they see as an exclusionary process they adopt and promote the agro-ecology discourse by making farmers conscious about the advance of monoculture, the dominance and unfairness of international markets that have little to do with the local ones and the differing views of organic production in the North:

“We lost many cultural elements, because of the imposition of the dominant countries; we lost many traditional crops and we changed them for those crops that the most powerful countries need. Soya and pine are good examples. Agro-ecology has the tools close at hand to recover crops and the culture that belong to us. To take back crops is an element of freedom” (Yahdjian, 2008).

“When we started with RAOM in 1993, fifteen years ago, we had little experience. We started to put these issues on the table and hold discussions between extensionists and some organizations, and a little with the state... [to form] some kind of linkages. However it is a political proposal... The model incorporates the family inside the farm. Agro-ecology without the farmers... or family agriculture outside agro-ecology is not possible for me... This is different to organic production, when you live in Michigan, you have your farm in California and you do organic agriculture. You have employees... the protocol from the certifying company tell you what to you, how much to use, the inspector comes, certifies your organic products. [That] is not an agriculture that is socially [constructed]” (public servant, MAyP, Posadas, 2008).

Nevertheless, this radical discourse from NGO is not completely supported by the farmers' sector, which understand that other crops such as pine are necessary to diversify incomes or to access new markets.

The Institute of Social Development and Human Promotion (INDES) intervenes in the north of the province with an approach called *Enfoque Integral de Chacras*. The team is well-known in Misiones for pursuing and practice the agro-ecological perspective through this proposal. It comprehends the incorporation of new organizational and productive technology to manage soil, water and production (green covers, zero tilling, rotation, intercrop, common organization of machinery, homemade industrialization, products interchange, etc.). The members of INDES consider that this approach to farm management is not only economical but also social and political because it is participative and participation is a political process:

“It is political because from the agro-ecological perspective, the management of the farm... from there it could be observed the problems of the whole territory, of the community, it was not only the production question. And these questions lead them to make petitions to the state, somehow to request for their rights and they are not having any answer. And political also because it allowed seeing which are the issues important for them. For example in Pozo Azul, they want to have autonomy, to be able to define what they need and want for that territory, observing their problems. There were some things they wanted to do only from the organization, not at the community level and they noticed that if they didn't think out of the organization they could not achieve. So it is political from that logic, very basic” (local extensionist, San Pedro, 2008).

The interesting issue concerning INDES' intervention in Misiones is that they are an NGO that have gradually built links with tobacco companies, particularly with the provincial cooperative. This is particular because it means their ideology is “flexible” and they can understand the current situation of the market and farmers so as to accompany them:

In the context of the agro-ecological discourses, working with tobacco companies is observed with suspicion. The same interviewee mentions that tobacco growing and the value chain in which farmers are engaged is structural, and that change would be most effective from this existing structure; they are adopting a “fight it from inside” approach. Once the capacity for the local soils to grow tobacco is exhausted, they will leave and in the long run, farmers' income will deteriorate even further:

“... the tobacco companies, whether you acknowledge it or not, will still exist... All around here you find tobacco growers who have made disasters with their land in another area of the province and have to leave their farms because they could not produce tobacco anymore, they migrate towards here, looking for new soil, new parcels of land. If they continue with that methodology, in five, ten years they will be in the same conditions as before, if they don't do any management of the soil... [If tobacco companies don't support better soil management] tobacco production will no longer be profitable in Misiones. It will need more and more external inputs. We understand that. And we are not thinking about how to help the tobacco companies, we think about the farmers, because the first ones that will be screwed up will be the farmers. Because if the tobacco company... doesn't work here, they will go away to somewhere else, they don't care. But if we can make that companies promote this, then we succeed in not destroying the soil in the farms” (local extensionist, San Pedro, 2008)

### ***Farmer's organizations***

From the information collected in interviews it is possible to observe in that in general, farmers' organizations are not familiar with the concept of agro-ecology. Where this is not the case, the framing of the organizations within the ecological agriculture discourse are a result of their strategic alliances with NGO or RDP. When asked about it, farmers confused “agro-ecology” with “ecology”. They identify the term with the Ministry of Ecology (locally known

as “Ecology”) and its environmental regulations (e.g. the prohibition of deforestation and land clearing in particular areas).

Many farmers have been applying agronomic techniques promoted as “agro-ecological”, even though they were not acquainted with the term, because soil deterioration and water pollution were causing falls in their incomes. For them, food production is only an option if it means an income and, secondly, an improvement of family consumption.

The farmers’ associations organized for legal access to land in North San Pedro have a particular understanding about agro-ecology. They mostly do not know the concept, and if they do, they link it to the strategy used by the NGO involved in land mobilization in the area. NGO portrayed family agriculture in the area as more environmentally friendly than forestry and logging companies. The use of agro-ecological practices to take care of natural resources was an argument used to convince the provincial government to consider land expropriation and its redistribution. These practices would include the use of green covers and organic compost, intercropping and rotation along with food production.

However, the evidence points that these NGO (INDES, APHyDAL) were not able to work with the entirety of families in the area, and that these agronomic techniques were not used or known by name. One of the farmers interviewed commented about the disagreements between NGO and farmers’ organizations when using the ‘excuse’ of agro-ecology to politically defend their right to the land:

“They [APHyDAL] forced us to lie. They said they taught us. We were pretty ignorant. They accompanied us, they took us to Posadas [provincial capital]... They lied. They lied about us using green covers... why lie? We have to lie... They asked me once in Posadas, and he [NGO president] wanted me to lie. And I didn’t want to lie, I don’t need to lie. Then I left the fight and didn’t go there anymore. That we are using green covers...! We never use green covers!... Many have to lie in Posadas, they have to say we use green covers... They have to lie to the Ministry of Agriculture... It is okay... that lie helped us a little, because at least they [land owners] stop pressuring us. Because who claims to be the owner of the land made a lot of pressure because... they [we farmers] burn the forest... if you set a fire they would take a picture; they were always watching you. That was the excuse they had to take us out of the land. So that little lie helped us to get what we wanted,” (farmer, San Pedro, 2009).

Among local cooperatives or associations and production specialized cooperatives, there is only one that consider itself being agro-ecological. The rest do not frame their activities within this discourse, even though they promote many of the practices of agro-ecology among their members and they foster the idea of constructing new markets and new channels of commercialization in a way where farmers hold on more power.

## **Collective spaces of agro-ecology**

Different social spaces involving diverse actors have gradually been constructed in Misiones around the promotion of agro-ecology, and particularly the fostering of “seed saving”. The Seed Fairs (*feria de semillas*) are the main, and probably the best example of these kinds of spaces. These are depicted by local actors as a space to challenge industrial agriculture, which they believe has very bad consequences for biodiversity and agricultural production (genetic erosion, the patenting of genetic material and economic concentration in the agriculture sector among others) (Gorriti, 2001).

The fairs are jointly organized by many different actors in the rural development arena of Misiones. Its aim is to facilitate and promote the interchange of local seeds and other genetic material used by farmers that have proven to be well adapted to the local environment:

“The objective of the meeting is to freely interchange seeds that are cultivated traditionally by farmers and that are highly valued for different qualities such as productivity, resistance to pests and diseases, precocity, medicinal and culinary properties, among others. These seeds have characteristics that cannot be found in the seed sales shops (...). These seeds pass from one generation to another as a fundamental part of the farmers’ heritage, circulating from hand to hand in rural communities without entering into the mercantile circuit. Under the generic term SEEDS grains, cuttings, seedlings, rhizomes and buds are being interchanged” (Gorriti, 2001: 20).

Since the first provincial Seed Fair in 1997, an annual fair has been organized by RDP and NGO who “mobilize” farmers from the countryside to the town where the fair is held. More recently, there has been one provincial fair every two years and a regional one in between. Involved in these are not only families from Misiones, but also farmers’ organizations from other provinces and from Paraguay and Brazil and urban dwellers. All this has benefited the urban - rural linkages and foster the importance of consuming local produce.

The idea is that those farmers who have participated come back to their communities and share the experience of participating and interchanging information and genetic material with the others. During the year, they collect diverse kinds of seeds (corn, rice, peas, soya, green covers, etc.), plants and seedlings which later are shared. The high participation of farmers in its organization is an exceptional feature of the event: without the material gathered and brought by the families the fairs could not take place.

In these fairs, most of the participants are representatives of groups supported by the RPD (mainly PSA-PROINDER and PROHUERTA) and local NGO. The national government is the main source of resources however, the costs are shared among these actors. While for some NGO and RDP it might be “a space of contestation”, for farmers it is a space of social participation and communion. It is also a space where they learn about the importance of seed; farmers say: “the seed is a right, what can we do without seeds or land?” The organizations involved in these events, but also in the seed saving which takes place all year around, believe that community seeds should be free and that should be available for everybody and not only for those that can buy them in the market.

These seeds fairs have permitted the construction of a common vision around the importance of local genetic material preservation and interchange. The introduction of certain grain crops (such as maize) or green cover seeds in the farms have allowed farmers to engage in horticulture and soil conservation, gradually letting them improve their incomes. Most importantly, it is not only a social space of social participation but a political space for raising the environmental, economic and political concerns related to family agriculture and its sustainability in the face of agriculture based on industrial standards:

“These spaces are very important, because they have always promoted the participation of farmers, a process of discussion about the political importance of seed, the importance of having one’s own seeds, technical discussions regarding the transgenic crops, the dependence on external inputs, the appropriation of the rights of the peoples by the corporations, all those issues we tried to discuss... Why should certain seeds condition our activity? It is an interesting space for the political education of farmers and technicians, to understand the process of appropriation and transfer from one sector to another, from one country to another” (extensionist, NGO and public sector, Posadas, 2007).

With the experience accumulated, the organizers created the Movement for the Peasants’ Seeds of Misiones (*Movimiento por las Semillas Campesinas*). In 2005, this network of

actors decided to give itself a name, as a way to “formalize” their situation. Their slogan is “Seeds, heritage of the people at the service of humankind”. One aim of the movement is to make public the situation of family agriculture in the province. They seek to promote farmers’ political and economic organization in order to strengthen their social participation.

The movement discourse is based on a strong opposition to an agriculture based on industrial standards of modernization. They claim the need to return to local food production. The actors understand that it is the large corporations that commercialize seeds, pesticides and agro-toxics, and who are the ones to blame for the deterioration of local gene pools and deforestation:

“This great diversity has been the foundation of our nutrition, but today it is threatened. Monocultures and transnational monopolies are destroying the rich harvest of seeds that have been bequeathed to us by nature and by families of farmers through the centuries... And in this way our nourishment becomes poorer every day... In the same way that global markets replace local markets, monocultures are replacing diversity. And diversity can be preserved only by growing it, making it part of our lives” (Movimiento por las Semillas Campesinas, 2006).

The Seed Movement understands that if the province continues importing seed there will be a tremendous loss of biodiversity, there will be a loss in the local seed pool and that family farmers will depend more and more on companies that produce seeds. They also observed that after forty years of “green revolution”, poverty in rural areas still remains and the only ‘successes’ were the commodification of natural resources and the increased dependency of farmers on global markets. In this context, the preservation and non-commodification of seeds joins food production and the promotion of local markets at the centre of their discourse:

“Without seeds, as well as without land or water, we cannot support our families and our people. Along with the seed, its variety and history, we want to strengthen family farming, crop diversity, agro-ecological production, participation and solidarity interchange. We want to work for the empowerment of farmers so that they are able to confront the current model of monoculture which imposed a great use of purchased inputs and lead to the dependence of the farmers on the market. Because the power to decide what to plant, how much and how to produce food is to ensure food sovereignty in the hands of communities” (Movimiento por las Semillas Campesinas, 2006).

“The Seed Movement allowed the construction of another space and is open to everybody, even though it has logic of defence; we are in a struggle. We want to preserve the autonomy of farmers through their access to genetic material... Many seek the preservation of ‘local seeds’. Instead, we seek ‘seed diversity’. Why? Because if we focus only on local seeds... maybe in one area their seeds were lost but in another they still keep them, so in this space of the Seed Fairs it is possible to get them. You can acquire genetic material that maybe once existed in your territory but was lost. Maybe it is few, but with three seeds you can reproduce them. That is important; you can get hold of that material once again... All the South of the province, the border to Brazil, there is nothing. There are no local varieties of maize. Because when the peso was 1 to 1 with the US dollar, in Brazil it was very cheap to go and buy seed” (farmer and extensionist, San Pedro, 2008).

Among its achievements, the movement and the Seed Fairs can count the following: (a) the increased awareness in the countryside about biodiversity loss and natural resource degradation, (b) the fostering of farmers social participation in issues related to agriculture, (c) the creation of a collective space of social participation among diverse organizations, (d) the fostering of food production and crop diversification, (e) their influence in policy making at the provincial and national level, (f) the introduction in the province of the discourse about food security and sovereignty, (g) the rescue of the peasant identity, (h) the construction of social networks and (i) the creation of seed production pools in the North of the province.

## **The construction of farmers' local markets (*ferias francas*)**

The commercialization of food production in local markets in diverse localities of Misiones is the result of a tenacious work among diverse actors.<sup>15</sup> From 1995 when the first market was opened in the city of Oberá these markets became a kind of icon and an example of the concrete possibilities and promises of an alternative rural development in Misiones.<sup>16</sup>

From the very beginning these markets have been supported by the national state (in particular from the INTA, the PROHUERTA and the PSA-PROINDER) and the municipalities where they were installed. Not only have RPD granted financial support to informal grass-root to set up a process of organization but also assisted through information and training. The local governments, on the other hand, created the institutional regulations which allowed a *feria* (market) to be *franca*. This means that the markets do not pay certain local taxes and therefore they are able to sell fresh and good quality food with lower prices.

The context of price deterioration of the traditional crops served to frame the idea of launching the *ferias francas*. Farmers' organizations and RDP thought that it could be good to re-introduce food production, in the same way Brazilians had been doing. Local farmers markets had been opened in Brazil from long time, therefore, *misioneros* learnt from their experience before organizing the structure of functioning and opening finally the first one.

They are a successful entrepreneurship that gathers farmers three times a week to sell their horticulture produce, eggs, chicken, pork, bakery, marmalades and other home industrialization products. In the production and commercialization the whole families is involved.

These local markets are members of the Association of Farmers' Markets of Misiones (AFFM) a provincial association which unites all of them and serves as a channel of information and access to resources from the provincial and national state.<sup>17</sup> In San Pedro, there is another local market. It is as well a space of commercialization but with a different structure of organization, since they do not participate of the AFFM.

If compared with other farmers' organizations, these have been the only one created during the decade of 1990's. This means as well that they are the outcome of a real process of grass-root organization; they are not just an imperative from an NGO or RDP.

The participation of women in these markets is decisive. Certainly, women's role in the domestic economy in Misiones is linked to food production (horticulture, small animals' husbandry) since they are in charge of children and the house, they are providers of food. In general, when selling the food surplus in local markets men do not engage in the commercialization. Selling food is a matter of women, and also producing it.<sup>18</sup> Historically, male members have had "the right to urban space" to deal with the commercialization of

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<sup>15</sup> The social and political dynamics behind the creation of the first farmers' local market in Misiones have been analyzed in previous studies (Nardi and Pereira, 2006 and 2007).

<sup>16</sup> This has also been the first market in Argentina. Neighbouring provinces have copied also the idea.

<sup>17</sup> In 2008, the association received a subsidy from the national government. It was distributed to each market and each of them decided autonomously to use the money (for common purposes or individual, at the farm level).

<sup>18</sup> In Aristóbulo del Valle, however, more men participate accompanying their spouses and selling the products. Probably this is because (a) of the short distances to farms which able men and women to go to the town together or (b) in general couples are older and some men are retired.



industrial crops. With the creation of these new markets where the surplus of family consumption is sold as an “extra” income to the tobacco and yerba mate, women got access to urban space. This is indeed highly appreciated by those women participating in these spaces of commercialization.

Women from both markets in San Pedro point that it is not easy to take part and involve themselves in the *ferias* since they have to work even more at the farm in order to increase farm production (vegetable volumes, homemade bakery, sausages, marmalades and dairy products), move to the town to sell it and also take care of the children and husbands. Moving from the farm to the town can be very difficult for many reasons: (a) bad conditions of infrastructure, (b) heavy rains, (c) long distances, (d) not easy access to public transportation, (e) lack of automobiles, (f) many children to take care of at home. They also mention that this activity takes time they need to dedicate to domestic activities at home.

Nevertheless, they highly valued being *feriantes* (people that commercialize in this kind of markets) because the market is a social space of meeting and socialization with the urban population and with other rural families. They also find that this kind of project reintroduce the role of women in the urban society and also the family, since now they are providers not only of food but also a regular income. They consider that being women is an advantage over men when selling products face-to-face. In this regard, one of them mentions that: “women we know how to deal with clients that come to buy vegetables, men do not have the ability to sell” (farmers, local farmers’ market, San Pedro, 2008)

Farmers commercializing products in the local markets grant importance to these spaces because of diverse motives, among them, it counts: (a) producing and selling healthy food with no chemicals, (b) taking care of the family nutrition and health, (c) visiting the city and interchanging products with urban dwellers, (d) women participation in selling products, (e) producing crops taking care of the environment and (f) producing food crops instead of industrial ones.

Very much linked to the discourses and practices of NGO, RDP and other public agencies in the rural development arena, these markets share the common objective of improving farmers’ incomes and supplying towns with fresh and health food, therefore this intervention is framed in terms of “food security” and “food sovereignty”.

Despite the interesting dynamics created around the markets, their development (new farmers, greater volumes commercialized) has shown limits. This has lead different actors to search for new types of markets and/or channels of food commercialization. More recently, on the other hand, some studies have pointed out that due to the gender division of domestic work, the lack of income accountability and access to new information and tools for innovation, the fairs seem to be predestinated to be marginalized in the domestic economy and therefore also in the local economy, “constituting a restrict circuit” (Schiavoni, 2010).

The limits of development of these markets are put not only from the demand side (urban dwellers) but also the constraints to increase production at the farm level, to maintain quality and weekly delivery of food. In this sense, Schiavoni (2010: 128) mentions that:

“*Ferias Francas*, the way they have evolved in Misiones during the last decade, are projects that require being broadened through the systematic rescue of local knowledge, the diffusion of quality standards, specialization and the generation of the cost of production in order to turn them into alternatives of valorisation of the family agriculture”.<sup>19</sup>

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<sup>19</sup> In Spanish in the original. Translation of the author.

## Ecological agriculture and its constraints in Misiones

Some actors in the rural development arena do not agree with the most radical version of agro-ecology spread by some NGO or local extensionists. However, many of those who are engaged in the promotion of the principles of agro-ecology agree that it is neither simple nor easy to apply most of the concepts of this perspective, given the structural conditions under which family agriculture operates.

The main challenges to the implementation of agro-ecological practices are tobacco production and large scale forestry. Is it possible to apply an agro-ecological perspective when tobacco is still dominating the agriculture sector in Misiones and tobacco companies still exercise a lot of influence in political decisions? The fervent promotion of large scale forestry is another of the main restrictions. According to many, the state assigns resources for forestry, stimulating processes of land acquisition, water grabbing and pollution. Meanwhile there is no “serious” support for rural development in the family agriculture sector: there is no technology research and extension, no assistance to access new markets or create new channels of commercialization, and there is no easy access to bank credit or micro-credit.

Even though the actors involved in supporting the fairs demand state intervention, the notion that markets are pivotal for economic growth is central in their discourse. They dispute the idea that markets are easy to build and demand state support in order to facilitate farmers’ organizations and agriculture reorientation to access and create new local and regional markets. The key questions include: how can new markets be created so that farmers can change from tobacco to food production? How can markets be created in which farmers retain autonomy and decision power while still meeting the supply needs? The following statements from different local actors are telling:

“To live in the farm is nice. But is it hard, because conditions on the farm are difficult. [One must] have a minimum structure, an organized productive process with a little more processing and value addition; [one must] be able to close the productive cycle. Otherwise you are just a producer of raw material, or a tobacco grower, where you are slave of the tobacco companies. Nowadays, many criticize tobacco plantations from an agro-ecological point of view, [they are] totally against it... but why do [farmers] do tobacco knowing the costs? They do it because it is the only crop that has an assured market. For the rest of the crops there isn’t a market organized in this province” (farmer, extensionist, San Pedro, 2008).

“There is a tremendous need amongst the people. Therefore, you have to try to help them produce tobacco without agro-toxins. But you cannot say to the farmer - ‘agro-ecology this way and tobacco that way’ - [it will work better] if they are together, if they are interlinked... In the *colonia* they are like that. The steady income of the farmer comes from the tobacco... tobacco companies brain wash them. They say that what you are doing is the best, the international companies do the same, and they indoctrinate them into believing that what [these companies] come to do here is to save the farmer” (local extensionist, Aristóbulo del Valle, 2008).

Another concern is regarding diversification as part of the agro-ecological discourse. How far can diversification be developed when it is time consuming and there are no markets where produce can be sold? The attack to monoculture comes from the biodiversity point of view and from the autonomy perspective of farmers from concentrated markets. Local actors consider that a diversified farm is more stable and sustainable in the long term than one that produces only one crop. However, the issue would be how to find a balance between a diversified farm and a more specialized farm producing good quality crops for the (local or regional) market. Some local actors observe that farmers “do everything but they do not do anything”.

Diversification is also time consuming in terms of farm labour and political participation. Since in most of the cases, cooperatives are “crop oriented”, it is not easy for diversified farmers to participate in them in order to arrange prices, get information, etc. Some advocate the construction of “networks of solidarity” in the countryside, instead of using the market mechanism in order to diversify at a territorial level and not at farm level.

Another concern that could constrain the practice and concretization of the agro-ecological discourse might be the conflict that sometimes occurs between farmers and extensionists (whether from NGO or public agencies). This can be put in term of class conflict, since the needs of the farmers is different from those of the extensionist:

“Those extensionists that they [the NGO] brought didn’t want to walk around our farm, to get their hands dirty! They just wanted money, because there was a grant from Germany. APHyDAL brought one or two extensionists, one in agro-ecology, and other in forestry... people from outside! They didn’t know what they were doing! People that didn’t know even how to step on the soil, and they got a salary. They distribute the money from Germany among themselves” (farmer, San Pedro, 2009).

In some places, the “radicalization” of the discourse and the promotion of a discourse based on theoretical knowledge but not implementation has made farmers stop participating in workshops about agro-ecology or training courses for food production. They describe how participation is time consuming and if they do not work in the farm, they suffer the consequences of losing production or productivity because their incomes decrease.

It can also be observed that some NGO or RDP have to promote agro-ecology because there are certain conditions from the international funders. They do not fully understand the ideas behind agro-ecology and just continue doing extension as usual:

A good example of the conflicts that might occur between extensionists’ and farmers’ interests is the inclusion of small scale forestry on the farms for income diversification in the long term. For those actors communing with a more ecological version of agriculture, pine is the enemy. They do not encourage farmers to invest in forestry and do not inform them about the possibilities of accessing public subsidies to do so. Farmers later regret that they have not done this, and seek to find ways to incorporate pine in their farms.

The above leads to reflect about the following: can pine or any other genetically modified crop be part of an agro-ecological proposal for poor areas? Is it wrong to incorporate pine as part of the strategies of product and income diversification? Is pine in small scale as environmental negative as in big scale? It is possible to argue that yes, it is negative since soil acidity may difficult future crops to be grown in areas where pine were planted, the answers should be find upon deeper reflection but those actors involved in rural development are promoting an alternative rural development based on agro-ecological practices.

Other questions can also be posed. How can agro ecological approaches be in balance with the current needs of the market? In particular, how can food production be increased and improved on small farms where perennial crops are an important investment, which are not easy to remove or replace and which occupying space? This is the tension between diversification and specialization in a particular environment. The following comments are very illustrative since they show how different actors position themselves in this matter:

“People are waiting for the prices of yerba to improve, they are still thinking of their *yerbal* [mate-plantation]. We should start considering taking away old *yerbales* [that have been going for] thirty, thirty five years and prepare pasture... to clean [the land] and improve cattle production. Start specializing more in that” (local extensionist, Aristóbulo del Valle, 2009).

“I believe there should be other alternatives which do not take away [*yerbales*] because that is something perennial. In Misiones the tree is very important. It is very important. And in any case, perennials like the yerba (which is not a tree, it is a big bush), anything that has deep roots, is very important for me, because soil deterioration and other issues like that are very much connected... It is hard to make people observe the erosion. Very difficult, sometimes farmers cannot see this” (local extensionist, Aristóbulo del Valle, 2008).

Since there is not yet a market for organic products in Argentina and in South America in general, the agro-ecological production is difficult to sustain since prices are the same than those for the conventional products. Therefore, it may not be cost effective for certain farmers to use organic practices since these - though environmental sustainable - demand more working hours and are therefore not easy to sustain at the long run if this is translated into overexploitation of the family members.

Finally, another is the matter of those actors that give agro-ecology a political twist and intent to “confront large scale capital”, paying less attention to the market and the farmers’ production. Those actors find it more difficult to “change the system” because in order to do so it is necessary financial and human resources. These NGO believe that structural change cannot be conducted neither without economic support or peoples’ mobilization:

“If we don’t make of this something stronger in its organization and it’s only left at the family level or at the community level, of course we’re never going to acquire political strength so as to... because the idea is to change something. We want to change this model, or at least we dream about changing something (local extensionist, NGO, San Pedro, 2006).

“The fight in general is against the monopolies, the large scale companies. Those are the one that distort everything, the ones that generate poverty, the ones that generate everything (...) we, as organization, we are not so strong so as to go and confront them right now. We need to be stronger, to incorporate many more organizations... In order to confront Alto Paraná we need to have money, we need to be a lot of people” (local extensionist, NGO, San Pedro, 2007).

## **Final reflections**

It can be observed that in the province of Misiones, there are rural development actors intervening with a clear proposal towards a family agriculture more sustainable. Here, the national state seems to be an important actor to consider in order understanding the ongoing dynamics in the countryside. Even though the national public sector is not homogenous, some of its agencies have built an interesting alliance with grass-root associations (cooperatives, NGO, women associations). The shared ideas about agro-ecology have permitted it. In Argentina, the NGO have in general confronted the state. Here it seems that there is room to build a different society - state relation. Still, the demands that can be made from within these agencies are not radical. Such demands most of the time come from NGO which confront particularly the provincial state.

The more general territorial processes in which family agriculture is framed seem to be working as a force against it. These forces are characterized by activities performed by large or international corporations that have market power (buy land, produce large scale forestry, hire local labour, etc.) and by the lack of presence of the provincial or national state to make a realistic agrarian policy to support family agriculture.

Farmers attribute to the market failures and the state lack of support their main causes of resources’ exploitation: “we have to cut down the trees because the soil in our plot is deteriorated and we need to go into the native forest”. They consider that if they received state

support to incorporate new technologies, to have access to the market or to create new channels of commercialization they will not need to exploit natural resources.

The agro-ecological proposal is intending to construct a diverse society, another relation between the farmer sector and nature, by introducing new practices of natural resource management. Even though it does not mean a structural change, it does mean particular territorial dynamics important to take into account when reflecting about social relations in rural areas, about rural development and about the construction of new social and physical spaces.

There a diverse range of actors that benefit from these practices. It is mainly farmers who gain. But also extensionists from NGO and rural development programmes who, aligned with the international and national discourse, can reproduce themselves in the arena of rural development. In Misiones, the extensionists from the rural development arena are a clear element of a middle class in formation in the countryside. To do so, they need a strategic alliance with the farmer sector.

By being able to “appropriate” physical space (natural resources) in a particular way, farmers sustain and reproduce themselves in a social space (in the rural society). The role of nature preservation in rural development and poverty reduction is understood by the rural development arena as a mean to sustain agriculture and “root” families to the land. It is observed as a way to improve productivity, to improve farm incomes, to improve families’ nutrition and to cut down farm expenses by avoiding the payment of out farm inputs (such as agro-chemicals, seeds, etc.).

There is a gradual construction of an alternative way of social organization of natural resource preservation and agriculture: a new way of relating with the forest, the land and water. It is a territorial process that supposes to “fix” people in space (farmers should not migrate) by giving them the chance to live on agriculture. By being farmers and remaining in the land, there is possibility of reproduce the family agriculture sector, a contestation, a resistance to the current transformation of land abandonment in Argentina and capital penetration in the agriculture sector.

“Rooting farmers to the land can be read in different ways. One is the reproduction of the force of labour of the tobacco companies and another is the contestation to large scale forestry which needs land and not farmers. Since there seems to be no alternative crop for monetary income than tobacco, staying in the farm so far could mean the reproduction of cheap labour for the tobacco companies. For those that are not engaged in tobacco plantation food production and sustainable natural resource management means an important way to sustain their livelihoods in the countryside. The key here is the role of the state in helping creating the necessary markets so that farmers could stop planting tobacco.

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