Collective Approach of Rural Development: Case Study of "Maronna Foundation" in the Pampa Bioma, Rio Grande do Sul, Brazil

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Abstract

The Maronna Foundation was created in the 1980s by two brothers who were heirless farmers. After a visit to Massey University, New Zealand, they decided to use their fortune to support rural farming in the Brazilian Pampa through an agropastoral institute. Over the last four decades, the foundation has developed diverse research, education, and extension projects in partnership with local, regional, national, and international institutions, especially universities, research centers, non-governmental organizations and local governances. Recent surveys conducted in the area of the Maronna Foundation demonstrate the interest of local breeders in technologies applied to farming systems, mainly for rangeland and grassland management, cultivated forages, animal genetics and herd reproductive improvement. Such interest has been linked to the actions carried out by the Maronna Foundation over the years, as has been declared by local stakeholders, and has been scientifically demonstrated as planned in the NEXUS-Pampa Project. However, three characteristics should explain the situation: the philosophy of the Maronna Foundation that focuses on a collective approach to local growth and development; management led by a large, diverse and representative board; and practices based on both scientific competences and participative methods. The "Rincão do 28" association of family farmers could be used as a case of this materialized philosophy.

Introduction

The Maronna Foundation is a nonprofit, Non-Governmental Organization, instituted on August 26, 1983, through the testaments of Potito and Francisco Maronna. It is located in the Brazilian portion of the Pampa Biome, in the municipality of Alegrete, state of Rio Grande do Sul. As a testamentary foundation, it should perform and fulfill the wishes of its founders: to organize in the "Estância do Vinte e Oito" an Agropastoral Institute, similar to Massey University in New Zealand, and to manage a specialized library. Along the years, its goals were outlined as described:

a) To defend, preserve and protect the environment, and to promote sustainable development;
b) To promote economic and social development and to fight poverty;
c) To undertake non-profit experimentation of new socio-productive models and alternative systems of production, commerce, employment and credit;
d) To carry out studies and research, develop alternative technologies, and to produce and promote information and technical and scientific knowledge pertaining to farming activities.

Two rural properties are part of the Maronna Foundation: *Centro de Validação Tecnológica Capivari (CVT Capivari)* and *Estância do 28*, both of which generate part of the financial resources needed to maintain and promote the actions needed for achieving its goals.

CVT Capivari is located on BR-290, 12km from the municipality of Alegrete-RS and spans an area of 101.7 ha. It is consolidating itself as a Technologic Validation and Training Center, by offering courses and putting projects together. It maintains production as its main source of income: finishing cattle and milk production (the latter, since 2018) are its main activities.

The production systems are interconnected to the technologic validation and training projects, which offer internships for students from universities, institutes, and technical schools. The results are shared in the *field day* and are also published in scientific papers. The productive system is used as a means that generates economic resources, data and information for the technicians and local farmers.

Estância do 28 is located 60km south of Alegrete-RS, in a region called Rincão do 28, 4th subdistrict of Vasco Alves. It is inside the Ibirapuitã Environmental Protection Area, which is a 318 000ha protected area managed by ICMBio, in the municipalities of Alegrete, Quaraí, Rosário do Sul and Santana do Livramento. The property spans an area of 2 381ha, beef cattle is the main economic activity, and natural

pasture is the main cattle food source. The soil and terrain are varied, which interferes in the quality and productivity of the farmland.

In the region surrounding it, there are many farmers that had practically no prior technical support. The *Rincão do 28* community is formed mostly by small rural properties classified as family farmers. The main productive activities are beef cattle and sheep farming, with small areas for subsistence agriculture (VARGAS & SILVEIRA, 2010). The main animal food source is native pasture, in basalt and sandstone soils, which present considerable variation in quality and availability along the year (SILVEIRA et al., 2006; GIRARDI-DEIRO et al. 2006; SILVEIRA et al., 2005), in which a very high number of animals is usually present, despite the seasonality of the production of this type of pasture. This contributes to the low rates of productivity and consequent low income. Excess pasturing is usually accentuated in small farming properties.

The people from the region are *Gaúchos*, whose origins trace back to the wars between the Spanish and Portuguese empires in claiming and delimiting land in Latin America. When considering sustainable management of an ecosystem, we cannot ignore the people therein, and should focus on indicating actions that can enable the survival of local cultures in a globalized world. Considering people as an important component of the agroecosystem, their permanence in the region is of vital importance to its sustainability.

Methods and Study Site

In this context, the Maronna Foundation created a project titled *Desenvolvimento Sustentável do Rincão do 28* (Sustainable Development of the Rincão do 28). The project aims to contribute to the sustainable growth and development of the *Rincão do 28* region and surrounding areas. The focus is on improving farmer income and the quality of life of those involved. It was created in December 2006 and launched in 2007. The first step was to call the local community, residents, and farmers to participate.

The methodology used in the project was to have farmers actively participate in defining the priority of the actions to be taken, based on monthly meetings. Initially, the farmers were invited to participate in a meeting to present the project. In this meeting, the farmers indicated which of the courses they were interested in. It was up to the Maronna Foundation and partners to make it possible for the actions that were agreed upon with the farmers to become effective, by communicating with organizations that could help to achieve the goals proposed. To this end, several institutions became involved in the projects, some more sporadically, others in a more systematic manner.

The first demands were of a social nature, mainly related to lack of access to basic infrastructure (such as electrical power and roads). As time passed, and after data had been collected in partnership with the University, actions of a technical nature, aiming at increasing production rates, and consequently improving economic income also came into demand.

With the group formed, other institutions foresaw actions that could be more effective. Thus, important projects were implemented alongside that community, being it the Maronna Foundation's role to mediate and frequently execute the actions proposed by other projects. Some of them are:

- *Juntos para Competir* (SEBRAE-RS, SENAR-RS, FARSUL, 2008-2009) joins the project to develop quality cow-calf production and improve farming production rates, since local production activity was raising beef cattle. The specific goals of this partnership were to implement the use of the technique of artificial insemination to genetically improve the herd and standardize cow-calf production, cultivate collaboration among farmers and organize the joint commercialization of cow-calves, seeking to aggregate value to the product by offering higher quality on scale. The group became known for its progress as high quality cow-calf farmers.

- URB-AL III Program is an international cooperation program between Europe and Latin America, cofinanced by the European Community. URBAL Pampa Ovinos (2010-2012) is part of the URB-AL Program, which provides technical assistance in sheep farming. The Maronna Foundation administered funds received from the European Community for carrying out the project.

- *Juntos para Competir* (2017-2019) – *"Fortalecimento Produtivo e Mercadológico da Ovinocultura"*. This project comprises a series of technical and management assistance services focusing on sheep farming, which is the second most important farming activity that produces family income throughout the year.

- Livestock Production Systems in the Ibirapuitã River Basin and Their Relationships With Water, Energy and Food Production - Nexus Pampa (2017-). The project adopts a transdisciplinary,

participative approach, and is limited to the Ibirapuitã river basin and the understanding of its reality resulting from the interactions between humans and nature. Drawing from this premise, we can explore the factors linked to the importance of water, energy and food, and their interrelations, according to the multidisciplinary "Nexus Water-Energy-Food" approach, that highlights that for an assessment to have long-term impact, it must be part of a wider process of involvement and should necessarily be discussed with the main interested parties and specialists (FAO, 2014).

Discussion [Conclusions/Implications]

The success of the "Sustainable Development of the Rincão do 28" project made the Maronna Foundation well-known, and in 2019 it was certified as an *Entidade Executora Sebraetec*.

In this new phase, the Maronna Foundation moves on from being an articulator between people and organizations to an organization that carries out projects of improvement of regional production chains. The projects regard beef cattle farming, sheep farming, and integration between livestock and crop farming. Recently, the Maronna Foundation also works with projects regarding milk production and olive cultivation, all of which inside the Pampa Biome.

Therefore, three characteristics should explain foundation actions: the philosophy of the Foundation focused on the collective approach of local development, the management led by a large, diverse, and representative board and the Foundation practices based on both scientific competences and participative methods.

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