
An interdisciplinary and participatory approach to setting research priorities in Brazil

The new Brazilian Research Network on Food and Nutrition Sovereignty and Security offers a positive alternative to the old established ways of doing food and agriculture research, argues **Renato S. Maluf**.

The Brazilian Research Network on Food and Nutrition Sovereignty and Security promotes academic research on food, nutrition and agriculture. It takes an interdisciplinary perspective that focuses on public policies, dialogue with organisations and social movements, and recognises different ways of producing knowledge.

These perspectives have guided the development of the Research Network since 2012. Its official constitution was approved during the third National Meeting of Research, held between November 8th and 10th 2017, which brought together hundreds of researchers on the campus of the Federal University of Paraná, in Curitiba (PR), Brazil.

The Network emerged in part due to the construction of what could be called the 'socio-political field' of food and nutrition sovereignty and security (FNSS) in Brazil initiated in the late 1980s. This era saw the country's re-democratisation, bringing together social organisations, public managers and academics with significant repercussions for public policies from 2003 onwards¹. The process led to an understanding that new approaches to research were needed.

The dominant paradigm of disciplinary research was not able to adequately contemplate multidimensional issues including hunger and malnutrition, the right to adequate and healthy food, diversified family-based agriculture, and the adoption of agroecological principles.

There has been an increasing number of research groups working on the

subject of FNSS and the human right to food (RtF) in universities and research institutions throughout the country. This has happened in parallel with hunger and food becoming priorities on Brazil's public agenda in the 2000s. The National Council for Food and Nutrition Security (CONSEA)² has emboldened researchers to adopt multidisciplinary approaches to FNSS and RtF, and at the same time laid bare the lack of opportunity for dialogue between researchers that adopt this perspective, and the lack of institutional support (e.g. from development agencies) capable of harbouring such approaches.

The Research Network on Food and Nutrition Sovereignty and Security was developed by a group of researchers who wanted to practice citizen science that produced academic knowledge, whilst at the same time valuing other forms of knowledge production. They wanted to prioritise dialogues that fitted with the agendas of social organisations and public policies, without compromising their own academic autonomy. Their other aim was to construct adequate research methods without compromising academic rigour.

This research concept is expressed in the six principles that guide the Network's performance, namely:

1. Interdisciplinary and multi-professional academic knowledge, respecting diverse forms of knowledge generation and methodological diversity.
2. Citizen research committed to overcoming hunger and promoting

food and nutrition sovereignty and security.

3. Independence and autonomy from governments, political parties, national and international organisations and private interests.
4. Permanent commitment to reducing inequalities and promoting gender, ethno-racial and generational equity.
5. Supporting food quality, and adequate and healthy food in terms that respect socio-environmental circumstances and cultures.
6. Generating knowledge that contributes to public policies and to positioning at national and international levels free from conflicts of interest.

Likewise, the Network's action guidelines aim to promote, among other things: (a) cooperation between national and international researchers; (b) methodological diversity; (c) multi-, inter- and trans-disciplinary characteristics of the production of knowledge; (d) knowledge for new forms of teaching and extension; (e) knowledge exchange with organisations, movements and social groups; (f) professional, institutional, regional, gender, generational, cultural and ethnic-racial diversity; (g) strategies for disseminating scientific production and knowledge in the academic field and the society; (h) interaction between knowledge, policy and action; and (i) action, funding and partnerships free of conflicts of interest.

Much has already been achieved with the approach proposed here, which



constitutes a solid base for the Network. This can be seen in the volume and quality of academic papers, analysis of socio-economic and political dynamics, diagnoses of underlying public policies and actions, and construction of indicator matrices.

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More than 300 research projects from all regions of the country were debated during the recent Third National Meeting. The long list of issues being addressed included: the various forms of family-based and diversified agriculture and their interaction with access to equally diverse healthy food; meanings and requirements for the adoption of the agroecological approach; sustainable food provisioning; determinants of overweight and obesity; nutritional deficiencies and their relationship with

access restrictions and consumption habits; food and nutrition education; and intersectoral and participatory public policies.

This new Network is in direct contradiction to the research establishment that reflects the old disciplinary tradition. This ‘establishment’ promotes standards of food production, distribution and consumption that contribute to Brazil’s high levels of social inequality, environmental damage and neglect of cultural and genetic heritage, as well as the reproduction of global trends towards poor diets. Based on scientific legitimacy conferred by the traditional academic community, the old disciplinary tradition is given priority support by governments, the private sector and international organisations. This interaction can sometimes involve conflicts of interest, posing crucial questions related to public-private relations in initiatives with social impact.

The Network is undoubtedly a promising initiative that will strengthen a field of research that demands visibility and legitimacy both in academia and in society as a whole. It promotes a form of citizen science that is committed to eradicating hunger and promoting adequate and healthy food, to challenging inequality and valuing diverse and sustainable patterns of production and consumption. It is an approach that must be constantly reaffirmed through open debate and cooperation between those who practice it and those to whom it is addressed.

To be sure, there are conceptual and methodological challenges, many of which are recorded in the annals of meetings promoted by the Network. The

curricular structures of undergraduate and, particularly, graduate education need to provide reflection and research activity which promote the characteristics and contents highlighted here. One way this could be achieved is to address the lack of adequate institutional support from the development and funding agencies that host interdisciplinary projects or those based on ethnic-cultural diversity and knowledge.

Academia has been affected by the destabilising parliamentary coup of 2016. As well as experiencing budget cuts and regulatory backsliding, it is suffering direct and violent attacks on freedom of thought and expression. This means that, alongside the expected roles of the Brazilian Research Network on Food and Nutrition Sovereignty and Security, it will need to join with other resistance instruments that are being erected throughout the country.

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- 1 Leão, M.M. & Maluf, R.S. Effective public policies and active citizenship: Brazil’s experience of building a Food and Nutrition Security System. Brasília (DF), Abrandh and Oxfam, 2012.
 - 2 CONSEA is an advisory body of the Presidency of the Republic of Brazil to propose and monitor public policies related to food and nutrition security and the right to adequate and healthy food.