



BRICS Initiative for
Critical Agrarian Studies



RANEPA
THE RUSSIAN PRESIDENTIAL ACADEMY
OF NATIONAL ECONOMY
AND PUBLIC ADMINISTRATION

The 5th International Conference of
the BRICS Initiative for Critical Agrarian Studies

[New Extractivism, Peasantries and Social Dynamics: Critical Perspectives and Debates]

Conference Paper No. 12

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13-16 October 2017

Russian Presidential Academy of National Economy and Public Administration (RANEPA)
Moscow, Russia

Organized jointly by:



COHD 人文与发展学院
College of Humanities and Development Studies (COHD)



Universidade de Brasília



With funding support from:



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October, 2017

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Narrative disputes on family farming public policies in Brazil: conservative attacks and restricted countermovements

Paulo Niederle¹, Catia Grisa¹, Everton Picolotto², Denis Soldera¹

Abstract

This paper analyzes the 'conservative narratives' that underlie current changes in Brazilian rural development public policies. Firstly, it presents an overview of family farming recognition and institutionalization, and the main public policies created in support of this social segment. Subsequently, we discuss how a conservative narrative started to question the capacity of these policies to integrate small farmers into modern agricultural markets. Focusing on how this narrative tries to legitimate a new frame of reference for public action, the paper discusses the main ideas its spokespersons have introduced in public agenda, mainly the segregation between agricultural policies for 'productive farmers' and social policies for the 'unproductive' ones. It demonstrates how this discourse produces the exclusion not only of family farmers, but also of traditional peasant, black and indigenous communities, from the 'social pact' that prevailed in Brazil over the last three decades, and which depended on the State as a central actor to mediate the contradictions derived from the unstable coexistence between agribusiness and family farming logics. Finally, it analyzes how the main rural social movements are reacting to this process.

Keywords: Public policies, Rural development, Family Farming, Social movements

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1 Introduction

Brazilian experience in developing public policies for family farming is globally acknowledged as a success story (FAO, 2015, 2014, 2013; WFP, 2013). During the last decade, it became one of the pivotal elements of important international programs, especially those focused on food security (Maluf, Santarelli and Paulino, 2016; Milhorance, 2013). In the same period, however, some of these policies have been brought into question because of their limits and misapplications. Criticism was levelled at the concentration of resources in rural credit programs, which financed technological modernization and a dependent integration of a relatively small number of family farmers into conventional agricultural markets (Aquino and Schneider, 2015). Added to that, there have been discussed the difficulties in promoting the productive inclusion of the poorest farmers, who, despite advances in food security programs, have remained dependent on social assistance programs (Niederle, 2017a). Other criticisms also highlighted institutional hindrances to structural changes, whether towards a broad agrarian reform (Sauer and Mezáros, 2017; Medeiros, 2015) or for creating new dynamics of sustainable territorial development (Leite and Delgado, 2015; Favareto, 2010).

At the end of President Lula second term of office (2007-2010), and especially during President Dilma first term (2011-2014), debates on the limits and future of family farming policies and even on the fate of the Ministry of Agrarian Development (MDA) - created in 1999 to respond to the demands of this social segment - have intensified. Two 'narratives' began, then, to dispute the 'referentials' of these policies.³ On the one hand, the 'conservative narrative' tried to build a 'story' about the ineffectiveness of rural development policies, suggesting that the economic strength of Brazilian agriculture remained confined to a small segment of highly productive modern farmers provided with technology, which, although including some family farms, would be better supported by sectoral agricultural policies that could be run by the Ministry of Agriculture (Alves and Rocha, 2010). On the other hand, both researchers and agrarian social movements also began to question the effects of such policies, although, in this case, because of their limitations to expand the scope of action and to counter the advance of a new type of agrarian predatory capitalism (Görgen, 2017).

In this article, we analyze the development of this dispute since the end of the first term of President Dilma, locating the main actors and their stances. Although preliminarily, inasmuch as its developments are still ongoing, we also examine the main consequences of the institutional *coup d'état* that, in 2016, deposed the president and has contributed to consolidate the conservative narrative, leading to the extinction of both the MDA and various public policies, and to the lessening of several other policies. This led social actors and movements that, during the last two decades, were the main protagonists of the recognition and legitimation of family farming in Brazil and elsewhere⁴ to a defensive position.

The article is structured into five sections besides this introduction and final remarks. In the next section, we briefly recount the trajectory of political-institutional recognition of family farming in Brazil. Then, we present the referentials underlying the 'three generations' of family farming policies

³ The concepts of 'narrative' and 'referential' used here refer to the 'cognitive approach to public policy analysis.' Policy narratives are discursive resources used by groups of actors for persuading others into creating or changing a policy (Jones and MacBeth, 2010; Radaelli, 2006; 2000). They can be understood as arguments, considered 'truths', that try to influence a policy process. According to Radaelli (2000), narratives are expressed as stories that restore a temporal and causal order to social problems, thereupon suggesting a set of measures to solve them. A public policy referential, in turn, is a notion proposed by authors as Muller (2008), Jobert and Muller (1987) and Fouilleux (2000), who define it as the substantiation of ideas into public policy instruments that make public action effective.

⁴ This is the case of MERCOSUR Family Farming Special Meeting (Reunião Especializada sobre Agricultura Familiar do MERCOSUL - REAF), which, since its creation in 2004, has been playing a key role in the institutionalization and diffusion of these policies (ideas, institutions, frames of reference, and instruments) regionally.

over the last 20 years. The third section focuses on narrative disputes around the outcomes of these policies and highlights how, given the transformations in the 'global referential' (Jobert and Muller, 1987), the conservative narrative gained strength. The next section examines the effects of ongoing institutional changes, highlighting the widening of the gap between agricultural and social policies, the dismantling of some food security policies, the land market deregulation, the attack on social minorities, and the changes in criteria for characterize family farming. The last section discusses the dilemmas faced by family farming organizations and movements to put together a countermovement to resist the exclusion of this segment from the social and political pact that has been effective since restoration of democracy with the 1988 National Constitution.

2 From struggles for recognition to institutionalization

Since the colonial period in Brazil, family farming has been relegated by both the state and the economic elites to a subsidiary rank in relation to the interests of the exporting plantation. Family farming became responsible for functions deemed secondary, such as food production aimed at the domestic market and the maintenance of a workforce reserve to be used according to the seasonal need of large farms (Prado Jr., 1996; Queiroz, 2009; Martins, 1981). Despite some isolated actions by the State to support small farms in specific localities and periods (especially in the southern states), historically family farming got left behind under economic precariousness and social vulnerability (Brumer et al., 1993; Wanderley, 2015). Hence the difficulties faced by this group to construct autonomous political forces that could challenge the great landowners and the mainstream agricultural model.

Although peasant movements were already present in some regions, it was not until the 1960s that these movements attained to constitute a national labor union representation. The National Confederation of Agricultural Workers (Confederação Nacional dos Trabalhadores na Agricultura - CONTAG) brought together small and landless farmers, and rural wage earners (Palmeira, 1985; Medeiros, 1989). Nevertheless, it was only as of the late 1970s and especially in the 1980s, when redemocratization movements got to break with the submission to military governments, that this organization began to play a relevant role of social criticism. Since then, family farmers have organized important political actions specially demanding better prices for agricultural products, differentiated credit lines, agrarian reform, technical assistance and access to social security (Medeiros, 2001; Favareto, 2006; Picolotto, 2014a). The increasing visibility and political importance of these actors allowed them to intervene in debates - following the new Constitution of 1988 - on the Agricultural Law of 1991 (Law n. 1771), guaranteeing special treatment for 'smallholding production'.

The settlement of *family farmers* as political actors in the national setting occurred in the 1990s as a result of a coalition of three groups of social actors (Niederle, Fialho and Conterato, 2014). The first group comprised researchers that had revealed the place historically occupied by family farming in the development of advanced capitalist economies. Therefore, the adoption of the notion of family farming not only replaced that of smallholding production, but promoted a theoretical and normative displacement of what this segment of farmers represents. Such displacement becomes evident as academic work carried out in the 1970s and 1980s quit the emphasis on the subordination of petit commodity production to agroindustry. As of the 1990s, researchers began to challenge the supposed inferiority of this social segment (as well as the signs of its impending end), to show its socioeconomic importance, diversity, productive capacity and, above all, that family farming makes a major contribution to reducing inflation in food prices and generating employment in rural areas (Abramovay, 1992; Lamarche, 1993).

The second group comprises the rural workers union organizations, supplemented by non-governmental organizations and agrarian social movements such as the Landless Workers' Movement (Movimento Sem Terra - MST). Although in the early decades the main demands of rural labor unions

were aimed at rural workers' rights and the struggle for agrarian reform, from the 1990s onwards, the promotion of family farming as the backbone of an alternative rural development project gained more relevance. The choices, actions and elaborations of this syndicalism have been crucial to build the concept of what would later be normatively defined by public policies as family farming. The unification of CONTAG with the Unified Workers' Union (Central Única dos Trabalhadores - CUT), which had already a National Department of Rural Workers, was crucial then. Thus, a coalition was formed able to take a more propositional stance before the State. Representatives of family farmers began to participate in commissions, forums, and councils, to propose and negotiate policies. From the perspective of the political struggle, this moment is also marked by the 'Cry from the Land Brazil' (Gritos da Terra Brasil) (started in 1994), a national mass mobilization of rural workers. Combined with other events and social claims, this type of mobilization led the government to create, in 1996, the National Program for Strengthening Family Farming (Programa Nacional de Fortalecimento da Agricultura Familiar - PRONAF), which remains as the main policy instrument for this social segment (Medeiros, 2014; Picolotto, 2014b).

In the late 1990s, the first political dissidences began to break out in this broad coalition around family farming. The emergence of new labor union and non-union organizations revealed dissatisfactions with the political choices, but also an increasing diversity of actors in the rural areas, each of them demanding attention to their specificities (indigenous, *quilombolas*, artisanal fishers, extractivist farmers, women etc.). In the labor union sphere, the Federation of Workers in Family Agriculture of the Southern Region (Federação dos Trabalhadores na Agricultura Familiar da Região Sul - FETRAF-Sul) was created in 2001, soon acquiring national scope under the name of FETRAF-Brazil (Picolotto, 2011). On the other hand, apart from the formal structure of unionism, other movements were created such as the Small Farmers Movement (Movimento dos Pequenos Agricultores -MPA). Created in 1997, MPA started to dispute the political representation of these farmers with the union organizations. However, while FETRAF and CONTAG support the identity of *family farming*, MPA is linked to Via Campesina's political platform. Like MST, this movement seeks to strengthen the political identity of the *peasantry*, what implies creating a critical narrative about the instrumentality of family farming to the capitalist logic, which leads some intellectuals of Via Campesina even to treat it as "little agribusiness" (Fernandes, 2014; Görgen, 2017).

The third group of actors comprises the policy makers. The Brazilian State's liberalizing agenda of the 1990s, confronted with the new possibilities for social participation granted by the 1988 Constitution, placed labor union organizations in an ambiguous position vis-à-vis the State: in some situations, they directly opposed trade liberalization and deregulation policies; in others, they found opportunities to propose and collaborate in the design of public policies (in councils and policy forums). For example, the creation of Mercosur sought to turn Brazil into exporter of industrialized products and importer of agricultural products (Delgado et al., 1996), which was interpreted as a huge threat to family farming. This triggered several discussions with the government, focused on the demand for differentiated agricultural policies. The objective was to reduce the impact of trade liberalization on family farmers, on specific production chains (milk, wine, wheat) and on the most affected regions (South) (Romano, 1995).

Aiming to characterize the profile of the new social category and to guide the implementation of these policies, a broad project for defining Brazilian family farming was launched, whose results were released in 1994 and contributed to elaborate guidelines for 'a new strategy for rural development in Brazil' (FAO-INCRA, 1994). The document classifies Brazilian agricultural establishments into two categories: 'employers' (patronal) and 'family', and within the latter it distinguishes three subtypes: *consolidated*, *in transition* and *peripheral* (FAO / INCRA, 1994). Hence, the paper suggests that policies in support of family farming should target the farmers 'in transition', who, despite their weaknesses, would possess the potential to become economically viable. This was the strategy adopted by the Department of Technical Assistance and Rural Extension (Departamento de Assistência Técnica e Extensão Rural - DATER/MAPA) and, as of 1999, by the Ministry of Agrarian Development (MDA) created this year to bring together public policies for family farming and

agrarian reform, while the Ministry of Agriculture, Livestock and Supply (Ministério de Agricultura, Pecuária e Abastecimento-MAPA) became responsible for corporate farming activities (the so-called agribusiness⁵).

In short, the creation of PRONAF in 1996 was the beginning of the trajectory of design of public policies for family farming in Brazil. The creation of the MDA in 1999 affirmed the struggles of the category for recognition, increasing visibility and legitimacy vis-à-vis the society and the state. As of 2003, the political reconfiguration engendered by the election of President Lula gave a fundamental boost to this trajectory. Legitimized by their contribution to the political process, scholars, policy makers and social leaders linked to family farming not only began to demand new policies and a higher level of institutionalization for this category, but also became protagonists of this process, occupying important posts in the structure of the State. Although its effects are now deemed less efficacious than initially anticipated, the approval of Law No. 11,326 of July 24, 2006, known as 'Family Farming Law', was also an important milestone in this new political moment. The law recognized the social category, defined its conceptual structure and began to guide a broad set of public policies.

3 Three generations of family farming policies

The development trajectory of family farming public policies can be divided into three generations, each associated with a specific referential (Grisa and Schneider, 2015; Schneider, Shiki and Belik, 2010). Formed in the mid-1990s, the first generation encompasses instruments that are underpinned by an agricultural and agrarian referential for rural development. In line with the mainstream global (neoliberal) referential, these policies aimed to correct 'market failures' and, at the same time, to economically structure family farming for integrating it into the value chains (Guanziroli, 2007; World Bank, 1994). In addition to PRONAF, this generation also includes policies aimed at rural settlements and insurance of production and prices (Family Farming Insurance, 2004; and Family Farming Assured Prices Program, 2005). These are differentiated agricultural policies aimed at a specific public, even though being still very similar to those historically designed for all agricultural sectors. Such policies, besides remaining in force today, still absorb the major part of resources, especially that of rural credit - a mechanism that perpetuates itself as the driving force behind a process of modernization of family farming and whose effects, according to some authors, are not quite different from those manifested in the 1970s: it is concentrated on more capitalized farmers, on commodity production, and especially on the southern region of the country (Schneider and Aquino, 2015).

The second generation of policies began shortly after the creation of PRONAF, when the idea that the state should act more effectively in the fight against poverty (considered one of the 'market failures') gained space in the international agenda, particularly under the influence of the World Bank. Thus, a greater proximity was demanded between family farming policies and the Solidarity Community Program (Programa Comunidade Solidária), created in 1995 by the government Fernando Henrique Cardoso. Accordingly, a special line of credit was created, called PRONAF Infrastructure and Municipal Services. Created in 1997, this line gave priority to municipalities where land distribution was more scattered, and which had the lowest rates of urbanization and of agricultural productivity. Subsequently, the adequacy of public policies for the most vulnerable rural population also began to be demanded by labor union organizations and social movements, which, recognizing PRONAF's limitations to encompass the socioeconomic diversity of family farming, demanded new lines of credit

⁵ The opposition between 'family farming' and 'agribusiness' often involves inadequate extreme positions in view of the heterogeneity of social groups that make up the rural areas (Niederle and Schneider, 2009). In this article, however, these terms are not used as heuristic categories, but to identify two distinct 'sociopolitical categories', which mobilize different coalitions of interest, conceptions, and development strategies (Bruno, 2016).

aimed at the groups, regions and productive activities less served by that program (Grisa, 2012; Santos, 2011).

The emergence of a new hegemonic political coalition following the election of President Lula further strengthened efforts to combat poverty and hunger, spurring the creation of a set of policy instruments under the same socio-assistential referential: Crop Insurance Program, 2002, Family Allowance Program, 2003, Program on Sustainable Development of Rural Territories, 2003, National Rural Housing Program, 2003, Citizenship Territories Program, 2008, Caring Brazil Program, 2012, Green Allowance Program, 2011, and Plan Brazil Without Misery, 2011. In all cases, the focus was on improving living conditions of rural population (access to food and other basic rights) and the infrastructure of rural areas.

This referential soon became the subject of a dispute between two narratives. On the one hand, representatives of family farming organizations, as well as public officials and researchers identified with them, started to advocate for these policies in view of the need for greater attention of the State towards the most vulnerable groups in the rural world. Nonetheless, in their view, social assistance policies should not only ensure social reproduction of these groups, but also facilitate chances of productive inclusion that allow them to gradually overcome the structural hindrances to get into agricultural and non-agricultural markets (Bergamasco and Delgado, 2017; Bianchini, 2010; Mattei, 2006, Niederle, 2017a). On the other hand, this same referential began to be claimed by representatives of the coalition politically associated to agribusiness, specially the Confederation of Agriculture and Livestock (Confederação da Agricultura e Pecuária - CNA), but also academics and public officials (CNA, 2010; Navarro and Campos, 2013; Buainain and Garcia, 2013). In this perspective, noting the high concentration of the national agricultural production, Alves and Rocha (2010) suggest that, for most family farmers, fostering agricultural production could not solve the problem of poverty. Therefore, 'a good deal of social assistance policy is necessary for farmer families in the countryside' (Alves and Rocha, 2010, p. 288). This leads directly to the claim that agricultural policies like PRONAF would be almost exclusively targeted at more established farmers who have access to modern technologies and markets.

However, a new generation of public policies began to challenge this dualistic view between agricultural policies and social policies. Lula's election also made room for other actors who advocated the construction of new sustainable markets aimed at the promotion of food security as an alternative for productive inclusion of family farming. Advocated mainly by public officials, scholars, social movements and social organizations grouped in the National Council of Food and Nutritional Security (Conselho Nacional de Segurança Alimentar e Nutricional - CONSEA), this referential guided the actions of the Extraordinary Ministry of Food Security and Hunger Combat (Ministério Extraordinário de Segurança Alimentar e Combate à Fome - MESA), which was later changed into the Ministry of Social Development (Ministério do Desenvolvimento Social - MDS). In this perspective, the Zero Hunger Program (Programa Fome Zero) is remarkable as well as, within it, the several initiatives to promote access to food, foster diversified and agroecological agricultural production, and promote food quality: Food Acquisition Program, 2003; National School Feeding Program, 2009; National Program for the Production and Use of Biodiesel, 2005; Policy of Minimum Price Guarantee for Sociobiodiversity Products, 2008 and National Policy on Agroecology and Organic Production, 2012.

Although emerging at different times, these three generations of public policies, associated to three distinct referentials (agricultural and agrarian, social and food security), coexist in the public arenas (Grisa and Schneider, 2015). Nevertheless, it is not a harmonious coexistence, since there are tensions, heightened or eased now and then, depending on the power disputes at stake, such as elections, governmental negotiations, political and economic context, pressure capacity by family farming social and labor union movements, and the very influence of the agribusiness coalition of interests. The conditions for the prevalence of one or another referential are associated with disputes over the place and role that family farming must play in rural development strategies.

Since the end of President Dilma's first term, many discussions started to deal with this subject. With greater or lesser emphasis, depending on the oscillation of the political coalitions and the economic context, questions about the results achieved by this set of policies have arisen. Some actors began to construct a narrative on the 'exhaustion' of such policies, suggesting a full redesign of the public action. Despite being directed by the coalition formed around agribusiness, this narrative also engaged followers among social activists (e.g. in Via Campesina, agroecological movements and traditional communities) and scholars dissatisfied with the limitations of existing policies. However, as we shall see below, there were already considerable differences in the way each group devised the alternatives for constructing a new referential, for example, in their positions either in support or against the extinction of MDA.

Another narrative, in turn, mainly supported by MDA government officials, though also by researchers and rural labor unions (CONTAG and FETRAF), emphasized the need for reviewing the existing policies and specially the importance of improving the coordination between programs that seemed to have contradictory rural development strategies (social policies served only to alleviate rural poverty, which was partly produced by the indebtedness resulting from credit policies). Furthermore, this narrative also sought to strengthen the idea that a new generation of policies should be designed, whose content would include improvements in productive infrastructure and technical assistance aiming to promote new economic alternatives.

4 Narrative battles: the conservative turn

Within the studies on public policy analysis, there is a growing interest in the performativity of discourses, which define a common cognitive referential that guides the action of social actors (Schmitt, 2008). As suggested by Radaelli (2000), the narratives operate as argumentative mechanisms that seek to become explanatory variables in the course of public policies. The created argumentative sequence establishes a plot comprised of beginning, middle, and end. The denouement looks, then, like a 'moral of the story' whose aim is to point out solutions to the problem, intending changes in public policy (Jones and McBeth, 2010). Consequently, the appropriation of the discursive rhetoric starts to guide the action of both policymakers and other social actors involved in public action. The instability resulting from distinct concurrent narratives is inherent in the conflict between different actors and coalitions. Therefore, it is common for a same situation to be interpreted differently by each of the narratives, since their essential function is to create objections to the current referential or, in the opposite direction, to argue in favor of its maintenance.

Besides being challenged by agribusiness actors, the referentials that guided family farming policies have been pervaded by inherent contradictions, ambiguities and conflicts in the very coalition that supports this social segment. The debate has intensified, especially after the release, in 2009, of the Agricultural Census 2006 (IBGE, 2009). Owing to the enactment of Family Farming Law, for the first time the Census could distinguish between 'family' and 'non-family' farms. As a result, a cooperation project between MDA and IBGE compared data to show the economic and social relevance of family farming. The first published data revealed that the 4.3 million family farms (84% of the total), despite occupying less than 25% of the utilized agricultural area, accounted for 38% of the gross value of production. Tabulation of data referred to a specific set of staple foods also led to the information that family farming would account for 70% of food consumed in Brazil (França, Grossi and Marques, 2009; Grossi and Marques, 2010; Grossi and França, 2012). Embodied in the discourses of government officials and social activists, and even in many scholarly studies, this information has rapidly spread. It also gave rise to the narrative that family farming was ultimately the main responsible for the domestic supply. This narrative gained momentum inasmuch as, since 2008, there were intensifying debates over the increase in food prices, an issue particularly sensitive for the Brazilian society, because of the collective memory from the dramatic economic inflationary context of the 1980s (Maluf, 2008).

The backlash to this kind of argument included several argumentative and statistical strategies (production of evidences). The coalition created around agribusiness soon realized that another narrative should be produced, one more favorable to its interests, on the problem of food prices and possible solutions. Thus, a data recurrently presented showed that only 8.19% (423,000) of rural establishments accounted for 85% of the gross production value of the 5,175,489 Brazilian rural establishments (Alves and Rocha, 2010). Such data began to be used as evidence of the inefficacy of public policies in promoting the economic integration of family farming, as well as to play down its importance in food security.

Another research project was established, this time between CNA and the Getúlio Vargas Foundation (FGV), to present what they defined as ‘a reliable answer to the question about who produces what in the field: how much and where’ (FGV / IBRE, 2010, p.1). In this case, the adopted classification contrasted farmers ‘qualified’ and ‘not qualified’ to access the PRONAF. Considering that the criteria for qualifying to the policy of credit are more restrictive than those described in the Family Farming Law, the results indicated that Family Farming (qualified to PRONAF) would cover 64.4% (not 84.4%) of the total number of establishments and would account for 22.9% (not 38%) of the gross value of production. The document also suggested that this segment, especially milk, pork and poultry producers, was largely dependent on the production of ‘non-PRONAF’ farmers, due to the acquisition of agricultural commodities for animal feed (intermediary consumption). Hence, it also argued that the opposition between ‘family’ and ‘non-family’ farms was inappropriate. Otherwise, it articulated a narrative on complementarity at the level of productive chains, which sought to sustain the emergence of a new type of referential for policies that would be concentrated in a single Ministry, and would focus on productive chains rather than social groups (FGV/IBRE, 2010).

Besides challenging the total number of rural establishments and the share of gross value produced, divergences surrounding the methodology also raised a new debate involving a large contingent of ‘medium-sized producers’, who were identified as a ‘rural middle class’. The differences between the analyzes - 20 percentage points in the number of establishments, and 15 percentage points in the GPV - supported the existence of about one million establishments that were identified either as Family Farms, according to the methodology used by the MDA (IBGE, 2009), or as agribusiness, according to the criteria proposed by the CNA (FGV / IBRE, 2010). In line with the latter view, this stratum would be better represented by the logic of entrepreneurial agriculture that is technologically modernized and integrated to the market, and whose labor force would not be exclusively the family. A stratum to which the logic conceptually related to family farming does not apply and that, therefore, should be served by MAPA’s agricultural policies.

The distinction between “efficient and market-integrated” farmers and those whose social reproduction logic is based on “subsistence” is nothing but the old distinction between “modern” and “backward” dressed up. More than that, it resulted in a discursive effort to reconstruct social identities. According to the FGV/IBRE document (2010, p. 3),

[...] more than two-thirds of those eligible [qualified to access PRONAF] produce such a low Gross Production Value that casts doubt on the possibility that some production-oriented policy could significantly change the income level of this segment. They indeed produce virtually for self-consumption and do not generate income in the farms. If their survival relies on income from other sources, it would be reasonable even to identify them as rural residents and support them through social and anti-poverty policies, which are generally cheaper and more effective.

By emphasizing the importance of medium-scale rural producers and questioning the productive capacity of most family farms, the conservative narrative created a new dualism, no longer between agribusiness and family farming, but between “productive” and “unproductive” farmers. For the productive ones, it planned to intensify integration to markets, expand and facilitate access to agricultural credit, boost agricultural income generation through technology transfer, increase

productivity, correct market imperfections, and improve productive infrastructure, especially for food distribution.

A political competition for the “rural middle class” was established (Picolotto, 2012). The strengthening of this narrative led political coalitions to readjust their actions. Regarding rural unionism, the CNA (entrepreneurial farmers) launched an effort to expand its labor union base to the “productive” segment of family farming, thus amplifying its dispute with CONTAG.⁶ As to the state actors, both MDA and MAPA sought to readjust their policies to cover this segment. In 2010, MAPA reformulated and expanded the Program for Rural Employment and Income Generation (Programa de Geração de Emprego e Renda Rural - PROGER), changing it into the National Program in Support of Medium-scale Farmer (Programa Nacional de Apoio ao Médio Produtor Rural - PRONAMP). This line of credit has become one of the main financing lines of this ministry. In 2015, MAPA launched the program The Countryside in the Middle Class, with the proclaimed objective of promoting, within four years, 400 thousand low-income farmers to the *rural middle class* (MAPA, 2015). This program envisaged partnerships with state governments, municipalities, labor unions and the parastatal Micro and Small Enterprises Support System (Sistema de Apoio às Micro e Pequenas Empresas - SEBRAE), which, through its staff, provides technical assistance and training to improve efficiency, profitability and management of the rural enterprise. The MDA, in turn, expanded and added flexibility to the conditions for accessing PRONAF, for the more capitalized farmers. In addition, it created a specific line (More Food Program, in 2008) to finance productive infrastructure (machinery and equipment) and invested in the establishment of the National Agency for Technical Assistance and Rural Extension (Agência Nacional de Assistência Técnica e Extensão Rural - ANATER), created in 2014 to coordinate technical assistance to farmers at the national level.

The emphasis given by these policies focused on increasing food supply through productive and technological increments. Strictly speaking, from this point of view, the kind of labor force, whether family or hired, became less relevant. Public action was mainly focused on farmers already integrated to markets, something that would come to consolidate the use of agricultural policies for the productive farmers and social policies for the poor farms (Cazella et al., 2016). According to Bruno (2016, p. 1), this resumes a ‘discursive selectivity that imposes a hierarchy on who is able or not to be productively integrated’, claiming a supposed lack of historical alternative and holding up, at the same time, integration and denial, since the ‘vocational family farmer reaffirms the exclusion of the ‘inept’ family farmer.’ Therefore, the conservative narrative reproduces the forms of domination that naturalize the pattern of social inequality and, thus, legitimize decisions on inclusion and exclusion.

Identified with this narrative, several authors began to support the emergence of a new agricultural and agrarian model, one in which the notion of family farming and the policies especially designed for this segment, particularly those of agrarian reform, would lose their relevance. However, even within this coalition disinclined to family farming, the proposed solutions diverged, taking two non-mutually exclusive stances. On the one hand, the focus was on granting social policies to ensure social reproduction of poor family farmers (which would total about 3 million farms). Such policies would mitigate their situation until most of them could complete the “natural process” of exodus to the cities

⁶ There is a discrepancy between the legislation establishing criteria for entitlement to family farming public policies and the one that defines its labor union category. While the Family Farming Law defines ‘family farmer’ as the one who cultivates an area of no more than four (4) fiscal modules, Decree-Law n. 1166/1971 acknowledges, for labor union affiliation purposes, as a rural worker the family farmer who holds up to two (2) rural modules. Family farmers that cultivate areas of up to two modules comprise the union base of CONTAG, while those who farm larger areas are represented by CNA. CONTAG has been struggling to match the labor union affiliation criteria of Family Farming Law, but has encountered the resistance of CNA that, in recent years, has striven to represent the consolidated family farming.

or disappeared due to lack of successors (Alves and Rocha, 2010). On the other hand, there was the argument for a new wave of technological modernization, which, although highly selective, would make viable a (small) part of these farms (Navarro, 2016).

Thus, it is suggested that the high concentration of the gross value generated by agriculture stems from the lack of modernization of small-scale producers, resulting from inadequate policies for technology diffusion, since it does not reach the millions of establishments that ‘hardly’ contribute to the agricultural production (Alves, Souza and Rocha, 2012; Alves and Souza, 2015). It is also argued that the increase in gross income is primarily explained by the increase in technology (68%), then by labor (23%) and, finally, with lesser relevance, by land (9%). In recent years, this analytical approach to the Total Productivity of Factors has been widely used to challenge the need for agrarian reform, since, according to this narrative, land would have lost its relevance in the modern agribusiness economy (Alves, Souza e Rocha, 2012; Navarro, 2015c, 2016b). Therefore, the solution would be to improve policies of diffusion and absorption of technologies (Vieira Filho, 2013, 2014). In addition, an alternative for certain groups of small-scale producers would be to expand the scope of policies aiming to generate income through non-agricultural activities (Buainain and Garcia, 2013; Campos, Kanadani and Navarro, 2013).

5 The most immediate effects of the conservative turn

Soon after President Dilma Rousseff’s impeachment in 2016, major changes began to take place regarding family farming policies. Backed by the broader narrative of the need to reduce state spending and control government budget, one of the main changes was the extinction of MDA, followed by institutional uncertainties regarding the new allocation of its attributions. First, in line with the understanding that much of family farming should be a focus of social policies, part of MDA policies was reallocated to the Ministry of Social Development (MDS), which became known as the Ministry of Social and Agrarian Development (MDSA). To this end, the Special Department for Family Agriculture and Agrarian Development (Secretaria Especial de Agricultura Familiar e do Desenvolvimento Agrário - SEAD) was created in this ministry. However, as Mattei (2016) argues, ‘due to political differences between the various forces that comprise the interim government, this structure did not even work under the MDSA’, with SEAD being soon transferred to the Civil House and reorganized into the Sub-department for Agrarian Planning, Sub-department for Family Farming (with Divisions of Produce Financing and Protection and Division of Technical Assistance and Rural Extension), Sub-department for Rural Development, and Extraordinary Sub-department for Land Regularization of the Legal Amazon. This change terminated the Division of Marketing and Value Aggregation that was responsible for part of public policies related to the commercialization and agro-industrialization of family farming, as well as the Department of Territorial Development.⁷

These institutional changes are an outcome of the “new” ideas regarding the place and importance of family farming and of sectoral understandings about rural development in Brazil. Through this process, a ministerial structure that was primarily focused on the social category changes into a Department subordinated to the Presidency of the Republic, thus reducing the political and institutional influence of family farming actors. As pointed out by a, interviewed public official, these

⁷ The institutional changes were introduced by the Provisional Act no. 726 of May 12, 2016, sanctioned by Law No. 13,341 / 2016 of September 30, 2016. However, prior to the enactment of the law, the Chief Minister of the Civil House, Eliseu Padilha, has even announced the recreation of the MDA, what would be a response to appease political groups that supported the impeachment, and to ease pressures from social movements. Instead, Decree 8.865 of Sep 9, 2016 transferred SEAD from the MDSA to the Civil House (Cabinet of the Presidency of the Republic). In May 2017, through Provisional Act no. 782 of May 31, 2017, MDSA was renamed to the Ministry of Social Development (MDS).

changes indicate that the family farming ‘agenda has no place in the government’. Furthermore, the ‘institutional downgrading would imply loss of political capacity for coordination and would directly impact the operationalization of some public policies’ (Soldera, 2017, p. 134).

Besides the extinction of the MDA, the resources intended for family farming were reduced under the argument of the necessary fiscal adjustment, and several public policies were paralyzed, reformulated or put under review. As reported by the newspaper Folha de São Paulo of October 1, 2016, ‘the Michel Temer (PMDB) Government’s proposed 2017 Budget sets up a significant reduction of funds of important federal agrarian programs. The cutbacks affect programs from various ministries and agencies responsible for actions aimed at agrarian reform, small-scale farmers, indigenous and traditional communities, among others.’ Indeed, family farming unions estimate that ‘with the end of the MDA, many policies and programs that were accomplished through struggle by the rural working class over the last few decades ended up eliminated or lost strength due to reduced budget.’ (CONTAG, 2017). Budget cuts can be illustrated by the case of PAA, which was said, in January 2017, to undergo a reduction of about 30% in relation to the previous year spending. Nevertheless, in July 2017, information indicated an effective reduction of 67%. Even so, for supporting the assertion about the maintenance of the policy, the government strategy has been to foster Institutional Procurement, a modality of PAA for which funds are already allocated to the budgets of several federal institutions. Figure 1, below, summarizes the situation of important programs aimed at family farming and agrarian reform.

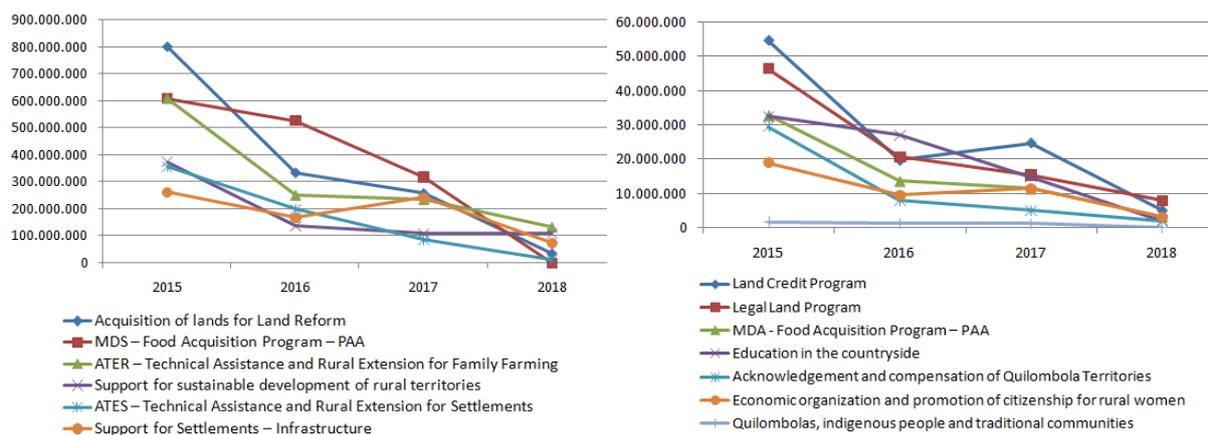


Figure 1 - Resources allocated to policies in support of Family Farming and Agrarian Reform between 2015 and 2018 (in millions reais).

Source: Prepared by the authors based on Teixeira and Intini (2017)

Note: The 2018 resources correspond to those anticipated by the Annual Budget Bill (PLOA), presented by the Government to the National Congress for approval.

It is important to emphasize that the reduction of resources is not only circumstantial. It also echoes the approval of Constitutional Amendment no. 95 of December 2016, known as “PEC do teto dos gastos públicos” (Constitutional Amendment Bill on public spending ceiling). This amendment established an upper limit to the State's primary expenditures for the next 20 years, corresponding to the spending value of the immediately previous year, adjusted for inflation. This rule imposes tight constraints on spending in the long term, not only for family farming targeted policies, but also for those focused on health, education, infrastructure and social policies that affect the conditions for social reproduction of this particular segment as well as of the whole Brazilian population (Paiva et al., 2016).

Territorial policies were strongly impacted by political and institutional change, even though they had already been facing problems since Rousseff’s government (Delgado and Leite, 2013). Besides the extinction of the Territorial Development Department (Secretaria de Desenvolvimento Territorial),

programs such as PRONAT and PTC were reduced. Also noteworthy are the non-renewal of technical cooperation agreements that underpinned the activities of the Centers of Extension in Territorial Development (Núcleos de Extensão em Desenvolvimento Territorial - NEDET) and the redirection of the call for bids on infrastructure projects, which turned their emphasis to municipalities and intermunicipal consortia, that is, broke with the territorial logic of public action. With weakening territorial policies, the [development] activities in rural territories became fundamentally dependent on the performance of civil society organizations and on the agency of local actors.

While some public policies were terminated or minimized, others were halted. As soon as the impeachment process took place, the Program on Improved Management (Programa Mais Gestão) - the main instrument of the National Program for Strengthening Cooperativism and Solidary Associations in Family Farming and Agrarian Reform (COOPERAF), created in 2015, was halted. This program promotes Technical Assistance and Rural Extension focusing on management practices, production, marketing and social organization of cooperatives and associations. At the beginning of 2016 a Call for Bids (n° 02/2016) was underway for hiring either public or private institutions to advise 930 cooperatives and family farming associations. This invitation has been withdrawn and the activities of the Program were halted.

Another important change relates to the policy of agrarian reform settlements and land regularization. In line with the conservative narrative presented above, and given the expansion of land grabbing (Flexor and Leite, 2017; Sauer and Leite, 2012), institutional changes have sought to make new areas available to the market. These changes were exacerbated by the Provisional Act no. 759, proposed in December 2016, and enacted as the Law No. 13,465 of July 11, 2017 (Land Regularization Law), which: a) confers the title of the land to settlers of Land Reform as of the tenth year (if the settlement project is consolidated), and with more than 15 years of settlement, allowing the sale of the land; b) permits monetary payments of lands acquired for the implementation of agrarian reform projects (previously payment was only in State Agricultural Debt Securities), making land sale more attractive for the settlers; c) establishes new criteria for beneficiaries selection, which is now carried out in the municipal sphere and conducted by INCRA, thus reducing the participation of social movements in the process; d) regularizes areas “directly and peacefully cultivated” that were illegally occupied before 2008 (in previous legislation it was 2004), or after 2008 if the land has been demonstrably occupied over at least five years and has an extension of at most 2,500 hectares (maximum extension was previously 1,500 hectares)⁸. As Sauer and Leite point out (2017, p. 32), such provisions ‘besides placing huge extensions of land on the market, point to a drain in the agrarian reform policy in Brazil, prioritizing allocations to public lands that weaken the creation of settlement projects and the regularization of areas owned by traditional communities.’

⁸ It should be noted that such provisions have been contested, including by the Public Prosecutor's Office that demanded institutional reviews and charged INCRA and the Deputy Secretary of the Legal Land Program (Programa Terra Legal) with “inaction”, considering that the new legislation transfers land ‘under quite favorable economic conditions’ to individuals; authorizes ‘the private appropriation of most valuable public patrimony’; establishes ‘unjustifiable privileges in favor of land grabbers (*grileiros*) who, in the past, illegally appropriated vast tracts of public land’, ‘grabbing that often involved the use of extreme violence, slave labor, and large-scale degradation of the environment’; ‘makes merely symbolic the amount to be paid for land acquisition, by means of discounts and of setting the value for acquisition of the land in terms of the minimum value of bare land established by the Reference Price Worksheet applied to land regularization in Land Reform settlement projects’; that ‘the law under appreciation induces, when it should inhibit, real estate speculation in the Amazon region’; and that ‘the expansion of border areas will lead to an increase in agrarian conflicts (with consequent increase in associated deaths), deforestation (with an impact on the goals of the Paris Agreement) and scaling up of “ situations characterized by complete disregard for legislation’ (Brazil, Ministério Público, 2017).

The changes arising from Law 13.465 / 2017 add to other initiatives, for example the possibility of changes in regulations aiming to ‘simplify regulations for land registration and control by foreigners’ - one of the plans for 2017, as pointed out by the Ministry of Planning and Management (Brazil, MPOG, 2016, p.180) - and changes in the rules for demarcation of indigenous lands. Some of these proposals have long been under debate in the Congress⁹, and the political changes under way since 2015 may offer a ‘window of opportunity’ (Kingdon, 2015) for their institutionalization. Also noteworthy is the recent issue of Opinion n. 001/2017/GAB/CGU/AGU, of July 19, 2017, which compels the whole federal administration to incorporate elements of the decision of the Supreme Federal Court (STF), in 2009, on the case of Raposa-Serra do Sol Indigenous Land, what implies adopting the time frame of the 1988 Constitution as entitlement criterion. In other words, from now on, only the indigenous communities that were in possession of their territory when the 1988 Constitution was promulgated are entitled to their land. Such institutional change was strongly influenced by the Parliamentarian Agricultural and Livestock Front (known as the Ruralist Legislators), and the testimony of a member of this Front is emblematic:

Since April last year when President Temer took over, we have asked: what is the position of Michel Temer Government regarding the indigenous question? (...) [The binding opinion] is a great victory for the Brazilian producers who have been worried, anguished about the pressures of FUNAI [National Foundation of Indigenous People], of the Ministry of Justice, and now, with the President Michel Temer, there is a new direction for Brazilian rural producers.¹⁰

In addition to discursive disputes that have regulatory implications on agrarian and land issues, such changes reflect disputes over the use of land in Brazil. The narrative in defense of “productive farmers” gains space in the social and political reality.

Also for illustrating the case of policies put under review, it is worth mentioning the change in rural social security, presented as Constitutional Amendment Bill (PEC) n°. 287, in December 2016, by the Minister of Finance, and sent by the Presidency of the Republic to the National Congress. Employing a narrative based on the demographic changes experienced by Brazilian society and on the need for fiscal adjustment, the PEC argues that ‘although the reform now proposed will have full effects only in the long term, it is expected, in the short term, an improvement in the economic context, resulting from its approval, with a positive effect on the fiscal policy, allowing the reduction of long-term interest rates, and stimulating investment and job creation.’ (PEC 287/2016). The first proposal equated men and women normal retirement age for social security pension and raised it from the current 60 and 55 years, respectively, to 65 years. In addition, it aimed to institute ‘a minimum and periodic individual collection for special pensioners [family farmers], replacing the social security tax model levied upon the result of produce commercialization’ (PEC 287/2016). Following several negotiations - still ongoing - the current proposal indicates as normal retirement age, for rural social security, 57 years for women and 60 years for men, conditioned to 15 years of individual contribution.

Finally, it is worth mentioning the enactment of Decree No. 9,064 of May 31, 2017, which rules on the family unit of agricultural production and establishes the Family Farming Registry. On the one hand, this decree emphasizes a new concept - Family Agrarian Production Unit - to the detriment of the notion of Family Farming, something that can weaken the political coalition constituted around this social category since the 1990s. This is a conceptual change that exposes the dissent over the term and points to new interpretations about the category/identity family farming. On the other hand, this decree creates a new mechanism for the identification of family farming, which may overcome the limits of

⁹ This is the case of Constitutional Amendment Bill 215/2000, which aims to bring into exclusive authority of the National Congress the approval of demarcation of lands traditionally occupied by indigenous people and the ratification of already approved demarcations.

¹⁰ Available at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=onCmKzJAVcU>

the PRONAF's Declaration of Entitlement (depending on the criteria established in the conceptualization).

The ongoing changes in family farming public policies suggest that rural development is once again giving way to an agricultural development driven by so called productive and economically viable agriculture. On the other hand, the State's action turns to deregulations and sanctions that make agricultural activity even more attractive to large national and international investors. In this new interpretation, there is no room for much of family farming. The conservative narrative shows its ability to guide a new referential, as the prophecy of the incapacity of family farming to reproduce is fulfilled, not by virtue of its own conditions, but by the change in the state's *modus operandi*, associated to the breakdown of the social and political pact that sustained the coexistence between family farming and agribusiness during the last decades.

6 Restricted countermovement

Despite the acknowledged advancements of family farming policies in Brazil, insofar as their limits and deficiencies became more evident, labor unions and social movements increased their criticism about government action. Such criticism not only varied in intensity depending on the movement voicing it, but also reflected different understandings about the role of public policies and rural development strategies. In general, while family farming unions (CONTAG and FETRAF) favored the idea of restructuring and expanding existing policies¹¹, representatives of Via Campesina (MPA and MST), as well as a more dispersed group of agro-ecological movements, adopted a discourse that denied some policies, particularly PRONAF, which was said to reproduce economic, social and environmental effects similar to the old programs of agricultural modernization and promotion of agribusiness. According to Marcelo Leal and Sergio Gorgen (2015), two national leaders of Via Campesina,

PRONAF is experiencing its exhaustion stage as a massive public policy for upward mobility, change of technological standard towards agroecology and universalization of the access. In recent years, PRONAF has been seized by the banking logic, was transformed into forms of profit transfer for the industries of agricultural machinery, agrochemicals, and transgenic seeds. It moved away from the peasant logic and now strengthens the rural middle-class agribusiness and the pesticides industry.

Inadvertently, a kind of “perverse confluence” has been created between these criticisms and the conservative narrative. However, while this latter blamed the inefficiency of the policies for their inadequacy in integrating most family farmers into the markets and promoting the transfer of modern technologies, the first ones denounced the perverse effects of this process, which would be responsible for the socioeconomic vulnerability of family farmers and their dependence on industrial and financial capital. Moreover, while the conservative narrative produced evidence based on the census statistics to legitimize itself (despite a time-lag of almost one decade since the last Agricultural Census), the criticism from social movements was fundamentally anchored in local experiences that were not generalizable. Thus, throughout the discursive disputes, a deadlock also emerged over the different forms of valid knowledge for evaluation of public policies.

¹¹ At the Fighting for Family Farming and Land Reform National Meeting (*IX Jornada Nacional de Luta da Agricultura Familiar e Reforma Agrária*) FETRAF called for a 'Family Farming PAC', an analogy with the Growth Acceleration Program (PAC) established by the federal government in 2007 to finance large infrastructure projects (FetraF-Brasil, 2014). This claim became an expression of a demand for coordination between the various policies for family farming involving areas such as production, education, health, culture, leisure and infrastructure.

The intensification of criticism from both sides of the political spectrum has led state actors to a defensive political stance, hindering a broader dialogue on adjustments and innovations that could have been made to existing programs. Only belatedly, on the eve of the impeachment that deposed President Dilma Roussef, some initiatives involving MDA representatives, social leaders and researchers indicated the intention of a thorough evaluation of PRONAF, which was not carried out due to the subsequent political changes.

When Michel Temer interim government started the administrative restructuring that led to the end of MDA, the backlash was less significant than expected by most public officials, social leaders and scholars. Protests were mostly dispersed and disjointed. Internal disputes within the own labor union movements regarding their appraisal of the new political context contributed to that weak reaction. The period between promises of recreating the MDA and the consolidation of SEAD in the Civil House (see above) involved disputes between coalitions that aimed for a stronger position in the new government. This interval was just enough to break up stronger reactions, as well as to cause splits between social movements and labor unions. Today, as the new institutional design becomes clearer, the political coalitions are firmly entrenched in the State structures (albeit with precarious stability), and the impacts of the new conservative (and liberalizing) fiscal adjustment begin to drastically affect the implementation of family farming policies, the reactions to this process are beginning to acquire clearer contours. Even so, distinct political agendas and strategies hardly indicate a broad unity of rural social movements and labor unions.

Three examples are particularly relevant. Firstly, regarding the key issues that mobilized the agenda of these collective actors during the last year, the restructuring of Rural Social Security (see above) was the one that achieved greater political unity, since it affects the vast majority of farmers. While debates over the bill are still in process, the government's withdrawal from its initial proposal has shifted the focus away from what could become an element of convergence for a countermovement. The impact of the other reforms, however, has provoked distinct reactions. Changes in policies of agrarian reform and rural settlements became the main concern of the MST. The grant of land titles to settlers (and hence the possibility of selling it), as well as the transfer of obligations to the municipalities, may result in a general disruption of their social base, as well as in their decreasing participation in the process of management of these policies. CONTAG's agenda, in turn, remained focused on the demand for adjustments in differentiated agricultural policies, particularly rural credit (reduction of interest rates and conditions for access).

A second example involves the different stances adopted by the actors when negotiating the Family Farming Harvest Plan 2017-2018. Since the launch of this policy management planning tool by the MDA, at the beginning of Lula's Administration (2002), for the first time the CNA (representative of the rural entrepreneurial sector) participated in the discussions and the launching of the Plan (which, this time, took place in a formal restricted meeting, without broad social participation). Formerly participating just in the debates of MAPA's Agricultural and Livestock Plan, in 2017 the CNA presented proposals for the extension of limits established by PRONAF on credit and annual gross income per farmer, what would imply increasing the access to the benefits for those more capitalized family farmers. With regard to the family farming and peasant social and labor union movements, CONTAG took a stance of dialogue aiming, according to the entity, to preserve the previous achievements. FETRAF and Via Campesina, in turn, refused to take part in the discussion of the Harvest Plan in an explicit manifestation of nonconformity with the "institutional coup" that deposed the previous government.

Finally, it is worth highlighting the policy of social participation of the new government, especially the reconfiguration of the Councils, Forums and Committees that were established since the mid-1990s as arenas of dialogue with civil society for the shared management of public policies. Following an initial halt of these arenas activities, some began to be rearticulated on new bases. This is the case of the National Council for Sustainable Rural Development (CONDRAF). Soon after the impeachment, aiming to ensure the existence and control of this council, civil society representatives elected a

tripartite commission to run it. The Government's reaction revealed another perspective: it reduced the participation of civil society, made the nomination of CONDRAF's president a governmental prerogative (without election) and, in June 2017, created a Working Group that must submit a proposal for restructuring the Council. In this case, while Via Campesina maintained its opposed stance in relation to the government and were absent, CONTAG, FETRAF and some agro-ecological movements indicated representatives for the Working Group. Among these latter movements prevails an understanding that non-participation would imply the ultimate dismantling of various policies as well as of the own SEAD.

The discourse of the new SEAD officials has been announcing the maintenance of family farming policies. There is indeed an interest of the political alliance that controls this space in strengthening SEAD. Following the extinction of the MDA and the reallocation of its public servants, SEAD became an institutional structure with little capacity for policy execution. As the actors who control this Department have a peripheral position in the new government, to some extent they depend on the maintenance of dialog with social and labor union movements, albeit under new bases of participation, to broaden their political capital. What makes this context even more complex is the fact that these actors keep political ties with another labor union confederation (Força Sindical), which, without much influence on rural areas, sees in the policies run by SEAD an unprecedented chance to dialog with farmers. Although such arrangement suggests the establishment of a logic of political trades, the fact is that budget cuts and the fragility of SEAD compromise any more substantial transaction. In the main, family farming actors were forced into a stance of resistance and relative paralysis. In the face of the worsening political-institutional crisis in the country, the bets go to the impending rearrangement of interest groups coalitions aiming at the 2018 presidential elections.

Social movements and labor unions have recently conducted assessments of their stance vis-a-vis the Workers' Party governments, and its impacts on their capacity for social mobilization. They generally emphasize the important contribution to designing and implementing public policies in support of family farming, but recognize that the excessive commitment to the viability of these policies ended up redirecting resources that were once focused on the interaction with their social bases. With the end of the Workers' Party period, a loss of capacity for autonomous action and social engagement is observed, which is pointed out as one of the reasons of the current political lethargy.

7 Final remarks

In Brazil, claims for more or less substantial changes in family farming public policies have been the focus of debates among social movements, researchers and public officials in recent years. Despite advancements carried out in terms of institutionalization of this social segment (Family Farming Law) and the innovations mainly embodied in food security policies, the coexistence of different referentials guiding the design and implementation of these policies has exacerbated the contradictions of rural development in Brazil (Niederle, 2017b). To some extent, family farming is victim of its own success. Increasing recognition by society, the upward mobility of a part of family farmers to the "rural middle class", and the intensification of disputes with organizations related to agribusiness strained the social pact that, since the late 1990s, had allowed the segmentation of social, economic and political spaces (including the coexistence of two ministries).

Of course, the breakdown of such pact goes beyond conflicts particular to the rural space. To a great extent, it reflects a change in the "global referential" (Jobert and Muller, 1987) that was established following the impeachment of Dilma Rouseff. However, the contradictions that underlie this breakdown were already present in what we define as the 'conservative narrative'. Reviving the idea of a new wave of technological modernization for the Brazilian countryside, this narrative proposes a new dualism, no longer between family farming and agribusiness, but between "productive" and

“unproductive” farmers. In an even more sectarian way, while transferring to the formers the burden of sustaining the “modern” dependent agroexport model that characterizes Brazilian participation in global value chains, it reserves to the latter a marginalized social condition, similar to that once occupied by “small production”, a notion against which, among other reasons, the identity of “family farming” was constituted in Brazil.

Although the political instability of the country does not allow to point out any trend, this article shows that, in line with the conservative narrative, the main changes in public policies have so far focused on those leading to rather structural changes (agrarian reform), which were more innovative (PAA) or that legitimized the ways of life of social segments considered “unproductive” (traditional farmers, *quilombolas*, and indigenous communities). However contentious these changes may be, the opposition to this process is restricted either by the social lethargy produced by the deepening of the political crisis or by the difficulty of social movements and labor unions to find common agendas and strategies for action. While the strength of these actors in the period of the Workers’ Party governments lay on their ability to interact with the State, and to propose and implement public policies in support of family farming, now this seems to be their weakness. Inheritors of a successful partnership, they now feel the effects of institutional change.

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The 5th International Conference of the
BRICS Initiative for Critical Agrarian Studies
October 13-16, 2017
RANEPA, Moscow, Russia

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