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## **Hemp as a Multifunctional Crop to Promote Quilombola Communities of the Brazilian São Francisco Valley, a Case Study**

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### **Introduction**

The Sertão, namely the semi-arid hinterlands located in the north-eastern part of Brazil, is a region chronically subject to famine and multiyear droughts, which bear the worst distributive inequity and food security metrics in the country (Filho and Batista, 1996; Buckley, 2010), housing 45% of the food insecure Brazilians (IBGE, 2014). In this harsh environment, agriculture is only possible during the short rainy season and along the valley of the São Francisco river (SF), the largest and most important source of water from the Sertão. Given its main agricultural landscape, this area is also one of the biggest producer of narcotic cannabis in Brazil; in fact, here about 40% of the illegal cannabis produced in the country and controlled by criminal organizations is grown using the working labour of smallholder farmers who, being affected by the drought, have no other employment options (Fraga, 2006). The river lands have been the stage of violent and unequal forms of settlement, marginalizing traditional communities such as indigenous groups and the Quilombolas - a rural minority descending from slaves, historically subjected to food insecurity, racism and land confiscation. It has been estimated that over 1,2 million Quilombolas are spread over 2.197 communities countrywide and over 74% are under extreme poverty (SEPPIR, 2013); Quilombolas, though, are also a prominent example as peasantry resistance on the fight for recognition and access to constitutional rights – as land, water and food. In the last decades, governmental programs - as the “Zero Hunger” and “Bolsa Família” - aiming to promote food security and poverty alleviation have successfully removed the country from the FAO Hunger map in 2014, but despite the astonishing achievement, the realization of social emancipation of traditional communities still is a challenge (Costa, 2015). The adverse conditions of water scarcity, the historical socio-economic exploration and power inequalities have established a context particularly unfavourable to the livelihood conditions and income opportunities of such communities (Fraga and Iulianelli 2011). As said, often, community members join the traffic networking and crop narcotic cannabis for subsistence matters. The situation created a social problem in the region, with the rural population being exposed to conflicts, violence and prosecution, and creating fear, emigration, and economical recession of the rural region (Moreira, 2007; Fraga, 2006). But cannabis is a multifunctional crop, drought tolerant, used for centuries to provide mankind nutrition, functional fibers and medicine; the plant arrived in the Sertão region in the 16th century with Portuguese colonizers for fibers production and African slaves for medicinal and religious purposes. Nowadays, the cannabis plant is already well established to the dry climate of the region and has been part of local economies and cultures for centuries (Carlini, 2006; Zuardi, 2006). This is a quite conflictual crop because of the drug-related and criminal activities linked to it. Thus, cropping any variety of cannabis is illegal in

Brazil, hence furiously fought by law enforcement and the punitive tool of the state under the maxim of the ‘war on drugs’.

Despite this, cannabis is now undergoing a transformation in the public perception. Recently we have seen a relaxation of social stigma and consequent change in legislation in several countries, as a growing global trend towards the depenalisation and market regulation of cannabis products, pushing the discussion towards the regulation for industrial (namely hemp – the non-narcotic varieties), medicinal and recreational matters in Brazil. The Cologne Declaration on Industrial Hemp, from the European Industrial Hemp Association (EIHA) of June 2017 indicates that hemp is a multipurpose crop, delivering fibers, shives, seeds and active plant ingredients for foods and beverages; food supplements; bioplastics; constructing material; textiles; paper products; biofuel and pharmaceuticals. The area of cultivation in the EU is growing steadily, from ca. 8,000 ha in 2011 to 46,700 in 2017 (nova-institute.eu, 2019). Such a trend constitutes a chance for legal markets creation, given hems’ rediscovered functions and features which respond to a growing consumer markets for ethical and sustainable products.

Therefore this work aims to examine the issues of cannabis as a narcotic cash crop and expose the living conditions of the Quilombolas in an area whose landscape is quite demanding and agriculture a quite harsh activity; and to investigate the potential capacity of the landscapes in the SF valley to provide industrial hemp products to a growing global demand. Could cannabis be (re)implemented – from narcotic to multifunctional – and reverse the social conditions of the communities by generating alternative income and countering social marginalization and environmental degradation?

## **Material and Methods**

As an exploratory piece derived for a master thesis, the qualitative research methodology applied aims to explain the actual situation of communities and the realities of the case study. Data was collected during a month stay in the region in August 2017; it was based on immersive observational participatory field experience and semi-structured interviews with members of seven Quilombola communities divided in three territories situated along the SF river. Interviews were conducted following a snowball sampling technique (Creswell 2009). The collected data (transcripts, field notes and visual media) was analyzed for a coding structure that composed the results and discussion. Codes were developed from the material itself instead of existing theories, by the use of content analysis through the lenses of critical questioning (Flick, 2007), thus looking to the social problems under examination from the communities’ perspective. The intention was to investigate the complex situation in which these communities found themselves, derived from historical circumstances and political situations which can help explain the intricate web of social, ecological and economic factors that can hinder or help the implementation of hemp as a multifunctional crop. Due to the sensitivity characteristics of the data, the anonymity of the interviewees and the details of locations will remain undisclosed to protect the participants of the research.

## **Results and Discussion**

The findings of the research raised relevant data about the interactions of the people and livelihoods inside the communities with the environment and the resources surrounding them.

### Quilombola identity and Territoriality

The Quilombola identity represents the cultural heritage and self-recognition of the Quilombola people. The concept of territoriality and its importance to their social, physical and cultural reproduction represents a key foundation to the fulfillment of the state of social emancipation and in guaranteeing food security and human rights. The importance of the territory to the

communities was highlighted as a ground step to their fixation in the land and thus further development. Interviewees stressed the importance to land access and ownership quite clearly. Concomitant to the importance and relevance of the land entitlement is the difficulty and bureaucracy of the process itself. A process that is long and slow and which sometimes faces threats from political interests of agribusiness. Only one of the communities visited holds a partial land title, in a fight that took over 20 years to be secured. Their identity is formed by centuries of resistance strategies for subsistence and survival. Such characteristics are reproduced through their traditional forms of food culture, agriculture, education, societal organization and political engagement. The latter, thus the ‘power’ communities have to push for government accountability for the realization of constitutional rights such as the provision of primary services, has been proved to be the most effective action in changing their realities. Without owning the land, community members rely on daily jobs at the cannabis plantations.

#### Food security and local development

Despite the lack of official data on these communities, the role of social grants such as “Bolsa Família” had the biggest impact on the immediate food security of the families. When questioned about the existence of hunger inside the community, interviewees were vehement that this is not the case as already happened in the past, as they are proud of the improvements achieved by their communes in the last years. But the concern about their future is understandable. The interviewees recognized the high dependence of community members to these grants, because if they are reduced or cut their food availability will be directly affected.

#### Living conditions and quality of life

The expansion of narcotraffic has forced eradication policies applied by the State, normally with the use of brutality and police repression against the weakest cfflinks of the productive chain, that is, the smallholder farmer (Iulianelli et al., 2004). The community members reported diverse cases of abuse of power and ‘terrorism’ from the police officers. This caused the stigmatization and the disinclination of cannabis. The increase in violence was reported to have two main sources, namely the deliberate use of force by the police under the ‘war on drugs’ strategy, and the dispute of power and land among drug dealers controlling the traffic routes. With the aforementioned governmental projects, families could complement the household income and no longer rely on the additional earnings of cannabis plantations, as such income security pacifies the communities with the reduction of narcotic activities; this means, therefore, less police persecution and traffic inside the territories, being set free from the violence surrounding the drugs market, resulting in an improvement of the overall quality of life.

#### Income generation activities

The Quilombola communities visited rely mainly on subsistence and smallholder agriculture, livestock farming such as goat herding and fishing and additional income activities such as traditional handicraft and (in)formal employment in non-farming activities. Hence, due to the lack of opportunities, smallholder farmers continue the involvement in growing profitable illegal cannabis for criminal organizations. Willing to improve living conditions, farmers often engage in cannabis production for additional or survival income, risking their freedom and lives in an agricultural activity that was perceived to be simply treated as a profitable cash crop. This way, the moral questioning about growing cannabis loses its grip. Moreover, with the current political and economic crisis in Brazil, previous governmental programs and public policies aiming at rural development have been drastically reduced (Carta Capital, 2017; Revista Fórum, 2019; Schreiber, 2016). Because of the continuous budgetary cuts to the aforementioned public policies, a rise in the plantations numbers is expected – and with that, more police repression and violence. In addition, the predatory interests of agribusiness in the region made smallholder farmers living in Quilombola communities suffer threats to their productive resources and hindrances to access rights such as land tenure, hindering the development of stable revenue sources to smallholder

farmers. When presented to the idea of converting the narcotic fields to hemp production, the farmers were ignorant to this application, that the same plant could be managed differently to produce seeds, leaves, roots and fibers. And showed enthusiasm towards the possibility to crop it alternatively; if they could produce it in a legal way. Farmers show no interest in cropping narcotic cannabis any longer.

### **Conclusions and Outlook**

It is inarguable that cannabis is a multifunctional crop and can provide diverse products other than only the narcotic substances. Thus, it is necessary a reform on the legislation to distinguish industrial hemp from the drugs law and enable hemp production in Brazil. In fact, in the scholarship there is agreement that the ‘war on drugs’ has failed, and it has been costly to everyone. It was never so easy and cheap to find diverse drugs in the illegal markets as it is now, and the demand is still on the rise (World Drug Report, 2019). This extremely profitable market, instead of generating tax revenues, is used to finance criminal organizations and foster violence along its value chain. To the particular case of cannabis in the SF valley, concentrating the repression on the smallholder farmer only leads to mass incarceration and social marginalization. As reported, in many cases the person imprisoned was the main income generator of the house; and once in jail, other family members had to engage in cannabis plantations to keep the family subsistence; creating a vicious cycle of dependency without practical solution. The State is key to lead a transition process to transform hemp from a product for illegal communities into a product for legal markets, and can do so promoting control and surveillance for no misuse. Once this obstruction is overcome, Quilombola communities could make use of traditional knowledge and experience in growing cannabis to produce in a legal and protected way, hemp plants for diverse uses. While considering the small scale, lack of mechanization and artisanal production realities of the Quilombolas, hemp seeds could be aimed as the main cash product, using the remaining leaves as supplementary livestock feeding and the fibers/shives to support handicraft activities and/or be used as mulching/ground cover, animal bedding, construction material inside the community. Currently, the potential capacity of the SF landscapes to produce such a valuable crop is not only being hindered, but hijacked – in the political stage – by the few actors profiting from criminal activities (conveyance, selling); favored by keeping cannabis illegal and creating public demonization on it; drawing the attention and throwing the guilt to growers and consumers, an austere scapegoatism.

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