The place of family farming in climate negotiations

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In a historical period characterized by industrialism and bureaucratic protocols for organizing production processes, there is no doubt about the importance of the Decade of Family Farming, established by the United Nations General Assembly for the period 2019 to 2028. By shining a light on what is the most numerous professional category on the planet, the UN initiative is helping to position family farming as an important player on the international political agenda. In particular, it draws attention to the intrinsic qualities of their mode of production and way of life, which must be valued and developed as an unavoidable condition for resolving critical dilemmas that confront contemporary societies in a scenario of socio-ecological collapse.

These intertwined dilemmas were described by French philosopher Edgar Morin as a "polycrisis": multiple interconnected crises that amplify each other, making it impossible to effectively address any single issue in isolation from the others. Unfortunately, the solutions that have received the most public attention and support thus far are characterized by their fragmented and sectoral approaches. These are part of what have come to be known as "false solutions"—so-called because they fail to provide effective responses to the issues they claim to address, and often worsen other crises in the process. The installation of large solar or wind energy farms on lands occupied by family farming communities is a paradigmatic example of the contradictory effects of sectoral false solutions. In the name of a transition to a “clean energy” matrix, they block more promising paths toward a just ecological transition—one that necessarily includes the energy dimension.

The diagnosis of a polycrisis indicates that solutions for achieving the 17 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) or for tackling the challenges set by the three United Nations conventions born at the 1992 Rio Earth Summit (on climate change, biodiversity, and desertification) will not come from sectoral initiatives guided by reductionist metrics. To be effective, solutions must address the various dimensions (or symptoms) of the polycrisis in an integrated manner. Only by addressing the common root of these interconnected crises can we break the vicious cycles that perpetuate them and open the door to transformative virtuous cycles that point to structural resolution. Changing the economic patterns by which modern societies appropriate natural goods and services—and return their waste to nature—is a unavoidable condition for tackling the polycrisis at its root.

It is precisely because it enables large-scale change in these economic patterns that we attribute a decisive role to family farming in solving the polycrisis. To justify this statement, it is important to define precisely what we mean by “family farming”. This is not a matter of conceptual nitpicking without consequences. The concept delineates very different realities in terms of how agriculture relates to nature and society. Not because it refers to farming carried out on small plots of land. The great virtues of family farming for contemporary societies do not stem from its small scale. They derive precisely from the fact that it is … *family*-based. The labor force that

operates the means of production comes from the very families that manage these means and depend on the fruits of their labor for their own reproduction. In short, what defines family farming is the *social organization of labor*, not the size of the economic unit.

Family farming is, therefore, a specific way of practicing agriculture. Its virtues, which must be recognized and developed, are rooted in its peculiar form of labor organization (its mode of production), which corresponds to an equally peculiar economic process (its way of life). At the microeconomic level, labor in family farming is organized to manage a diversified range of productions that are interconnected, forming complex economic-ecological webs at the landscape scale through multiple uses of the territory. The maintenance of biodiverse productive systems and the management of biomass are key to closing ecological cycles powered by solar energy captured through photosynthesis. This is an economy of *diversity* (or scope), rather than an economy of *scale*, which is typical of industrial processes. Various outputs generated on the same production unit optimize the use of endogenous resources and reduce—or even eliminate—structural dependence on agrochemical inputs that are energy-intensive and toxic to human and environmental health. In this sense, it is a highly efficient economy from the standpoint of energy conversion. If we are truly committed to promoting a just energy transition and avoiding greenhouse gas emissions, we must take family farming much more seriously as an efficient energy converter in food production processes.

However, this kind of agricultural economy can only be multiplied and consolidated at the micro level if it is integrated at the meso level into *territorialized food distribution and supply systems* that economically value the diverse and culturally adapted production it generates. Territorialized food systems bring production and consumption closer together in two senses: a) Physically, by reducing energy consumption in processing, packaging, refrigeration, and transport; b) Socially, by shortening the chain of intermediaries that drain value from the territory to the detriment of fair remuneration for family farmers' labor.

Therefore, the effectiveness of family farming as a response to the polycrisis depends on its structural linkage to territorialized agri-food systems. This means its potential cannot be fully developed if public investment is focused solely on its production units. The investment focus must encompass the entire agri-food system, including all the links that connect production to consumption.

Strengthening the family farming economy also requires expanding the agricultural space it occupies. This is the contemporary meaning of the agrarian question, and it should be the primary goal of agrarian reform. In economic terms, this means *scaling up economies of scope*. On the other hand, in order to curb the deepening of the crises, it is necessary to limit economies of scale and their expansionist drive over agrarian territories.

In practice, these impulses materialize in land grabbing, with the expropriation of the territorial rights of indigenous peoples and traditional peoples and communities, and in deforestation to open up new areas for agricultural production linked to global value chains that are highly consumptive of fossil energy and toxic to the environment. Expansionism also encroaches on areas occupied by family farming units that are in crisis due to hostile economic and institutional environments that hinder the development and consolidation of their economies. Institutionally,

expansionism is supported by changes in environmental, land, sanitary, fiscal, and tax regulations imposed on States by economic sectors that benefit from them.

Therefore, resolving the agrarian question in the 21st century will not be achieved simply through subdividing and distributing land to family farmers. Public recognition of family farming will not be enough if the economic and institutional environment continues to push it to operate like small-scale agribusiness. This, in fact, is precisely what happened in Brazil after the creation of the National Program for Strengthening Family Farming (Pronaf) in 1995. By driving development trajectories based on productive specialization in commodities for industry and export, and by fostering high dependency on input and service markets, Pronaf ended up undermining—or even destroying—the intrinsic qualities of family farming that should have been promoted.

An important inflection from this contradictory approach began in 2003, with the first term of President Lula. At that time, we witnessed the emergence of a new generation of public policies responding to the government's political priority: the fight against hunger and malnutrition. Initiatives such as the Food Acquisition Program (PAA), institutional purchases—including through the National School Feeding Program (PNAE)—and the cistern programs in Brazil's semi-arid region were among the most significant institutional innovations created during this inflection in policy design for family farming.

The positive effects of this inflection were clearly seen in Brazil's semi-arid region, home to half of the country's family farming establishments. In less than two decades, a region historically marked by extreme deprivation and social vulnerability underwent significant transformation, driven by the boosting of the family farming economy. Contributing to this rapid transformation was a set of policies aimed at providing public services and social protection to farming families. However, what truly defined the regional specificity of public action were the policy guidelines focused on strengthening family farming economies.

Instead of fostering subordinated links to agribusiness value chains, the policies conceived and implemented jointly with civil society organizations gathered in the Semi-Arid Articulation (ASA) suitable conditions for the development of economic intensification trajectories based on productive diversification, the management of endogenous means of production (soil, water, agrobiodiversity, labor, etc.), and the commercialization of goods through short marketing circuits. Despite the persistence of strong structural barriers to rural development in the region—notably the high concentration of land ownership—Brazil's semi-arid region is now the stage of a virtuous experience in implementing "climate-smart" policies, more appropriately termed locally as policies for "living with the semi-arid."

Despite the positive inflection in the early 2000s, it proved insufficient to overcome the productivist perspective that guided the creation of family farming policies in the mid-1990s. The majority of financial resources allocated through the family farming credit plans (Planos Safra) are still funneled toward financing commodity production under monoculture systems, managed with intensive use of agrochemicals and other commercial inputs and services. As a result, a minority segment captures the largest share of public resources allocated to the category, becoming structurally dependent on the financial and agribusiness systems. Meanwhile, the

majority segment—including a significant number of landless and smallholder families—remains on the margins of rural and agricultural development policies.

In light of the deepening and interconnection of ecological, climate, social, food, and health crises, it is urgent to create a new inflection in agricultural and food policies. We could refer to this as an **"agroecological inflection in public policies for family farming."** Such inflection both deepening and complementing that initiated in the early 2000s.

Deepening, because it must be aimed at intensifying and diversifying policy instruments aimed at enhancing the work of family farming in producing food in quantity, quality and diversity. The foundational elements for this deepening are already outlined in the National Policy for Food Supply (PNAB) and the National Policy for Food and Nutrition Security (PNSAN). Strengthening the national plans derived from these policies (Planab, Plansan) with robust budgets and means of implementation is a necessary condition for this inflection. In the current context of fiscal constraint and high market interest rates, one highly effective measure to support the agroecological inflection would be to finance both plans with a portion of the national treasury resources currently used to subsidize interest rates for credit lines directed at commodity production (like soybean) by family farming.

The previous policy inflection, which recognized and valued family farmers' labor in producing healthy and adequate food, would now be *complemented* by recognizing and valuing the labor involved in reproducing the very means of production. It's about recognizing the work invested in regenerating the ecological infrastructure of agroecosystems (soil, water, biodiversity), which will be used in future production cycles. It is also about recognizing the labor dedicated to reproducing the family labor force itself—whether through food production for self-consumption or time devoted to domestic and caregiving tasks. In short, it is about recognizing and valuing family farming as an institution that organically links human labor with nature's work, coherently connecting economic production with ecological and social reproduction. Therefore, beyond producing essential goods for societal consumption, the labor process in family farming also generates **"agroecosystem services."**

As positive externalities of the economic processes carried out at the micro scale—within family farms and rural communities—agroecosystem services can provide coherent responses to multiple crises confronted by society at the macro scale. In this sense, they stand in stark contrast to agribusiness, whose economic growth model at the micro level generates *negative* externalities that are at the root of the crises experienced on a global scale.

By regenerating and/or maintaining the integrity of the biophysical base of agroecosystems, the agroecosystem services produced by family farming should be promoted as a strategy for conserving biodiversity and reversing processes of soil and water body degradation. Avoided greenhouse gas emissions and the maintenance of agri-food systems with high levels of resilience to climate change should also be recognized and valued as agroecosystem services provided by family farming.

Valuing agroecosystem services also means recognizing the importance of domestic and care work for the family farming economy and addressing the disproportionate burden placed on

women in carrying out these activities. It equally means opening up new, economically promising and culturally meaningful work prospects for rural youth.

Public policies that promote agroecosystem services should support the development and application of technical management practices based on biological processes, contributing to the closing of ecological cycles at the scale of agricultural landscapes and ensuring high levels of autonomy from input and service markets. The intensification of agroecosystem service production in family farming is also closely tied to the development and facilitated financing of machinery and equipment adapted to managing complex production systems—reducing drudgery and increasing labor productivity.

The **National Policy on Agroecology and Organic Production (PNAPO)** and its operational instrument, **Planapo**, as well as the **National Policy on Research and Innovation for Family Farming and Agroecology (PNPIAF)**, the **National Program for the Reduction of Pesticides (Pronara)**, and the **National Plan for Youth and Rural Succession** all incorporate a set of coherent initiatives to promote agroecosystem services through family farming. However, much like the PNAB and PNSAN, they remain underfunded and poorly coordinated with one another.

Strengthening and articulating these national public policies, plans, and programs is a first and indispensable step toward the necessary and urgent agroecological inflection in state action. By recognizing and enhancing the economic role of family farming in the joint production of healthy and appropriate food and agroecosystem services, this inflection may open a vital path toward the integrated resolution of national and global crises.

Unlike ecosystem services, agroecosystem services are not measured through reductionist metrics. Nor can they be regulated by markets. Their value is affirmed in the public sphere, as a result of broad social recognition of the multiple economic, ecological, and cultural roles that family farming plays for the benefit of present and future societies.

The context of the **30th United Nations Conference on Climate Change (COP30)** being held in Brazil presents an exceptional opportunity to position family farming in the international political agenda as a decisive actor in the restructuring of food systems—systems that are responsible for one-third of global greenhouse gas emissions and approximately two-thirds of emissions in Brazil.

Positioning family farming on the international agenda means bringing visibility to and leveraging its unique characteristics and economic potentials that can only be developed at the micro scale. This, in turn, requires the decentralization and democratization of governance systems over agri-food systems. In practical terms, it means incorporating **agroecological strategies to strengthen family farming aimed at the territorialization of food systems** into National Adaptation and Mitigation Plans, as well as into the targets established in the **Nationally Determined Contributions (NDCs)**.