



Revista de Administração - RAUSP

ISSN: 0080-2107

rausp@edu.usp.br

Universidade de São Paulo

Brasil

Emerenciano Mendonça, Patrícia Maria; Alves, Mário Aquino  
Institutional entrepreneurship and professionalization of the rural development of the sisal region in  
Brazil  
Revista de Administração - RAUSP, vol. 47, núm. 3, julio-septiembre, 2012, pp. 489-499  
Universidade de São Paulo  
São Paulo, Brasil

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# *Institutional entrepreneurship and professionalization of the rural development of the sisal region in Brazil*

**Patrícia Maria Emerenciano Mendonça**  
**Mário Aquino Alves**

Recebido em 21/maio/2012  
 Aprovado em 23/julho/2012

Sistema de Avaliação: *Double Blind Review*  
 Editor Científico: Nicolau Reinhard

DOI: 10.5700/rausp1053

## RESUMO

### **Empreendedorismo institucional e profissionalização do desenvolvimento rural da região do sisal no Brasil**

Neste artigo, analisa-se a profissionalização do campo do desenvolvimento rural na região Nordeste do Brasil e como esse fenômeno tem criado oportunidades para ações empreendedoras quando as práticas profissionais de agências de financiamento são traduzidas de acordo com as realidades locais. Essa profissionalização tem características particulares, uma vez que assume formas fluidas, a implantação de redes que contribuem para a teorização e a divulgação de certas práticas, em vez de concentrar-se em associações profissionais e ligações formais com instituições de ensino. As principais consequências comumente associadas ao processo institucional de profissionalização são o aparecimento de certas formas de organização e a divulgação de práticas profissionais consideradas legítimas. Uma consequência adicional foi observada no domínio do desenvolvimento rural: ideias e práticas disseminadas por meio da experiência profissional sofrem uma reinterpretação, quando os empreendedores no setor as adaptam à sua própria lógica e às suas necessidades.

**Palavras-chave:** profissionalização, desenvolvimento rural, empreendedorismo institucional.

## 1. INTRODUCTION

This work observes the professionalization of rural development in the Northeast of Brazil and how this phenomenon acted as an institutional agent while also creating room for entrepreneurship, when the methodologies of rural development agencies were adapted to local realities.

*Patrícia Maria Emerenciano Mendonça*, Graduada em Administração pela Universidade Federal da Bahia, Mestre em *Social Policy and Planning in Developing Countries* pela *London School of Economics and Political Science*, Doutora em Administração Pública e Governo pela Fundação Getúlio Vargas – São Paulo, Pós-Doutora pela *University of Essex*, Inglaterra, é Professora Adjunta do Centro Universitário da FEI – São Paulo (CEP 01525-000 – São Paulo/SP, Brasil).  
 E-mail: pmendonca@fei.edu.br  
 Endereço:  
 Centro Universitário da FEI  
 Reitoria  
 Departamento de Administração  
 Rua Tamandaré, 688  
 Liberdade  
 01525-000 – São Paulo – SP

*Mário Aquino Alves*, Graduado em Direito pela Universidade de São Paulo, Graduado em Administração Pública, Mestre e Doutor em Administração de Empresas pela Escola de Administração de Empresas de São Paulo da Fundação Getúlio Vargas, é Pós-Doutorando na *HEC Montréal*, Canadá, e Professor Adjunto da Escola de Administração de Empresas de São Paulo da Fundação Getúlio Vargas (CEP 01313-902 – São Paulo/SP, Brasil).  
 E-mail: mario.alves@fgv.br

There is a rising interest in various disciplines in professional practices related to the **market** of development, the exchange of ideas, and resources and methodologies to help to lift certain populations to a level considered as developed. All of this undergoes a variety of changes through the years and at times gives rise to contrasting paradigms (VAN ROOY, 1998).

From colonial systems to international cooperation models, from the creation of financing agencies and development schools (THOMAS, 1996) to their critics (COOKE, 1998; ESCOBAR, 1998), from the need to develop management capacities in political sciences and the state (BRINKERHOFF, 2000; BRESSER PEREIRA and SPINK, 1998) to the management of organizations for the promotion of development (LEWIS, 2001), discussions on development have constantly centered on models, organizations, people and capacity.

We believe that professional practices are one dimension of the institutionalization of development as a social field. Professionalization can be understood as a structural element in social fields, but this process can lead to innovations as the actors go about reconstructing and appropriating practices.

In this study on the sisal region, in the state of Bahia, in the Northeast of Brazil, we aim to verify how the dissemination of themes and management models for rural development, promoted by international donors, doubly affect and transform practices related to the historical process of social mobilization in the region.

On one hand, one can say that professionalization reached the main organizations that lead mobilization in the area, which form a body of technical and symbolic knowledge that influences action in the field. Professionalization structures a social field as it produces new relationships and brings new legitimating resources to the field and because it creates a professional identity among its participants, reflecting their practices, vocabularies and networks.

On the other hand, it can also lead to innovation, particularly as regards more **fluid** forms of professionalization, not regulated as traditional professions and not as connected to formal education. The local actors do not embrace the new practices unreflectively but, instead, they reconstruct and incorporate them into their own repertoires.

## 2. RESEARCH DESIGN AND METHODOLOGY

The empirical analysis aims to describe the process of professionalization of rural development in the sisal region, recognizing that it includes the dissemination of certain practices through the circulation of information among professional groups (DiMAGGIO, 1991; GRENNWOOD, SUDDABY, and HININGS, 2002; LOUNSBURY, 2002). The fieldwork seeks to identify less formal categories of dissemination, given that the activities of rural development are multidisciplinary and have no specific regulation.

The second objective of the empirical description is to understand the entrepreneurial component of this professionalization, given that practices were not simply disseminated, but reconstructed by the actors once they were introduced into the sisal region. To this end, we had to trace cognitive resources available for the entrepreneurs in the field and to map how they were employed in converting certain practices to a local context. In order to achieve this, interviews were carried out with these professionals and also with project donors and with the organizations that they worked for. The scripts used were open, allowing the interviewees the freedom to construct their own depositions. In total, 34 interviews were carried out.

The first interviews sought to trace the pathway of the entrepreneurs in this field. They were identified via the researchers' prior knowledge and contacts in local organizations, centralizing the identification of their main participations in networks and the types of influences they were under. These initial interviews also aimed to check which of these actors would be singled out as central and, more important, donors and providers of field support for rural development in the sisal region. From these, the researchers selected certain donors for complementary interviews. Documentary research was also carried out to find out what the main programs and activities supported by donors in the sisal region were.

A second block of interviews was conducted, some of which were repetitions with part of the interviewees, to check how their professional practice worked and what their background was. The *curricula vitae* of certain technicians, advisors and consultants were also checked to verify common points in their educational background.

Besides the interviews, a variety of materials were collected during the visits: reports, bulletins, newsletters, videos, journals and other academic work conducted in the region. Furthermore, meetings, seminars and events that happened during visits were monitored in an observatory role.

Based on this extensive material, we sought to describe and to analyze how the social entrepreneurs in the sisal region interpreted and absorbed the professional practices and methodologies introduced by many of their donors (Non-Governmental Organizations [NGOs], international aid agencies and, more recently, foundations from the private sector).

## 3. PROFESSIONALIZATION AND THE PROCESS OF LEGITIMATING TECHNIQUES AND SYMBOLS

In institutional theory, professionalization is studied as a central element in the structuring of social fields and the transformation of institutional logic (DiMAGGIO, 1991; GRENNWOOD, SUDDABY, and HININGS, 2002; LOUNSBURY, 2002). Professionalization of organizational fields can be interpreted as the struggle of the members of a certain occupation to define its conditions and work methods and to

establish a cognitive base and occupational legitimacy for it (DiMAGGIO and POWELL, 1983).

Bourdieu (1989) talks of professionalization as an instrument of domination, in which technical power is transformed into political power. The political intent arises in relation to a state of political games regarding the universe of technical actions and expression, which can be offered at every moment. Thus, the techniques are used to limit the space of political discourse, limiting at the same time the universe of political thinking. The monopoly of production is delivered to a body of professionals and controlled by similar professionals, making those without technical skills unable to act politically.

Scott (2008) observes that professionalization can happen at a cultural-cognitive level, sharing the notion of epistemic communities, in which professional groups exercise control through ideas and the delimitation of presupposed ontologies, proposing distinctions, typifications and norms based on the shared understanding of the problems to be solved and of the approaches to be adopted.

For Weber (2004), legitimacy can be guaranteed in an affective, rational or religious manner, or even through the expectation of consequences. Technical skills are seen as rational forms in the construction of professional competences, determining assumptions and establishing norms for relations among individuals. Misoczky (2005) points out that the emphasis on technical authority as a particular source of legitimacy can be found in the differences between normative and regulative isomorphic mechanisms (DiMAGGIO and POWELL, 1983). In the normative isomorphic mechanisms, the pressure that induces action, without any form of threat or sanction, lies in the collective expectation of the standards of professional conduct and social roles (SCOTT, 2008). In the regulative isomorphic mechanisms, coercion is the inductive driver and it is reflected in the regulation of professional practice by the state or by professional associations. Here is where most of the traditional professions can be found. There are also the cognitive mechanisms, which can focus, for example, on sharing an occupational identity, thus creating a basis for the adoption of hegemonic references.

When we talk about professional communities being more **fluid**, as the nature of their work cannot be regimented around a specific professional category, it means that any possible regulative mechanisms applicable to formal professions will not be found. It seems that the mechanisms they engender to fulfill the institutional role of organizing practices and contributing to the construction of occupational identities are distinct from those employed in the more formal professional systems.

However, it can be difficult to identify and, in particular, to trace the limits of these **fluid** professions. The limits of professional practice are unclear and often fail to reflect the creation of professional associations or training systems and institutional training, for example, in universities.

In these cases, professionalization occurs through informal networks. However, this fulfills some of the institutional mechanisms found in formal professions, such as theorization and dissemination of certain practices.

DiMaggio and Powell (1983) point out that imitations (mimicking processes) are motivated by uncertainty. When, for example, organizational technologies are not entirely understood, when their objectives are ambiguous or when their context creates symbolic uncertainties, organizations can shape themselves based on the practices and forms of other organizations. As such, models and practices can be disseminated in an unattended manner via, for example, consultancies or associations and networks of organizations. Those models to be copied are perceived as legitimate and successful. Other sources of legitimating professional practices are the prestige of certain adopters and spatial proximity.

However, disseminated practices are unlikely to simply be reproduced. When they are carried from one place to another, room for their reinterpretation arises. One can see in this process an opportunity for entrepreneurial action.

The dissemination processes occur at the moment when the disseminated practices are adapted for use in different fields. This conversion involves selecting and transforming the ideas involved in a certain groups of practices. This is the case when the objective is to adopt them in a different institutional context (BOXENBAUM, 2005).

In other cases, the dissemination of professional practices can occur by imitation or by sharing identities. Strang and Soule (1998) highlight cohesion via strong ties (GRANOVETTER, 1983), where ideas and practices are transferred from one place to another to find resonance in a dense network that does not scatter them, making equivalent structures in this new group, but also adapting them according to the group's identity and symbolic resources. It involves the development or redevelopment of frameworks that, as Tarrow (1996) observes, are created from parts of extant repertoires, to which parts of the new initiative are added.

#### 4. THE SISAL REGION

The context of this analysis is the sisal region, which has semi-arid climate and lies in the Northeast of the Brazilian state of Bahia. The area is known for its sisal production, a very resistant plant, originally from Central America, that can survive in dry climates. In the Northeast, sisal is also known as **agave** and its fibers are used for making ropes, tapestry, bags, hats, ribbons to tie hay together, jewelry packaging and other craftwork. To avoid any waste, the by-product of the process of extracting the fibers from the sisal leaf is used for animal feed.

The sisal region has a population of approximately 550,000 inhabitants that live mainly in rural areas (63% of the total population) and some 52,000 families working in agriculture.

The demographic concentration is 80 inhabitants per square kilometer, considered typical of rural areas in many countries (IBGE, 2004). In recent years, the region has undergone a growing diversification of production, not only in agriculture but also, albeit more weakly, in industrial and service sectors.

The low rainfall in the area has always been one of the distinctive characteristics of the region. Even when there is some sparse rain, it is badly distributed and has a high level of evaporation, which makes it difficult to maintain the natural stock of water in the ground. Hirschman (1963) in his work *Journeys Towards Progress*, in the sixties, visited the region and attested that:

“Being rather dry, yet not dry enough to turn into desert, the *sertão*<sup>(1)</sup> is one of the healthier areas of the lowland tropics, with relatively few insects and plagues that are dangerous to man, cattle or crops” (HIRSCHMAN, 1963, p.14).

The difficulties of access to water feed a cycle of relations of dependency during the dry spells, which are reflected in a specific political culture, strongly characterized by informality and the personalization of relations. The region has some of the worst social indicators in Brazil in terms of education both of adults and of children, as well as low life expectancy and an income level below the median.

Child labor is one of the themes deserving special attention in the area and the national policy for the eradication of child labor was born there, in response to national and international pressures of human rights and development NGOs, including the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF).

The dry spells bring great financial instability for small-scale producers. This drives them to take on informal loans (usually from traders or middlemen that buy their sisal or their other products) and to accept favors of *coronéis* (the local oligarchs), who offer some form of assistance or provide emergency work.

Besides the above features, the sisal region and the other semi-arid areas of the Northeast of Brazil share a very distinctive local culture, revealed in the local music, celebrations, art and religion.

Until the mid-seventies, a period during which some initiatives designed to mobilize and organize these rural workers started being articulated, there was a strong relation between religious faith and the phenomenon of droughts. One cyclical climate characteristic was attributed to the absence of divine providence. Taking this into account, the entire social dynamics of the region took to relating with the drought phenomenon, including entrepreneurial projects, trips and even weddings. The country dweller is imbibed in this lifestyle and soil. When the hopes for rain stopped, it was the awaited moment for the government to act, as always and characteristically in a reactive manner.

Historically, a large part of this region has suffered from lack or systematic failure of efficient public policies, rather than only following its destiny, determined by the drought seasons. In the sixties, certain events motivated the rise of social movements in the area. On the international scene, there were great repercussions from the Cuban revolution among social sectors in Latin America. In Brazil, there was a military dictatorship and the emergence of agricultural policies, which privileged large-scale producers. Academics named these policies Conservative Modernization.

Paradoxically, the religious element became a portal to social mobilization, a central element in the strategic mobilization of social movements, mediated by progressive sectors of the Catholic Church that protested in Latin America, in what is called the Liberation Theology.

To this end, the clergymen would team up with laymen to reach rural communities, taking to them a critical interpretation of the word of God. There grew an organizational model named Ecclesiastical Community Bases (*Comunidades Eclesiais de Base* – CEBs) which quickly multiplied and, while still in the seventies, became consolidated in the rural areas as a model of organization for social movements, from where emerged leaders and new agricultural organizations, including unions, associations, cooperatives, and local NGOs such as the *Associação de Desenvolvimento Sustentável e Solidário da Região Sisaleira* (APAEB)<sup>(2)</sup> and *Movimento de Organização Comunitária* (MOC)<sup>(3)</sup>.

The CEBs appropriated the ideas of the educator Paulo Freire, who advocated developing mobilization strategies and redefining various meanings among the country people, especially those that concerned their relation with nature and religion.

The thoughts of Paulo Freire centered on the significance of reflection as an imperative learning process to bring together action and analysis (praxis), and as an element central to dialogue in the interaction between educators and **students**. The dialogue was constructed between the subjects mediated by the world. Or rather, the subjects only interacted creatively through action, through praxis, when taking on problems or conflicts that in turn became common problems. This would essentially consist of educational action: exposing human and social conflicts to challenge people and groups to integrate, in the pursuit of their common improvement (FREIRE, 1970; 1993).

The mobilization strategies of the CEBs aimed to modify the deeply ingrained logic of resignation, according to which poverty and exploitation were the natural fruits of God's will. Raising awareness was based on biblical readings, directed by priests and laymen. In this work, the incompatibilities of certain institutional processes became evident, such as the relations of dependency and favors imposed by local elites during droughts and the lack of social services. The reflection occurred in addition to the conflicts, aiming to introduce the notion that, with solidarity, it was possible to combat these forces, with the overriding objective of building a notion of rights among the



communities. Becoming aware of the sources of the power of their oppressors was the first stage for the unfolding of various other processes.

As the region was still relatively isolated until recently, information was also an important resource brought by the Catholic Church. The work of the church mobilized the ties of solidarity of the communities, which organized themselves around mutual self-help groups. The solidarity links of these groups were often strengthened by their very own isolation, religious beliefs and invisibility to any other agent interested in promoting better living conditions in their communities. Alongside these structures of community solidarity, the very structure of the church, with extensive networks and connections, allowed for the mobilization of work resources in the region. This **insurgent** solidarity created new thinking processes that modified the relations of the communities with religion and social structures.

The organization of social movements in the region caught the attention and support of international donors that, along with their resources, brought their agendas and visions about development. There were a large number of international organizations that supported projects in the region. For the purposes of analysis, we suggest the following classification for them: religion based organizations (such as Misereor, Bread for the World, DISOP); international development oriented organizations (such as the Inter-American Foundation, Action-Aid, CORDAID, Doen Foundation, Heinrich Boll Foundation, and UNICEF); and private sector non-profit organizations (such as Ashoka, AVINA, the La Guardia Foundation, the Kellogg Foundation and the Winrock Foundation).

In the first group, we have organizations with some form of religious basis, whether Catholic or Protestant. This influences their visions of development, their ways of raising funds and their provision of technical support and material. These organizations focus primarily on aid activities, which tied in with the philosophical positions of the Church in its rural works with excluded populations, and on the values of solidarity and advocacy of human rights. These are the ones that have been supporting actions in the sisal region for the longest time. Some of them entered into partnerships with MOC as far back as the 1970's and 1980's.

Among the second group of supporters, which we have generically called international organizations for cooperation and development, many have objectives and fields of activity similar to those of the first religion based groups, but their projects and visions incorporate a growing concern with instrumentality, with adopting techniques and classifications, and with outlooks on assisting local development. The projects of these organizations target activities designed to promote regional development, with the support of micro-firms, micro-credit, cooperatives and initiatives in the areas of agriculture and forestry. Among this group, the work of the Belgian NGO DISOP and of UNICEF stands out in the region.

The third group comprises private sector organizations, created from a vision of philanthropic activities of the business sector. The means of the latter tended to be more technical. Instead of formulating or delivering radical demands for social transformation or to combat inequalities, these organizations tend to promote best practices and participative development techniques that can be made widespread. Those that stand out in this group in the region are the Kellogg Foundation and Ashoka, mostly advocating and disseminating the notion of social entrepreneurship (AUSTIN, STEVENSON, and WEI-SKILLERN, 2006; DACIN, DACIN, and MATEAR, 2010).

## 5. PROFESSIONALIZATION OF RURAL DEVELOPMENT

The region gained visibility in recent years due to the results of various innovations in the last 40 years, which consolidated some of the most successful experiences of rural Brazil. The most outstanding of these is the work of APAEB, which helped family farmers to market their sisal and diversity their activities, besides providing support for the development of other organizations, such as associations and cooperatives, among others.

Many NGOs have been providing technical advice and rural extension in this area. Some of them are local and others, international. Many began their work through the CEBs, during the 1960's. Together with other organizations, particularly Credit Funds and, to a lesser extent, rural workers' associations, they have focused on advising farmers and providing them with technical training, which includes planning the management of small holdings with the families that own them, technical training in a variety of areas, including the improvement of sisal plantations, and diversification of production through cultures adapted to the semi-arid conditions of the area, as well as construction of new marketing alternatives. All these actions were designed to overcome the dependency of rural workers on political and economic thinking tied to the instability of the area's climate.

The great contribution of these organizations to the professionalization of the region is using educational methods to engage the producers in a way that is linked to the articulation of technical and rational elements of the production systems, and furthering management capabilities, which has an impact on the economic and social conditions of the area. The organizations linked to social movements in the region professionalized their work by following business management models similar to those of modern firms, but have their institutions and aims embedded in the form of a social project, born out of the mobilization of CEBs in the 1960s. This **insurgent solidarity** is an important framework, which, when applied to management tools and rural development themes disseminated by international development agencies, produces significant changes.

Thus, we find institutional processes driven by the professionalization of social movements and of social organization in the region. These processes contributed to the dissemination of management practices, often designed by donors to achieve a multiplying effect in different contexts. On the other hand, the interpretation of certain field entrepreneurs enabled the adaptation of some of these models, especially by leaders formed by the CEBs. The field entrepreneurs converted the practices disseminated by the donors' networks, transforming them through the lenses of solidarity, with a view to guaranteeing human rights.

Beside the characteristic of innovation found in the process of professionalization, the Sisal context has one more difference. The **fluidity** of this professionalization lies in its particular form of work and socialization, visibly anchored in practice. This fluidity also reveals a form of learning notably related to practice, often not articulated in the formal education of teaching institutions, as can be seen in this passage from an interview:

"I went to boarding school; at that time, there were 34 schools of the old Livestock Education Coordination Office of the Ministry of Education spread across Brazil and I went to one to do training on livestock. I wanted to understand why people couldn't earn more money, why people had to leave the area, and in particular this issue of why there were no opportunities here [...]. I was always passionate about the land. I arrived there and didn't study anything about the semi-arid land and this bothered me [...]. People don't study the *sertão* [arid scrublands]; you only hear things about the Atlantic Rainforest, I just hear people talking about soil, this was the only vision at the start of the 1980s [...] their vision that everything had to do with deforestation in order to plant and this had a great impact on me".

A passage from another interview:

"[...] I learned to how to do things, in action; I learned to face up to imposed challenges, plus a little about economics, unlimited need and scarce resources. [...] the training, the generation of knowledge, at various events, seminars, courses, meetings, interchanges, aiming to make this change in the farmers, so that they might create results, in the sense of knowing about technology and new alternatives, appropriate to the local situation; so the pathway was along these lines of trying to live from other sources, including foreign sources, in interchanges with other countries".

At the same time, this learning related to practice was permeated by an intense exchange between organizations,

especially NGOs. Many of the exchanges and training sessions were stimulated by these organizations' donors. These networks ended up functioning almost like **professional associations**, which accrue and disseminate learning.

There are many methodologies and agendas disseminated by a variety of donors in the field of rural development. When the entrepreneurs of the sisal region combine and modify them, they may act on a different level and use their own symbolic resources to do that. We highlight here one case described and documented by a local NGO.

Emphasizing methodologies that center on the use of planning tools, monitoring and evaluation, international agencies sought to adapt management tools under the guise of participation. One of the most widely disseminated participatory planning methodologies is Participatory Rural Appraisal (PRA), which uses group dynamics and exercises to facilitate the exchange of information, analysis and action among participants.

PRA carries out a succession of meetings on preparation, development and follow-ups, using various instruments such as focus groups, semi-structured interviews, **rankings** of preferences, ideas mapping (using clippings and panels), and seasonal and historical events diagrams.

Another planning tool of projects adapted by the German support agency GTZ comes from a different methodology, also largely employed by international cooperation groups: the Logical Framework Approach. It sees the lifecycle of a project as an ongoing process, made up of major stages that succeed each other: the diagnostic and the prognostics. For the diagnostic, a tree of problems is used to identify relations of cause and effect in the highlighted events.

We highlight here, in generic terms, how these planning tools are combined with Paulo Freire's critical reflection methodology, used in the region's first mobilizations, during the 1960's. Several professionals in the area pointed out and also monitored in meetings this adaptation, which aims to create, in a close approximation of the local situation, a planning model used by various donors and replicated by organizations in the region. The following box shows a comparison of the three main phases of a general model of strategic planning and the phases of the educational method of critical construction of knowledge.

The first part is the explanatory stage, in which one explains the situation, which may consist of problems or of so-called challenges. It aims to get people to become aware of the problems, identifying their conjunctural and structural causes. In general, it asks people "what are the problems?" and "where do they stem from?" The research is stimulated by the use of texts, drawings, music and theatrical performances. Additionally, this stage mobilizes and acknowledges the value of the participants, because, in Paulo Freire's methodology, the construction of knowledge through praxis is achieved via liberated practice. This liberation requires a prior process of creating awareness in

### Example of Translation of Professional Practice

Strategic Planning Methodology	Praxis – Reflective Analysis of Reality
Identification of Priorities – Internal and External Analysis	Know – See
Selection of Objectives	Analyze – Judge
Development of Action Plans	Transform – Act

relation to condition of oppression, a process achieved through vision and action, by taking naïve awareness and developing this into critical awareness, awareness articulated with praxis, which in turn leads to transformation.

The second phase involves a normative construction, or rather, how things should be, a process constructed through a technique named “exchanging place.” As one of the interviewees stated, “It is so important to see things how they really are and to also know how these same things are being seen by others”. This would be a vision and a judgment on which to act. This “exchanging places” corresponds, almost always, to the technical vision versus the vision of experience, indicated by various professionals as a position between popular knowledge and scientific knowledge.

The third stage is the strategic one, where strengths are calculated, by getting the people to look at themselves in terms of their capability to carry out the actions. Finally, this experience reveals a wide range of possibilities of educational and political action.

“Planning” is therefore not only an instrument to develop projects, but a moment of reflection in itself. This framework was also present in the conversion of other agendas and models for rural development proposed by donors. It is, furthermore, a central element of professionalization at a cultural level, as it is present in the definition of a professional identity. The professionals of the region, with different backgrounds (sociologists, economists, agronomists, educators), when asked, define their professions as being of a “popular educator.”

This way of working with planning tools passed on from donors has contributed to its own form of maturity, confirmed in an interview with UNICEF:

“These experiences are above UNICEF. Institutions like UNICEF and others evaluate other things, which are indicators, questions specifically related to children and adolescents [...]. All this movement that happened in the region has another type of importance, for other reasons, a historical importance, and the fruits will begin to appear, they already are [...] Society is learning, with all the contradictions, wrong alliances, all the awkward questions [...]”.

As well as the planning and management tools, whose applications are influenced by local organizational formats and frameworks, there are various other agendas that undergo adaptations and critical reinterpretations, such as gender-related themes. The donors disseminate the idea that women need to be engaged in productive activities. In the semi-arid areas, the woman farmer maintains a strict relation with the natural resource of water, being responsible for water for the family’s consumption in terms drinking, food preparation and personal hygiene. Moreover, she carries out various activities that are perforce linked to the use of water, such as agricultural cultivation and caring for farmyard animals. During dry spells, women take on the role of transporting water from the wells, rivers, or cisterns to the home, generally on foot with the container or bucket on their heads.

Therefore, attempts to improve income by including women in economic activities result in generating extra work and responsibilities for them, in addition to their current activities and responsibilities, not taken into account in the first place. In other cases, there are attempts to include women via aid programs, which in many cases increases their dependence on the very political system that excludes them.

As for the agenda of donors, when it comes to the issue of gender, this is only incorporated when it became possible to articulate the issue as part of the discussion of expanding women’s rights. Thus, inclusion projects for women should rely on elements such as joint land ownership in agricultural reform projects, requiring specific forms of credit, technical assistance, programs for cooperativity and selling that include the gender dimension, inclusion and amplification of rural workers rights to retirement pensions, and access to public services.

Another central question that was reconsidered was the sale of the production and access to the markets. The construction of a vision of a market of producers began in the early 1980’s, with the work of APAEB, and gradually emerged in connection with the idea of selling as the central element to deal with economic issues.

The productive chain of sisal involves the following actors:

- **Big businessmen** – Members of the local conservative political elite, who have been producing sisal in the area since the



1950's. More recently, from the 1990's, they have teamed up with companies, both national and international. Historically, these producers have received various forms of support from the State Government of Bahia, through tax exemptions whose only role is to create employment, normally jobs that pay the minimum wage. These companies, in general, process the sisal fiber into threads and resell them in regional and foreign markets.

- **The sisal mills** – Owners of private sisal mills, which perform the initial sisal treatment, before passing the product on to factories. They are economic agents known as **middlemen** who pay ridiculously low prices for the sisal from small-scale rural producers, maintaining an oligopolistic system and fixing prices in the region.
- **Sisal farmers** – Today there are very few of them, as they retreated from the business between the 1980's and 1990's, when the fiber reached its lowest prices in the international market. Today, these farmers prefer livestock rearing, which is also problematic, as the semi-arid region is poorly suited to this and the activity demands a lot of investment (MACHADO, 2006).

The sisal production chains and the gains it yields for each actor involved are questioned by the entrepreneurs in the field. A process of awareness-raising regarding these inequalities is arising and at the same time, alternatives are being designed to change this situation.

In an institutional video on the history of APAEB, from 1999, this issue is stated clearly:

“We began to observe that the unstable climate of the region put at risk the gains and capacity for negotiations of small producers, who were in the hands of middlemen. During times of need, they negotiated the product before the harvest, being at the mercy of the price stipulated by these middlemen. Their difficulty in getting access to credit and the lack of storage facilities for products were some of the reasons of the fragility at the point of negotiation”.

APAEB continually looked to deconstruct the rationale of the functioning of the productive chain of sisal with its middlemen. In its place, it articulated a new perception of the functioning of the market and of the possibilities that might be exploited. A process of trial and error was creating a path for the construction of alternatives.

The first solution found to deal with the middlemen was to implement a community sisal mill, which centralized the purchase of raw material, putting pressure on the prices paid by the middlemen. This was combined with other strategies

aimed to promote the diversification of the production of small family farms, in order to reduce instability.

The idea that it was possible to explore new links in the sisal production chain, exporting raw materials and even finished products, was becoming clear, as awareness-building and the creation of new projects continued to be pursued.

This called for an understanding that the sisal issue was part of the wider system of social and political structures of the region. Indeed, the construction of this vision contributed enormously to broaden the understanding of issues among the staff of local organizations, who were trained by international donors. In the early 1990's, APAEB technicians started to take part in Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO) and United Nations panels, which brought together the main countries producing and consuming vegetable fibers. This contributed decisively to the understanding of how the market functions and of what the prospects are.

However, there were conflicts when it came to how sales and access to markets were viewed. One of the interviewees mentioned the participation of international aid agencies in the process of constructing a vision for the market of the region, which was taken on by APAEB:

“[...] more recently, it became clear that forcing the point in the discussion about income [was necessary], with discussions about improvements in quality of life, of IDH, saying ‘Look, these projects have to have access to the market [...]’”.

However, with time, part of these actors began to question the relation with the market of which they were a part:

“The merely neo-liberal market; and this is the market that exists, so we produce the sisal here, sisal that doesn't involve child labor, that doesn't harm the environment, that respects worker relations. I am going to put this product on the same market, the miserable capitalist market. So, there is no alternative market, a fair market. [...] so, this became a lot clearer for people [...] it is not this market that will solve the problem of income distribution, of economic solidarity, of citizenship. It is another market, which needs to be built”.

This is a passage that seems to underlie two different visions of development in the region and that are employed in the strategies of different actors in the field of rural development. The vision of certain international cooperation organizations, and in a way, of many governmental actions, advocates incorporation into the global economy, whereas the other seeks to reinforce identities and relations of solidarity in the area and the activation of its endogenous potential.

## 6. MAIN FINDINGS AND CONTRIBUTIONS

This work conducted a study of practices related to projects for rural development in the sisal region, in the Brazilian semi-arid area, verifying the rising professionalization of the region. This professionalization has its own particular characteristics that include fluid formats and the rolling out of networks, which contribute to the theorization and dissemination of certain practices instead of being concentrated in professional associations and formal **links** with educational institutions.

Donors play an important role as regards theorization and dissemination practices. In some cases, this unifying feature is carried out through donors with specific personnel training objectives, which support these networks and end up functioning as professional **associations**. These organizations legitimate and disseminate practices such as different intervention methodologies, integration with the market and the introduction of different business tools in the world of social organizations. They also contribute to staff training, which includes recommending consultancies, carrying out the training, and referring leaders and technicians to centers of studies and universities. Besides these activities, the very mechanisms of control and the requirements of the donors contribute to the training of professional thinking in the supported organizations.

In the field of rural development in the semi-arid Northeast of Brazil, the training and use of technical information offered by donors provides access to key positions in organizations and to networks of development agents (local agencies as well as regional and international development organizations, which can be state agencies, NGOs or support foundations).

Professionals with such access become important elements in the intermediation of resources, or social entrepreneurs. It is worth noting that these professionals are often themselves the **adopters**, the small farmers who become points of intermediation that mobilize and organize other adopters, leading them to organize cooperatives, associations, production networks, purchasing, capacity development, and sales.

Professionalization also has implications for the emergence of organizational forms with clear boundaries and that function better. These can have a special impact on the context of the rural semi-arid zone, whose organizational formats tend to be arranged informally.

This is what happens, for example, with family production cells, which, to gain access to resources, need to tie in with cooperatives, associations and networks. These family production cells begin to use planning and management tools and methodologies, which appear as legitimated thinking processes. As these new organizations arise, they can seek specialization and the creation of new subordinate rationales as a form of differentiation for access to new resources. This leads to a creation of **class** entities (of sisal owners, of beekeepers,

of goat breeders, of female rural workers, or of young people, among others) that can be articulated in the form of federations, associations, or networks for formulating new proposals in their respective fields of activity, for theorization and for the dissemination of practices.

However, entrepreneurial ability involves not only this capacity of accessing such networks and resources, but also the ability to challenge the ideas and practices disseminated.

The professionals active in projects for the rural development of the region come from a variety of professional backgrounds: educators, pedagogues, historians, philosophers and economists. In common, they share a pathway of engagement in participative practices, tending to attribute their background, largely, to what many call **militancy**. Besides gaining practical experience, these professionals participate in many courses, events and exchanges – most of which are offered by partners and donors of the organizations in which they work.

The effects of professionalization in the sisal region contribute to the institutionalization of various development ideas. However, at the same time, they spur new dynamics, as the actors reinterpret or mix, intentionally or otherwise, the thinking that is being disseminated. The entrepreneurs in the field do not reproduce professional practices of the donors for rural development, but interpret them in a way that has been adapted to their own thinking and needs.

This conversion is the mechanism whereby an outside institution is incorporated, having the potential to produce considerable institutional changes in the field in which they are being adopted (TARROW, 1996; STRANG and SOULE, 1998; BOXEBAUM, 2005).

It is a process that involves bringing together technical and symbolic elements. This is what happened in the construction of an understanding of the market. The projects from donors targeted market access and product sales. However, this vision is modified and this type of approach tends to be rejected. All of this leads to the construction of a definition of the market anchored in the solidarity of local networks, which results in contributing to the proposal of a different vision of development, triggered not by exogenous processes, but implemented through local possibilities.

The engagement of these professionals finally rebounds in the construction of a professional identity, sustained by cohesion via strong ties (GRANOVETTER, 1983; 2001) and consisting of a dense network of organizations and individuals. This is often developed by international donors.

Thus, professionalization promotes a form of social engagement that adopts common practices that structure the area of rural development, creating conditioning formats for organizations and professionals to gain legitimacy and access to material and symbolic resources, also contributing to the rise of new organizational formats that are increasingly formal and bureaucratic in nature. ♦

NOTES

- (1) Term used by the local population for the areas with semi-arid climate in the Northeast of Brazil.
- (2) APAEB (the association of peasants and small family farmers from the sisal region) was created during the 1980s to organize small producers so as to eliminate intermediate traders (who exploited the small producers' work) in the sisal chain. The association soon expanded its activities and eventually built a factory to use the sisal fiber in the production of rugs, working both with the raw material and the final product. At the same time, the organization also encouraged production diversification in small

properties. APAEB's actions of local technical assistance and microcredit contributed to an important transformation, according to the small producers, regarding the semi-arid climate and natural resources. It also promoted important changes in the economic behavior of the small producers.

Site: <www.apaeb.com.br>.

- (3) Founded in 1967, MOC is one of the most active organizations working with rural poverty mitigation in Brazil. Mobilizations of this institution gave rise to the work of APAEB during the 1980's.

Site: <www.moc.org.br>

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ABSTRACT

**Institutional entrepreneurship and professionalization of the rural development of the sisal region in Brazil**

This work analyses the professionalization of rural development in the Brazilian Northeastern region and how this created opportunities for entrepreneurship when the professional practices of funding bodies were transformed in accordance with local reality. This professionalization has its own characteristics, including fluid formats and the rolling out of networks, and it contributes to the theorization and dissemination of certain practices instead of being concentrated in professional associations and formal links with educational institutions. The main implications are commonly related to institutional processes related to professionalization, such as the emergence of certain organizational formats and the dissemination of professional practices that are considered legitimate. An additional consequence was observed in the area of rural development: the ideas and practices disseminated through professionalization were reinterpreted when the local entrepreneurs adapted them to their own thinking and needs.

**Keywords:** professionalization, rural development, institutional entrepreneurship.

RESUMEN

**Emprendedurismo institucional y profesionalización del desarrollo rural de la región del sisal en Brasil**

Se analiza en este trabajo la profesionalización del campo del desarrollo rural en la región nordeste de Brasil y cómo este fenómeno ha creado oportunidades para acciones emprendedoras, cuando las prácticas profesionales de los organismos de financiación se traducen de acuerdo con la realidad local. Dicha profesionalización tiene características particulares, ya que asume formas fluidas, el despliegue de redes que contribuyen a la teorización y difusión de ciertas prácticas, en lugar de concentrarse en asociaciones profesionales y vínculos formales con instituciones de enseñanza. Las principales consecuencias comúnmente relacionadas con el proceso institucional de profesionalización son la aparición de determinadas formas de organización y la difusión de prácticas profesionales vistas como legítimas. Se observó una consecuencia adicional en el campo del desarrollo rural: ideas y prácticas difundidas por medio de la experiencia profesional sufren una reinterpretación cuando los emprendedores en el sector las adaptan a su propia lógica y necesidades.

**Palabras clave:** profesionalización, desarrollo rural, emprendedurismo institucional.