

NOTE



Agroecological logbooks: a methodological approach that contributes towards shifting social and gender norms in agricultural production

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ABSTRACT

This case study analyses a participatory methodological approach, known as the “Agroecological logbooks”, adopted since 2013 by grassroots organizations that operate within the conceptual and empirical framework of Agroecology and that are dedicated to strengthening groups, collectives and networks of rural women farmers and plant collectors. We propose an in-depth analysis of the impacts of the implementation of the Agroecological logbook methodology within the northeastern semi-arid region of Brazil between 2019 and 2020, focusing on the transformation of gender norms through the validation of social practices associated with the principle of “reciprocity”- giving, receiving and exchanging plants, foods, seeds and seedlings. Such practices are often “naturalized” as gestures of social reproduction, relegated to an “inferior” status, in contrast with the production of goods and services that directly involve monetary transactions within the sphere of formal marketplaces. In light of the perspective of feminist economics (CARRASCO, 2006, 2017), this paper proposes reframing such non-monetary transactions and relations as “care work”, as we reveal their benefits when it comes to fortifying food and nutritional security and biodiversity, as well as strengthening forms of collective organizing and networking on a local and regional scale.

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1. Introduction: preliminary remarks

The purpose of this analytical exercise is to understand the ways in which the methodological approaches, instruments and tools adopted by social organisations and movements that are aligned with the conceptual and empirical framework of “agroecology” have fostered transformations in social and gender norms¹ within the semi-arid region of Northeastern Brazil.

Over the past 20 years, a wide array of social organisations that implement programs and projects within the field of agroecology and food and nutritional security, many of which identify with feminist principles, have highlighted women farmers’ specific inputs in family-based agricultural practices,² given that the economic value of their practices is typically not taken into account within the majority of censuses or surveys and is not incorporated into the gross domestic product (GDP).³ Within this paper, our proposal is to investigate the repercussions of a methodology

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known as the “agroecological logbooks”, that was first created in 2002 by the NGO “Center for Alternative Technologies” (CTA-ZM), to be then widely experimented in different sociocultural contexts by the “Working group in Gender and Agroecology”⁴ that is a part of “the National Network of Agroecology”. This methodological approach aims to measure and make visible rural women’s⁵ economic and non-economic contributions to family-based agricultural practices.⁶ The methods employed, which include not only the logbooks but also socioeconomic questionnaires and “socio-biodiversity maps”, are part of an umbrella strategy that aims to reveal women farmers’ productive capacity, as well as empowering⁷ them as protagonists of social transformation. Organised in a simple notebook format, the agroecological logbook contains four columns that register information about what was sold, donated, exchanged, and consumed daily, covering everything cultivated in areas managed by women in small farming productive units – particularly within backyard gardens – and including not only agricultural production but also handicrafts and food processing. The sociobiodiversity maps provide a visual image of the “agroecosystem”, showing in detail the wide variety of crops, plants and fruits that originate from different spaces within the boundaries of each woman’s rural property and also encompass surrounding areas. These maps, which are created by rural women themselves, illustrate the power dynamics that sustain the sexual division of labour, given that participants are encouraged to highlight both their level of involvement in each activity as well as the ways in which they take part in decision-making processes.

It is important to point out that this methodology is not restricted to the exercise of filling out the agroecological logbook on an individualised basis within each family unit. The emphasis on fortifying women’s capacity for autonomous organising on a collective scale is an essential aspect of the methodological approach of the agroecological logbooks. Technical assistance services, carried out by NGOs or public institutions, play a crucial role in various stages of this pedagogical process, such as the coordination of “dialogue circles” with women’s self-organised groups; the gathering of data and an initial systematisation; and the return of this systematised data to the participants so that they can reflect critically about such results. Group sessions (“dialogue circles”), led by technical assistance agents, are aimed at creating opportunities for reflection not only about the challenges that women farmers face during their use of the logbooks but also about the nature of the information that is gathered, helping to raise consciousness about themes such as food and nutritional security and biodiversity, as well as inspiring the consolidation of women’s autonomous self-organised groups.

During the implementation of the IFAD/PSI-supported project, for instance, that stimulated the use of Agroecological logbooks in 8 states within the northeastern semiarid region between 2019 and 2020, it was possible to witness the creation and/or consolidation of approximately 56 women’s autonomous groups within 111 municipalities, all of which are connected to other community-based grassroots organisations (Weitzman 2020, p. 13). Dulce Carvalho, a member of the organisation “Service for Social and environmental assistance in the rural and urban sectors (SAJUC)”, who took part in the IFAD-supported initiative in the state of Bahia, reflected on the fact that:

after the use of the logbooks, it was possible to identify a significant increase in women’s forms of social and political participation within other social movements and networks in four communities within this territorial area. They began to become more deeply engaged in decision-making processes on community affairs, which had formerly been mostly male dominated. (PROJETO PROSEMIÁRIDO/CAR 2021, p. 8)

This goes to show that the recognition of women as farmers, producers, knowledge holders, and/or leaders during the application of the agroecological logbooks potentially contributes towards transforming social and gender norms around women’s roles in the public sphere, as they widen the scope of their participation in diverse forms of social organisation.

A participatory methodological approach, such as the agroecological logbooks, in which women farmers take ownership of the instruments and internalise the information that is generated from their use, contributes towards shifting the conceptions that have oriented technical assistance services in the rural sector since the 1940s, based on a top–bottom approach to modes of knowledge

construction. It is noteworthy that the introduction of the agroecological logbook methodology within the context of intervention strategies carried out by NGOs and public institutions occurred simultaneously with a reformulation of the public policy that orients technical assistance services⁸, thereby opening up new ground for the validation of agroecology as an alternative model for agricultural practices and the inclusion of participatory methodologies as tools that facilitate horizontal modes of knowledge construction (Weitzman 2008)

2. Significance of non-monetary socioeconomic practices within the agroecological logbook methodological approach

The focus of our analysis will be the transformation of social and gender norms when it comes to a set of social practices connected to giving, receiving and exchanging plants, foods, seeds, and seedlings. The agroecological logbooks challenge social norms that prioritise a market-oriented model of agricultural development by recognising the multifaceted dimensions of resources, inputs and relations that cannot be restricted to the economic scope. The process of registering what can be classified as non-monetary socioeconomic practices through a simple methodological tool, such as the agroecological logbooks, accompanied by educational workshops (or “dialogue circles”) for collectively discussing the significance of such experiences, reveals aspects of agricultural production and food collection that are traditionally undervalued precisely because they do not generate financial resources.

The analysis that we intend to develop is based on empirical data within the context of projects that have been supported by the International Fund for Agricultural Development (IFAD) in the semi-arid northeastern region of Brazil since 2012. The initiative with agroecological logbooks, that took place between 2019 and 2020, involving 879 rural women in 415 communities within eight states, showed that, out of the almost R\$1.5 million reais that were calculated as the value of their production over a time span of six months, more than 41 per cent corresponded to what can be labelled as “non-monetary socioeconomic relationships” (Jalil, Weitzman, Telles, et. al, 2020, 40). The information that was gathered through the agroecological logbooks revealed women’s important roles in production not only for sales and self-consumption but also for exchanges of natural resources and goods with neighbours in daily interactions, through donations to schools or in community festivals and religious activities.

Even when it comes to the purely “economic” dimensions of women-led activities, one can observe a tendency to downplay their commercial or mercantile weight, partly because such expressions of agricultural production do not easily conform to the overriding model for commercialisation, which involves offering large quantities of products within the marketplace. A considerable aspect of the production carried out by women farmers entails products with low monetary value that are sold in small quantities – for example, a few heads of lettuce or a small number of eggs. Because the amount is small, the common tendency of families involved in agricultural production is to treat it as negligible. The preponderance of the paradigm of “monoculture” farming – that focuses on one or two crops as the focus of agricultural practices – does not consider those who generally produce a variety of products on a smaller scale, as is the case when it comes to backyard gardens, spaces that are known for containing a wide range of crops (Rody and Telles 2021). For technical assistance agents, who have been trained to believe in the viability of a “main crop” system – that denies the importance of other kinds of plants (used for medicinal and nutritional purposes) – as well as the different strategies for land use, the recognition of women as “producers” of a wide range of food products leads these agents to gradually understand that, in order to respond to gender inequalities, commercial outlets should ideally aim to provide diverse products, regardless of the quantity (Rody and Telles 2021 , p. 58).

It is crucial to point out one of the paradoxes of the agroecological logbooks: what makes the logbooks “stand out” as a methodology is its capacity to “calculate” all practices, not only those associated with commercialisation, while at the same time seeking to steer away from a form of

reductionism, as if their value could be determined strictly by monetary factors. Placing a monetary value on social practices that have been rendered invisible allows them to gain social and political relevance. As a member of the “Working Group in Gender and Agroecology”, Elisabeth Cardoso states:

We most definitely do not have the intention of commodifying the lives of women, but in order to demonstrate the value of their production, we choose to do “measurements” through calculations, in such a way that even products that are exchanged or donated through reciprocity practices are given an estimated cost and are incorporated into the final “lump sum” of their products and activities – to be then shown to and discussed with women’s groups.

Many women who use the agroecological logbooks reported that their husbands and children began to view such production in another light after they started recording information that revealed economic aspects. The following case, reported by Elisabeth Cardoso, member of the “Working Group in Gender and Agroecology”, highlights alterations in the attitudes of individual family members after the use of agroecological logbooks, when products for which women are seen to be solely responsible and that were not previously considered lucrative gained “status” in relation to what are considered to be “staple crops” within the framework of the local economy. According to Cardoso, the woman farmer, Lucia, from Divino/Minas Gerais, who was deeply engaged in the fabrication and commercialisation of desserts made from fruits collected on her property, would often stop production during the season when all farmers – women and men – would harvest coffee, which is considered to be the primary commercial crop in the region (Rody and Telles 2021, 36). However, after using the agroecological logbooks, Lucia discussed the results of her records with her husband Tiago, and they both realised that the income from sales of her desserts was greater than what was earned through coffee production. In dialogue with her husband, Lucia decided to intensify her involvement in fruit processing and gradually withdrew from the different stages of coffee production. According to Lucia, after this incident, a major transformation occurred in the family dynamics: Her husband began to encourage her to take part in trainings about processing fruits so as to improve her techniques, and gradually, she became more fully included in decision-making about financial resources within the family unit. Such activities had previously been seen as “taking her away” from her domestic responsibilities.

3. Exploring the multiple dimensions of non-monetary socioeconomic practices as forms of “care work” in the face of food and nutritional insecurity

Unfortunately, consumption as well as reciprocity practices among neighbours and family members tend to be underreported within the logbooks. This tendency to undermine the importance of registering such practices seems to point to the fact that they often are “taken for granted”, as if they constitute a natural part of women’s daily routine, as well as not carrying any “economic” weight, a point that was discussed in the prior section.

Considering the perspective of feminist economics (Carrasco 2006, 2017), such non-monetary transactions and relations can be reframed as “care work” and play a key role in fortifying social relations and territorial dynamics (Carrasco 2006; Federici 2014; Guétat-Bernard 2015 and Orozco 2012). It is undeniable that they are part of a millenary tradition, nurturing expressions of solidarity and mutual collaboration between relatives, neighbours, and residents of neighbouring communities. According to Sabourin (2008) and Mauss (1997 [1950]), the principle of “generalised reciprocity” represents a foundation that sustains social relations in different cultural contexts, which becomes tangible in the common tendency to live out the triple “obligation”: “give, receive and reciprocate” (Sabourin 2008).

In the face of critical events, such forms of “care work”, revealed through “generalised reciprocity” practices, are shown to be crucial strategies for sustaining the social fabric of local communities. In a study focused on the impacts of COVID-19 within the semiarid Northeastern region (Favareto

2021), according to 52 per cent of the interviewees, initiatives spontaneously created by rural women ranged from the distribution of food to vulnerable families within public spaces, such as churches, to the delivery of food baskets made up of fresh agroecologically based produce to families' homes. The agroecological logbooks provided evidence of an increase in the circulation of food products – both raw and semiprocessed – within the context of IFAD-supported projects in the semiarid Northeastern region of Brazil during this time period (2019–2020) (Jalil, Weitzman, and Telles 2020).

According to some members of organisations that provide technical assistance in family-based agriculture within the state of Ceará, one reason for the increase in donations and exchanges of food on the local level may have been the restrictive measures limiting human circulation, which made it increasingly difficult to make sales (Weitzman 2021b). This implied that more food was made available at the local level, much of which could not be stored and therefore needed to be donated or exchanged for consumption. Furthermore, the suspension of events or social activities is a factor that undoubtedly triggered other expressions of interpersonal communication, via WhatsApp and other social networks, between families on a local and regional level, stimulating the public display of foods cultivated within backyard gardens, which in turn led to an intensification in the exchanges of foods, plants, and seeds.

One of the powerful effects of the logbook methodology is that rural women themselves register their agricultural production and discuss what is recorded collectively within self-organised groups, making it so that social practices such as donation and exchange are made more visible, both to themselves and to their family members. Such heightened awareness can fuel their interest in intensifying these practices, as is revealed by Tamara Rangel de Lacerda, the ex-coordinator of COOPESAR – “The Cooperative for consultancy, research and support services for rural sustainable development” – an organisation that accompanied the work with agroecological logbooks within communities in the semiarid region of Bahia during the period of 2019–2020. Tamara keenly observed that:

the large amount of products that were recorded in the agroecological logbooks, especially in the categories of self-consumption, donation and exchanges, inspired the women farmers to record more details about their production in their logbooks, as well as leading them to intensify the exchanges of seeds, seedlings, plants and food and diversify the plants and other kinds of food that they planted. (State Government of Bahia 2021, 12)

4. Summary of the impacts of non-monetary reciprocity practices on social and gender norms

In this section, we will explore the different ways in which reciprocity practices, typically carried out by rural women farmers and plant collectors in areas that are often not considered to play a key role in agricultural production, such as backyard gardens and forests adjoined to rural properties, challenge social and gender norms.

First, a social and gender norm shift worthy of mention involves a new way of envisioning practices and spaces that are typically left out of the design of agricultural development programs and policies. Monoculture is considered to be the predominant production paradigm for agricultural development, with an exclusive focus on single-crop cultivation on large swathes of land, thereby undermining the importance of other practices that are “agroecological” in nature, such as crop and plant diversification and the circulation of local resources among different spaces (backyard gardens, surrounding forests, meadows, cultivated areas, orchards, chicken coops). The modernist development paradigm reinforces the rigid dichotomy between social reproduction and production, which is deeply connected to the sexual division of labour. Gender-based social inequalities are deeply ingrained in the construction of technical and rural extension services since their inception, given that 87.3 per cent of women farmers have historically had minimal access to technical assistance when it comes to agricultural practices (Oxfam 2018), which further confirms rural women's limited access to resources, assets and inputs (Deere 2004). Backyard gardens, which are most often under the domain of women farmers, are viewed as “secondary” because they are oriented

around principles related to “social reproduction”, such as self-consumption, food security, and biodiversity.

Therefore, we call attention to a new vision of the family-based farming system, as one that is dedicated towards creating other forms of social cohesion, based primarily on sharing resources and inputs that flow between different spaces, as well as promoting equalitarian relationships along gender, ethnic, and racial lines. After adopting the agroecological logbooks, many rural extension agents attest to the fact that they began to question the highly productivist paradigm as a basis for agricultural practices and shaped another narrative that goes beyond the need to “maximise production” with the aim of attaining economic sustainability. An array of methodological instruments, including not only the logbooks, but also the sociodiversity maps, all of which are used with women’s self-organised groups, cultivate a new understanding, on the part of women farmers, of their families and members of the work teams of social organisations that provide technical assistance services, regarding the importance of spaces that have been typically undervalued within the boundaries of a rural piece of property, such as backyard gardens, forests, and meadows. Within the context of the IFAD-supported project, for instance, the logbooks and sociodiversity maps revealed how practices nurturing a dynamic relationship with natural resources, such as plant harvesting, are closely integrated with agricultural practices (Jalil, Weitzman, and Telles 2020). 61.2 per cent of the 879 women farmers who recorded their practices in logbooks collect natural resources in the Caatinga biome. More than half of Afro-descendent women farmers (52 per cent) foraged for natural resources in more than one location, moving between forests, shrubland and open pastures, to find plants suitable for medicinal or food purposes (Jalil, Weitzman, and Telles 2020, 69). In the case of 34 rural women from AMPPEPI, the “Association of residents and small producers from the State of Piauí”, who took part in the initiative involving Agroecological logbooks supported by IFAD between September 2019 and February 2020, it was verified that after the use of the logbooks, the backyard gardens became a reference point in their community and in the surrounding territory, given their diversity in terms of plants, vegetables, and small animal production (Weitzman 2021a, 27). During the first six months of registering such data within the agroecological logbooks, the economic impacts of productive practices in 34 backyard gardens became quite noticeable: “the income generated came to a total of USD\$16.913,99, given that 43,4% of this total amount refers to self-consumption, donations and exchange of products, and 56,6% refers to the products that were sold” (Idem, p. 28). This example illustrates the multidimensional aspects of backyard gardens, including their ability to produce a diversity of plants and food products that serve as a significant source of income, directly or indirectly.

Second, it is essential to highlight that the valuing of donation and exchange of plants, foods, seeds, and seedlings represents a major shift in a paradigm that historically has placed emphasis solely on interactions that are forged with formal marketplaces, as if these are the focal point for sustaining economic relations. Practices that seem “unmeasurable”, such as those that are constructed around the principle of reciprocity, pose a direct challenge to the restrictive logic that equates economic transactions with the process of negotiation within the scope of formal markets. Also, the notion that non-monetary transactions have no economic value whatsoever is challenged, given the understanding that all social processes are closely connected to economic dimensions, even if this relationship is indirect. This can be shown through the tradition of harvesting medicinal plants and creating remedies, practices that are fuelled by donations and exchanges of medicinal plants and seedlings between women farmers and collectors and undeniably reduce families’ expenditures with allopathic remedies or other health products in local pharmacies. In other words, such “non-economic” transactions have a direct effect on the strategies for financial management within rural family-based structures.

Last of all, it is important to point out that the agroecology logbook methodology challenges many principles that have typically oriented strategies directed towards agricultural practices and food production within technical assistance and rural extension services, in regard to gender roles and relations. The participation of technical assistance agents in each of the methodological stages has allowed them to reflect on the ways in which rural women participate actively in various components of the agrifood

system, such as agricultural production, plant collecting, harvesting, and commercialisation. Due to the fact that the logbooks and associated instruments – such as the sociobiodiversity maps – allow for a visualisation of the ways in which women carry out such a wide array of activities that extend beyond the domestic sphere, many technical services providers have reported that, after accompanying the methodology, they become more aware of the need to identify measures that could potentially alleviate rural women's workload and ensure that such tasks are more equally distributed within the community context (Weitzman 2020, p. 15). It becomes increasingly evident that, through a hands-on approach, the logbook methodology offers a more effective strategy than the consciousness-raising tactics on the theme of “gender equality” that have been typically utilised within a wide array of programs and projects dedicated towards “agricultural development”, carried out by NGOs and international institutions (such as IFAD and FAO).

One of the coordinators of the NGO CETRA, the “Centre of Studies on Work and forms of Assistance to Workers”, Suyane Fernandes, who took part in the implementation of the agroecological logbooks in the State of Ceará, explains how this approach can be considered a disrupter of the social and gender norms that orient the overriding paradigm for technical assistance services. She declares that “before, in visits to the field, the technical agents were motivated solely by the impulse to solve the concrete problems that were detected in the rural properties in respect to agricultural production, most often from a male perspective. After the work began with this methodological approach, the visits to the communities became more focused on following up on the wide array of information that the logbook provides and fortifying the women-led practices that are identified through collective efforts” (Weitzman, 2020, p. 13). She also observed that “putting into practice” this methodology serves as a breeding ground for cultivating new skills, helping technical assistance agents to develop a high-tuned attentiveness to the subtle transformations in social relations within family units and grassroots organisations, an element that typically has not been valued (Idem, p. 14). The logbook methodological approach sets in motion a participatory monitoring system that accompanies the tangible signs of changes in gender relations, an aspect that usually escapes “through the cracks” in the context of the majority of programs that are carried out by technical assistance services.⁹

5. Final conclusions

Civil society organisations in the Global South that are at the forefront of the creation of new epistemologies and methodologies for empowering women farmers as social, political, and economic agents and validating their unique strategies for constructing knowledge collectively indicate the initial signs of a profound shift in social and gender norms. The use of participatory methodological approaches, such as the agroecological logbooks, promotes new forms of interaction between professionals who carry out technical assistance in family-based farming and local farmers, thereby representing a disruption in a paradigm strongly rooted in the top–bottom, unilateral diffusion of technological and methodological processes that have been so widely disseminated since the onset of the Green Revolution.¹⁰

The logbook methodology incites a deep questioning of the naturalised vision of asymmetrical gender relations within the context of family structures and community-based organisations, as if they are immutable aspects of “a certain way of life” in rural areas. Those involved with its application come to the understanding that women's agricultural and food practices should be framed as “work” instead of being interpreted merely as manifestations of “help” or “assistance” to “others”. Such a paradigm shift has significant repercussions when it comes to reformulating the belief systems that have reinforced structural gender inequities within technical assistance services.

Notes

1. The concept of “social and gender norms” discussed in this paper aims to overcome the narrow focus on individual agency as a determinant force and consider a more systemic understanding of structurally rooted

institutional dynamics. As Cislighi, Manji, and Heise (2018) affirm: “Interventions that target social norms without a wider framing on the institutional, social, and political factors that perpetrate a harmful practice may have little positive impact” (WORLD BANK 2022, p. 133).

2. Women in the rural sectors involve themselves in numerous tasks related to agricultural production, such as animal breeding, collecting of plants for medicinal uses, planting and food preparation. They tend to suffer from a double or triple workload, since domestic work is almost solely their responsibility. According to the national household sample survey (PNAD, 2013), most rural women (90.8 per cent) devote 26.1 h per week to domestic work, while 43.1 per cent of men dedicate only 10.2 h per week to this type of unpaid, undervalued work (Jalil, Santos, and Ferreira 2017, 64).
3. The “Gross domestic product” (GDP) – a monetary measure of the total sum of goods and services produced by a country – is held to be a key indicator of the “economic health” of a nation.
4. The “Working group in gender and agroecology” was created in 2004 and is made up of women’s movements, feminist NGOs, and social organisations that develop intervention strategies within the field of agroecology and food security.
5. The classification “Rural Women” is a broad term that encompasses a wide range of identities: women farmers, agrarian reform settlers, agroextractivists (or plant, seed and food collectors), artisanal fisherwomen, Indigenous people, and quilombolas (afro-descendent people).
6. For further investigation, it is worth looking into references concerning the importance of tracking women’s work contributions, deeply influenced by concepts associated with feminist economics and feminist political ecology, such as: Brumer and Freire, 1983; Butto and Dantas, 2011; Carvalho and Bógus, 2020; Deere and León, 1982, 1987; Morales, 2021; Zulanga et al., 2018.
7. As a term appropriated by NGOs and social movements engaged in political activism along race and gender lines, empowerment refers to specific principles that underly the process for gaining autonomy and self-determination through collective action. Nonetheless, it is important to consider the complexity surrounding its use, given that this term has become a buzzword in programs and policies within the international sphere (Batliwala 2010).
8. Here I refer to specific alterations that occurred within the legislation for ATER – 12.188/2010 – known as PRO-NATER (National Program for Technical Assistance and Rural Extension) – in 2010, through a pledged commitment to the perspectives of gender equality, agroecology, and participatory methodologies.
9. Here reference is made to the model for monitoring agrifood systems, highly focused on technical, productive-oriented indicators, most of which are easily quantifiable, that have been implemented by many international UN agencies, such as IFAD.
10. The Green Revolution can be defined as a period involving the transfer of “technologies” to “developing countries” with the principal aim of maximising food production, in particular food grains, such as wheat and rice, that began in the mid-20th century. It introduced a “techno-economic paradigm” which places strong emphasis on the primacy of technological innovations for increasing productivity and competitiveness, in line with the dominant corporate agrifood regime. (Regidor 1987, 250)

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