Evaluation of Resilience as a Tool for Strategic Planning of a Community Development NGO in the Brazilian Amazon

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Abstract

Instituto Ouro Verde (IOV) is a non-governmental organization that works with groups of family farmers in 6 municipalities of northern Mato Grosso state in the Brazilian Amazon to strengthen social participation in agroecology and economic solidarity. In 2011, farmers and extension agents involved with IOV carried out an evaluation and strategic planning process incorporating elements of the resilience assessment methodology from the "Resilience Assessment Workbook for Practitioners," in three phases: identification of historical drivers of change in the way of life of the region’s farm families; identification and operationalization of attributes to characterize the family farmer social-ecological system; and development of strategic actions at different scales. The project was carried out collaboratively involving the institution’s technical team (12 people) as well as 20 community leaders from 5 rural communities.

The history of each community was studied by interviews of the pioneering farmers by youth leaders from the communities who had been trained by IOV. The histories compiled were then brought to a workshop where participants identified the key characteristics of the farmers’ way of life that had changed over the years and the driving forces that led to these. These key characteristics were considered the attributes of the family agriculture way of life and were operationalized in terms of quantifiable variables. The IOV technical team then undertook surveys with community leaders to characterize the present state of each group in terms of these attributes. This fed into a final workshop to reflect on these change processes, consider past and current drivers, in order to construct future scenarios that were used to decide on actions needed to strengthen the attributes of family agriculture.

The attributes of family agriculture related to four dimensions: use of labor, social organization, production techniques and relationship with the land; these enabled representation of the diversity of situations within the regime of "family agriculture." Results documented, for different groups that work with IOV, different perceptions about their situation, different forms of community organization, different production strategies based on different objectives and different strategies for the future. Exploration of the drivers and ongoing system change that are pushing the system towards a "pessimistic" scenario for family agriculture led to a collective reflection on the need to strengthen this social movement’s actions at different scales, from the rural community (for example, opening space for debate and collective action in the communities) to larger scale (for example, development of national-level partnerships to directly influence public policies).

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This experience shows that the methodology used helped to illuminate and deepen the institution’s strategic planning. Definition of attributes was an important process for reflection and internal dialogue that, in itself, helped to strengthen the organization. In addition, the work demonstrated that the choice of attributes is a critical part of the process and is subjective, based on the worldview of the actors involved, thus reinforcing the need for participatory mechanisms to ensure that the stakeholders affected adequately influence the process.

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