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“Filling gaps and removing traps
for sustainable resource management”

Hemp as a Multifunctional Crop to Promote Quilombola Communities of the Brazilian São Francisco Valley: A Case Study

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Abstract

The Brazilian Sertão, a region chronically subject to famine and multiyear droughts, bear the worst distributive inequity and food security metrics in the country. Inside the region, the São Francisco river valley is the main agricultural landscape but also the biggest producer of narcotic cannabis in Brazil. 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; but it is also a prominent example as peasantry resistance on the fight for recognition and access to land, water and food. With the current political and economic crisis in Brazil, previous governmental programs and public policies aiming at rural development have been drastically reduced. 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 constitutional rights such as land tenure, due to structural changes in governmental agencies. Often, community members join the traffic networking and crop narcotic cannabis for subsistence matters, facing violence and prosecution. But cannabis is also a multifunctional crop, drought tolerant, used for centuries to provide mankind nutrition, functional fibers and medicine. Recently, we have seen a relaxation of social stigma and consequent change in legislation, as a growing global trend towards the depenalisation and market regulation of light drugs, pushing the discussion towards the regulation of cannabis products for industrial (namely hemp), medicinal and recreational matters in Brazil. Such a trend could constitute a chance for legal markets creation, given hemsps' rediscovered functions and features which respond to a growing consumer markets for ethical and sustainable products. From the Quilombola communities' perspective, this work aims at exploring the potential capacity of the landscapes in the São Francisco valley to provide industrial hemp products (seeds, leaves, fibers) to a growing global demand and potential local market in Brazil (food, cosmetics, industrial), countering social marginalization and environmental degradation in this tropical semi-arid region.

Keywords: Alternative food trends, cannabis, hemp, quilombola communities