

# Agroecology and the environmentalization of struggles in the Metropolitan Region of Rio de Janeiro

Agroecologia e ambientalização de lutas na Região Metropolitana do Rio de Janeiro

Annelise Caetano Fraga FERNANDEZ [I]  
Sílvia Regina Nunes BAPTISTA [II]  
Caren Freitas de LIMA [III]

## Abstract

A significant part of land disputes in the state of Rio de Janeiro has erupted in the Metropolitan Region. This article aims to demonstrate the role of agroecology movements in the environmentalization of struggles involving disputes over territories and land, the reconfiguration of rural and urban spaces, new ways of conceiving urban spaces, and the right to the city. From the debate around agrifood systems, these movements ascertain the ability to ally with diverse actors and a systemic approach to socio-environmental processes. This study employs a bibliographical investigation about the dynamics of agricultural territories in the Metropolitan Region and participant observation of the agroecology movement of Rio de Janeiro.

**Keywords:** urban agriculture; agrifood systems; territories; right to the city; food activism.

## Resumo

*Parte importante dos conflitos fundiários do estado do Rio de Janeiro eclodiram na Região Metropolitana. O presente artigo pretende demonstrar o papel dos movimentos de agroecologia na ambientalização de lutas que envolvem disputas por territórios e terra, pela reconfiguração dos espaços rurais e urbanos, pelas novas formas de conceber os espaços urbanos e o direito à cidade. A partir do debate em torno dos sistemas agroalimentares, esses movimentos constatarem a capacidade de aliança com atores diversos e uma abordagem sistêmica dos processos socioambientais. Esta pesquisa faz uso de investigação bibliográfica a respeito das dinâmicas dos territórios agrícolas na Região Metropolitana e de observação participante do movimento de agroecologia do Rio de Janeiro.*

**Palavras-chave:** agricultura urbana; sistemas agroalimentares; territórios; direito à cidade; ativismos alimentares.



## Introduction

The agroecological movement has acquired strength over the past four decades as a counter-hegemonic force that throws into question the contradictions and inequalities produced by capitalism's penetration into the rural world and the industrialisation of agricultural activities. From a territorial perspective, agroecology seeks to combined scientific and local forms of knowledge in the struggle for alternative models of development grounded in the territory where access to land, territory and the means of producing life is inextricably entangled.

In this sense, the trajectory of agroecological movements intersects with the movements of political ecology, which question distributive aspects of access to natural resources and the commons, including land, water, forests and biodiversity, sociodiversity and agrobiodiversity (Martínez-Alier 2009; Santilli, 2009).

Issues such as the scarcity and contamination of resources and sources of food have become important topics in both rural and urban territories. In particular, the political project of food and nutritional sovereignty in metropolitan areas has emerged as a generative theme, articulating debates on the right to the city and the resistance of rural territories within municipal spheres (Baptista et al., 2024). The defence of different modalities of agriculture has also brought a range of expressions of urban resistance into the public debate (Genaro, 2020; Fernandez & Baptista, 2019; Lima, 2019), which position the territory as the starting point for new economic and cultural practices. Signs of resistance can be identified, for example, in the mobilisation of women and care practices rooted in cooking, household work and backyard cultivation; the activism of young people, who denounce the lack of professional opportunities

and view agroecological training as a socio-economic alternative; and changing patterns among consumers, who see the consumption of pesticide-free foods, produced by small farmers, as a political act that favours a more socially and environmentally just model of development (Portilho, 2020).

Activists from environmentalist movements have encountered everyday forms of social transformation in agroecological knowledge practices, whether through their work advocating for public policies or through territorial mobilisation. Likewise, social actors previously belonging to urban social movements with openly conflictual agendas, such as housing or health, have more lately come to discern in agroecology the potential to connect these same causes without engaging in open confrontation. Along these lines, agroecology, in territories controlled by drug trafficking gangs or militias, has emerged as both a refuge and a possibility for territorial reconnection.

This article thus seeks to analyse the convergence of struggles occurring in the West Zone of Rio de Janeiro and the broader Metropolitan Region from the perspective of agroecology movements. These enable a reflection on the environmentalisation<sup>1</sup> of deep-set conflicts over territory, land, and housing through the reconfiguration of rural and urban spaces and through debates on the right to the city. Furthermore, this text looks to demonstrate how conflicts approached from a socio-environmental perspective have been reinterpreted through agroecology, with these movements distinguished by their capacity to form alliances with diverse actors and by their systemic approach to socio-environmental processes.

As methodology, the research employs a bibliographic study of land conflicts in the Metropolitan Region of Rio de Janeiro, combined with participant observation over

a decade among agroecology movements in the state capital. This article sets out to describe the configuration of an agroecology network-territory, which, in addition to being nationally articulated with other territories, seeks to reverse the dominant and official representations of poverty and violence attributed to the region. What is produced in the process is a territory recomposed through local action (Teisserenc & Teisserenc, 2013) where conflicts over land use and other issues acquire new meanings, insofar as they are perceived as effects of more extensive socio-economic contradictions that interconnect with other territories and groups, exercising their capacity to generate public policies. These are groups that, although historically mobilised around specific themes and agendas, have fomented a convergence of struggles in defence of territory, public policies and the reclassification of these city spaces, subverting representations, dominant uses and power relations that permit or deny access to them, on the basis of agroecological values (Fernandez et al., 2022).

## Rural, urban, agricultural and environmental dimensions in the metropolis

The West Zone of the city of Rio de Janeiro and the other municipalities within its Metropolitan Region<sup>2</sup> were, in the past, classified as rural zones, with agricultural uses intended to supply the capital (Fernandez, 2009). A significant number of the land conflicts in Rio de Janeiro state erupted in the Metropolitan Region (Medeiros, 2018). This history remains little known, however, overshadowed by the prominence of urban issues in the metropolis.

The antagonism between rural areas and city, and the process of urbanisation – which generally transcends the empirical plane of the cities themselves – have been studied as phenomena that characterise the widespread integration of global capitalist development processes (Favareto, 2007). Authors like Graziano da Silva (1999) and Veiga (2004) have highlighted the emergence of new ruralities and the development of activities that are no longer exclusively agricultural, including tourism and initiatives linked to environmental services. When the analysis shifts to transformations of urban space, some authors have also pointed to the environmentalisation of discourses and struggles around issues previously interpreted through the framework of urbanism (Fuks, 2001). Less studied, yet no less important, are the manifestations of ruralities and the reinvention of crop cultivation in urban spaces, the meanings of which are highly polysemic, even if they generally seek new forms of connection between society and nature, along with new ways of representing and occupying the city (Fernandez & Baptista, 2019; Almeida 2016).

Moreover, through projects, legislation and environmental measures, it is possible to identify the environmental debate as a field that translates the socio-spatial conflicts unfolding in the present. So although environmental justifications are related to scientific principles and broader conceptions shaped by environmentalist concerns, these seek to intervene in local issues (Barreto Filho, 2004). The case of Rio de Janeiro's West Zone illustrates this process. In 1974, the Pedra Branca State Park (PEPB)<sup>3</sup> was created, covering around 12,492 hectares, equivalent to 12% of the municipal territory, to protect the forests surrounding the water sources and to secure the supply to this part of the city in response to an accelerating process of urbanisation.

The areas of Campo Grande and the westernmost region of Jacarepaguá, which also encompass the slopes of the massif, are characterised as rural-urban transition zones, presenting stretches of sparse settlement interspersed with areas where small-scale commercial agriculture is practiced but is in clear decline, unable to resist the urban expansion. (Work Programme for the PEPB Management Plan, 1979)

As an effect of the creation of the park in the Pedra Branca Massif, as in other fully protected conservation areas, a paradoxical situation emerged: on the one hand, the establishment of the protected area contributed to suffocating agricultural activities already under significant constraining pressures; on the other, it also ultimately shielded them from the voracious process of urban occupation occurring around the conservation area. As we shall see, small farmers gradually adapted their agricultural practices to ecological principles and came to emphasise their contribution to protecting the park's boundaries, engaging in fire-fighting and monitoring the social uses of this territory. Hence, we can observe a growing absorption of environmental principles by farmers who seek to reclaim their right to the territory transformed into a park, attempting to subvert the conservationist-oriented environmental perspective that considered the agriculture present there to be detrimental to nature conservation. In other words, the environmental question came to form part of the arguments of opposing groups in disputes over the power to name and define the uses of urban land.

## Occupation processes in the Metropolitan Region

From the 1930s to the present, various territories within the Metropolitan Region of Rio de Janeiro have seen a blurring of the distinction between rural and urban zones as conflicts over their uses emerged. Landmark moments in these disputes include the sanitation and drainage works in the Jacarepaguá and Fluminense lowland areas (*baixadas*).<sup>4</sup> Historically, these intervention projects were initially aimed towards the development of an agricultural belt to supply the capital yet, contrary to expectations, they in fact created frontier areas open to urban occupation and real estate capital investment. The 1940s also saw the emergence of peasant leagues in these areas (Grynspan, 1998; Santos, 2006), which campaigned to resist the processes of expropriation perpetrated by land grabbers, squatters and landowners.

Over time, agricultural and rural uses were progressively rendered invisible, while dominant representations of urban and industrial uses led to the consolidation of governmental and corporate actions directed towards large-scale development projects, mega-events and housing developments (Rocha, 2013). These initiatives, associated with high environmental and social costs, have entailed diverse forms of deterritorialisation of native populations,

as well as their de-peasantisation, provoked by the impossibility of reproducing subsistence conditions, the valorisation of urban land and the failure to recognise territorial and housing rights, among other factors.

The Metropolitan Region,<sup>5</sup> largely composed of municipalities classified as part of the Baixada Fluminense, also incorporates representations associated with this territory that, as Rocha (2013: 5) explores, revolve around poverty, violence and the region's incorporation into the urban fabric as a peripheral area, combined with ideas of a lack of urban infrastructure. As Rocha (2013: 11) further notes, however, this view needs to be challenged by economic groups seeking to highlight the economic dynamism arising from the two-fold exploitation of the territory through land-use speculation and the legitimisation of the redefinition of spaces for industrial production.

In the second half of the twentieth century, the Metropolitan Region of Rio de Janeiro underwent numerous transformations in relation to its rural environment, provoking conflicts across different territories of the state. According to Novicki (1994, p. 71), the struggle for land unfolded in three distinct conjunctures: (a) the politicisation of the agrarian question (pre-1964); (b) authoritarian depoliticisation (1964-1978); and (c) repoliticisation (post-1979). Even so, in each of these conjunctures, the author argues, most agrarian conflicts were linked to processes of urbanisation and real estate speculation. In this sense, these processes confirmed a "grey zone of indeterminacy between urban and rural areas" (Novicki, 1994, p. 72).

The author further stresses that the settlements established in Rio de Janeiro display certain specificities when compared with those of other Brazilian states. These concern the urban profile of its landless population, composed of residents of favelas and working-class neighbourhoods. Mario Grynspan (1998), describing the phenomenon of the peasant leagues in the Baixada Fluminense between 1950 and 1964, likewise highlights how processes of urbanisation may, in fact, lie at the root of social conflicts in these rural areas.

Anyone reading the newspapers of the 1950s and early 1960s would form an image of the Fluminense countryside as a region beset by serious problems, huge in scale and dramatic in character. The most significant of these problems was the eviction of small farmers from the lands they had occupied for many years [...]. Underpinning most of these evictions in the Baixada was a broader process of transforming rural space into urban. (Grynspan 1998)

In the 1980s, the clashes in the Metropolitan Region prompted new government interventions, which in turn led to the creation of a large number of settlements, most of them supervised by the state government. The Campo Alegre settlement was the first initiative to influence other groups in the region, initially involving around 600 families. As in the early stages of this settlement, other local movements saw the emergence of a new profile of residents who, although of rural origin, were already immersed in various forms of work within markets considered urban, such as construction labourers and small traders. For these people, land occupation represented an alternative

for both work and housing. It is important to emphasise that these actors did not necessarily set out to reconfigure their livelihoods by becoming typical farmers; rather, they saw the possibility of combining activities identified as rural and urban. This panorama is discussed by Medeiros, Souza and Alentejano (2002), who explain the historical context of the formation of land struggles in the state of Rio de Janeiro.

This new profile of the worker in the Metropolitan Region emerged in a context of changes in lifestyle, which provided the impetus for mobilisations demanding better living and working conditions through the land struggles in the area. The importance of the Metropolitan Region of Rio de Janeiro in the issue of land becomes clear when we consider the number of land conflicts between 1950 and 1980: more than 200 clashes occurred across the state of Rio de Janeiro, around half of them in the Metropolitan Region. This data was gathered by a research group coordinated by Medeiros (2018), which developed the project *Land conflicts and repression in rural Rio de Janeiro state (1946-1988)*. Their study provides a detailed account of the movements that gave rise to these clashes in the state, as well as documenting the diverse forms of repression to which these struggles were subjected.

By this time, the region already included workers who alternated between rural and urban activities. This was the case of employees of the National Motor Factory (FNM)<sup>6</sup> in the municipality of Duque de Caxias, which, when founded in 1942, depended on a workforce largely originating from rural lifeworlds in the region. The heterogeneous backgrounds of these workers led the factory to allocate portions of its land to residents for crop cultivation, which would then supply the factory's canteens.

Rural workers, inspired by labour struggles, realised that they could make certain social demands, including the question of access to land. This sociability between industrial workers and rural labourers – sometimes the factory workers themselves who combined employment in the factory with farming at home – led to the emergence of cooperation between these two sectors, termed “rural-factory intersections” (*intersecções ruro-fabris*) by Maia (2017). According to this author (2018), disregarding these historical relations ends up producing teleological conceptions in which the incorporation of rural areas of the Metropolitan Region becomes an unproblematised destiny, contributing to the silencing of an important part of the class struggle accompanying urbanisation processes.

## Territories in recomposition in the Metropolitan Region

In this regional context, resistance movements evolved over many decades, opposing the contradictions and forms of expropriation generated by this model of development, as well as by urban occupation. Examples include struggles for land and/or agriculture, housing and health, among other demands. In this way, specific forms of material and symbolic appropriation become evident, involving life spaces or territories in which identities and demands are asserted at expanding political scales.

Considering the concept of the region in its politico-administrative role (*regere*), which addresses issues related to practices of spatial differentiation (within which master plans, urban planning instruments and other

administrative devices interact and apply), it is important to stress that the characteristics generally attributed to regions – linked to geography, main economic activities, climate, type of occupation, and so on, and imbued with an apparently objective character – are generally the product of conflicts over the power to make people see and believe in certain ways (Bourdieu 2006), imposed by groups seeking to legitimise and assert dominant uses, while rendering invisible not only other activities but also the people engaged in them.

In light of the above, we could argue that the recent dynamism of the concept of territory has accompanied, or exerted influence over, the diffusion of territorial development policies, and may be part of what leads some authors to observe that territory has become the most appropriate reference point for public action: “the management of public problems, which are at once the result of the effects of globalisation and of environmental demands” (Teisserenc & Teisserenc, 2013, p. 97).

Teisserenc & Teisserenc (2013, p. 105) add to this debate the important observation that the environmentalisation of local conflicts has developed in parallel with the territorial claims of native populations, since territory is the space that enables local forms of knowledge to demonstrate their relevance and the possibility of alternative modes of production. At city level, it also represents a perspective of claiming another form of urbanity, in which more balanced relations with nature are not understood as the exclusive preserve of the rural world.

Territories are continuously constructed through meshworks, weaves and knots, as well as through boundaries, limits and belongings (Raffestin, 1983). Hence, the notion of network-territories (*territórios-rede*: Haesbaert, 2004) – constituted across multiple scales and connected to different areas, global flows and political structures of power – offers a perspective that allows territories to be understood in a more integrated and complex way, breaking with the dichotomy between territory (as belonging and rootedness) and network (as mere deterritorialisation).

On one hand, the contemporaneity of these processes is foregrounded by studies of global production networks that emphasise the effects of deterritorialisation and uprooting on groups subject to capitalist relations of production – or, as Escobar (2005) defines the phenomenon, the emptying out of place. On the other hand, the literature on social movements has also stressed the capacity of contestation manifested by local groups in defence of their territories and their potential to articulate through networks, increasing visibility and processes of de-singularising their struggles and claims. In the view of Scherer-Warren (2006, p. 109), this constitutes a new configuration of organised civil society, marked by the diversity of its actors’ identities and by the transversality of their demands for rights. The term coined by Teisserenc and Teisserenc (2013: 98) – *territory in recomposition* – seems particularly apt for the study of what is defined here as the network-territory of agroecology, given the emphasis placed on its dynamism

and the fact that it does not correspond to an externally imposed formal or official territory but whose boundaries evolve in tandem with its own emergence.

## From socio-environmentalism to agroecology

From the mid-2006 onwards, with the involvement of farmers from the Pedra Branca Massif (West Zone of Rio de Janeiro) in a project led by Fiocruz (Profito Project) for capacity training and the production of medicinal plants, institutional obstacles to achieving its objectives surfaced. The framework of socio-environmentalism, together with the issues raised by conflicts over human presence in conservation units (CUs) and the sustainable use of natural resources, guided the project's structuring and justification. A diagnostic survey conducted by the researchers identified that the farmers were already experiencing a process of environmentalisation of values, re-signifying their agricultural practices and their relations of belonging to the territory, now transformed into a park. Some of them, moreover, had already begun to enter organic food markets. When asked whether they had any concern for nature in their cultivation practices, a range of responses pointed to changes in behaviour: "I don't use pesticides," "I don't practise burning," "I don't pollute," and so on. Some responses also expressed principles of agrobiodiversity, including statements like "agriculture is about nature" or "agriculture is nature," thereby valuing agricultural management as a means of maintaining, adapting and diversifying species of fauna and flora. In addition, the

responses revealed a nuanced understanding of the conflict of interests between agricultural activity and the environment, as well as the possibility of reconciling the two. This becomes clear in responses such as: "environmental legislation makes agriculture more difficult" and "it is only possible to plant where there are no trees, since the crops are planted inside a park," as the interviewees explained. The latter answer is particularly interesting since it reflects a specific moment in the interpretation of practices deemed environmentally correct, especially within a conservation unit. It may be that, were this questionnaire applied today, the clear territorial demarcation between forest and cultivation would no longer be emphasised to the same degree owing to the dissemination of the ecological concept of agroforestry (Fernandez 2014).

In prioritising the demands presented by the producers, needs were identified relating to the achievement of rights "such as being recognised as a farmer by the government." This demand stimulated the Profito Project team to work in close articulation with other collectives and to encourage the participation of producers in forums, councils and networks. Their involvement in the Consultative Council of the Pedra Branca State Park increased; they achieved representation in local, municipal, state and national food security conferences; and they secured a seat on the Municipal Council for Food and Nutritional Security (Consea-Rio).

The year 2010<sup>7</sup> marked a close alliance between Fiocruz technicians involved in the project, farmers from the Pedra Branca Massif and the Rio de Janeiro Network for Urban Agriculture (*Rede Carioca de Agricultura Urbana*: Rede CAU), which had first begun to

take shape in 2009. The Network's founding, particular prominence was given to people who had been involved in the Permanent Assembly of Entities in Defence of the Environment (Apedema), highlighting the shift from environmentalism to agroecology and linking environmental themes to the practice of cultivation – most notably Bernardete Montesano and Luiz Poeta. The former, a journalist, had been active in social movements at the interface of health, environment and food security through plant cultivation activities, while the latter, together with some residents from the Serra da Misericórdia,<sup>8</sup> had since 1997 been promoting seedling planting initiatives aimed at the area's environmental restoration.

In 1999, a collective of organisations called the Grupão da Serra da Misericórdia<sup>9</sup> joined the campaign for the creation of an ecological park in the Serra, organising two thematic seminars to debate the issue (Barros, 2013). In November 2000, the Area for Environmental Protection and Urban Recovery (*Área de Proteção Ambiental e Recuperação Urbana: Aparu*) was created by Municipal Decree n. 19.144. Despite the efforts of these collectives, however, the area was never formally regulated. In addition to the conflict with land grabbers and the arduous task of persuading favela residents not to expand the built-up area, the group also fought for the deactivation of three quarries in the area: the mining companies Lafarge, Anhanguera and the Sociedade Nacional de Engenharia (SNEC).

In general, demands for protected areas are linked to conservationist values typically associated with the urban middle classes, who deploy argumentative frameworks (Fuks, 2001) against the threat of real estate speculation, but also against the threat posed by low-income

housing. The latter building developments, therefore, are often perceived as a source of environmental impacts. In this regard, the case of mobilisation in defence of an ecological park in the Serra da Misericórdia is paradigmatic since it reveals a movement of the popular classes proposing a new social contract within the community – “a war of everyone against the world that shelters us: the environment” (Fuks, 2001) – by making public debates on essential living conditions and the survival of dignified standards of life in the largest favela complex in the city of Rio de Janeiro.<sup>10</sup>

As expressions of the contradictions in the evolution of Rio de Janeiro's urban fabric, both the situation of the farmers of the PEPB, affected by the creation of a park, and the conditions faced by favela residents demanding the right to an ecological park and dignified living conditions, constitute cases of environmental injustice (Acserald, 2010). In both situations, agroecology enabled a common agenda of struggles and a repertoire of mobilisation centred on cultivation – one that resonated with residents by articulating the struggle for the environment, territory and the production of life. Disputes within public institutional spaces also proved to be a necessary instrument of struggle, reflecting how socio-environmental conflicts cut across multiple layers and scales of society.

## Food sovereignty: markets and the organisation of consumers

As noted earlier, the organisations that later formed Rede CAU, based on agroecological principles, had since the late 1990s and early

2000s been developing initiatives to stimulate forms of agriculture across multiple urban spaces (vegetable gardens, backyards, schools, nurseries, community spaces), in connection with health, culture, the environment, and food and nutritional sovereignty and security. In synergy with these dynamics in the capital, the Rio de Janeiro Agroecology Network (*Articulação de Agroecologia do Rio de Janeiro: AARJ*) was established in 2006, bringing together agroecology-based farming experiences in Seropédica, Nova Iguaçu, Barra do Piraí, Magé, Campos, Maricá, Parati, the Serra Region and the Paraíba Valley.

The NGO Consultancy and Services for Alternative Agriculture Projects (*Assessoria e Serviços a Projetos em Agricultura Alternativa: AS-PTA*), a key organisation in the structuring of the Rede CAU, which since the early 2000s had been focused on intra-urban agricultural projects, won the Petrobras Development and Citizenship Programme call in 2011 with the project Sowing Agroecology Project (*Semeando Agroecologia*). According to the NGO's official website, the project was defined as "a new peri-urban agriculture initiative in the Metropolitan Region of Rio de Janeiro," operating in the municipalities of Nova Iguaçu, Queimados, and Magé, in partnership with the Univerde and Coopagé farmers' associations, the Pastoral Land Commission, Rede CAU, and research and teaching institutions (Embrapa, UFRRJ and UFF). At this moment, therefore, as an expression of this metropolitan reality, the debate within Rede CAU intensified around the theme of family farming and its possibilities for social reproduction in an urban context.

Concomitantly, the debate on urban agriculture in the municipality of Rio de Janeiro was occurring at the intersection of

policies on food and nutritional sovereignty and security, originally stemming from the Ministry of Social Development (MDS) and its Fight against Hunger and agrarian policy on family farming. The demand for a National Policy on Urban Agriculture had already been coordinated through the issue of food and nutritional sovereignty and security.<sup>11</sup> As a result, the networking of the collectives described above resulted in the strategic decision to follow and engage with Consea-RIO from 2011 onwards.

While the legitimacy of the debate on urban agriculture was being established within agroecology movements, groups were also being organised in various urban centres to advocate for the creation of a National Policy on Urban Agriculture. The landmark for this mobilisation occurred in 2003, during the Lula government, with the campaign against hunger and poverty, which promoted the establishment of community vegetable gardens in urban spaces. Within the MDS, the debate on urban agriculture gained force through its articulation with the Policy on Food and Nutritional Sovereignty and Security. In 2004, the National Secretariat for Food and Nutritional Security (Sesan) was created and, in response to pressure from civil society, a programme for urban agriculture was launched as a step towards the construction of a National Policy on Urban Agriculture.

In 2007, the MDS conducted a national survey on urban agriculture and launched calls for the establishment of twelve Urban and Peri-Urban Agriculture Support Centres (CAAUPs).<sup>12</sup> Changes in government in 2012/2013 interrupted the MDS initiatives directed towards urban agriculture.

At the end of 2014, the document *Subsidies for a National Policy on Urban and Peri-Urban Agriculture* was presented at the final plenary session of Consea, when a thematic committee was set up within the Interministerial Chamber for Food and Nutritional Security (Caisan),<sup>13</sup> which became responsible for advancing the development of the policy.

As an expression of the debates taking place within the sphere of agroecology movements, urban agriculture also appears in the drafting of the First National Plan for Agroecology and Organic Production (Planapo 2013-2015),<sup>14</sup> although it received neither budgetary allocation nor ministerial responsibility for the implementation of actions.

This brief retrospective highlights how the debate on urban agriculture has encountered significant support within the Conseas. It is also within the Conseas that efforts have been made to shape the national school meals policy. However, compliance with the public school meals policy entails, as a first requirement, obtaining the Pronaf Aptitude Declaration (DAP).<sup>15</sup> Here we can highlight how the debate on urban agriculture in Rio de Janeiro municipality has unfolded at the intersection of policies on food and nutritional security, originally stemming from the MDS, and agrarian policy on family farming (via the Ministry of Agrarian Development: MDA). Moreover, since the struggles within these arenas are also reflected territorially, when urban agriculture is discussed through an agroecological prism, attention is drawn to the paradigmatic issues of the current socio-economic and environmental system.

In this way, it can be observed that Rede CAU, without relinquishing the core debate that constitutes the network – cultivation as the organising element of urban environmental issues (Lima, Baptista & Arruda 2019) – also incorporates the issues surrounding peri-urban family farming in the Metropolitan Region, given that urban agriculture is not territorially isolated but, on the contrary, interacts with the diverse forms of agriculture. Rede CAU thus embraces the struggle for the granting of DAPs to farmers, access to institutional markets, the creation of organic and agroecological fairs, for the organisation of participatory guarantee systems for the certification of organic production. What can be discerned, therefore, is that the struggle to strengthen agroecological farming, small-scale farming and family farming reverberates directly in the broader struggle over land use in the Metropolitan Region of Rio de Janeiro.

In the case of Rio de Janeiro, it is worth highlighting the singular nature of its urban agriculture movement. Compared with manifestations in other cities, what stands out is the economic dimension of its activities, involving strong market integration through fairs and institutional markets. Since 2010 and the inauguration of the Rio Organic Fairs Circuit (CCFO),<sup>16</sup> the pursuit of organic certification has come to represent yet another opportunity for productive inclusion for Rio de Janeiro's agroecological farmers. As well as participation in organic fairs, the process of acquiring organic certification – through participatory methodologies and territorial visits – has itself become a community-based alternative for technical

assistance and the building of agroecological knowledge, transcending the immediate objective of participating in organic markets.

Beyond the CCFO, there is also a circuit of alternative fairs – labelled agroecological, *da roça* (country farm) or family farming – which possess specific rules for their operation and distinct political identities, yet all sharing the clear aim of affirming the presence of agriculture in the metropolis and developing connections between consumers and producers. These marketing spaces can be defined as territorialised markets, therefore, due to their central role in asserting agricultural territories within the city, relocalising food and recuperating food culture, thereby transforming into spaces of food activism (Portilho, 2020). Also noteworthy is the integration of farmers from settlements in municipalities of the Metropolitan Region into the CCFO, as well as the creation of Country Fairs and Family Farming Fairs in the Metropolitan Region. Consumers and chefs have assumed an important political role in disseminating values linked to the conservation of agri-food systems, fair trade and closer links between the countryside and city. As one newspaper report observes:

Teresa Corção, from the restaurant Navegador in Rio's city centre, coordinates a movement in defence of organic production in Pedra Branca. She recalls that, at a time when Europe is debating the expansion of "green belts" in urban conglomerates, Rio is moving in the opposite direction by simply denying its rural side. "If small-scale organic production disappears in Rio, our everyday food will come industrialised, from afar. We will completely lose control over quality. We want to build a relationship with these farmers, who need to be recognized." (O Globo, 13 July 2013)

Rede Ecológica, a social movement of organic food consumers founded in 2001, with ten consumer nuclei in the city of Rio de Janeiro and active within Rede CAU, also stands out for its support towards integrating farmers within the Metropolitan Region into markets. Thus, the economic expression of family farming in the Metropolitan Region – simultaneously interpreted as urban agriculture (Fernandez & Baptista, 2019) – has contributed to the political visibility of urban agriculture experiences, raising awareness among agrarian public policy actors, and supporting the unconventional conditions under which agriculture is carried out in urban and peri-urban regions.

## Living, planting: conflictual urban planning

As discussed throughout this text, agroecology proposes a new relationship between humans, society, nature and space. In this context – though often neglected in debates on urban struggles, which typically dichotomise agriculture and the city – the agroecological approach has played a leading role in giving new meaning to the right to the city (Lefebvre, 2011), grounded too in the right to cultivate (Lima, Baptista & Arruda, 2019).

A notable example of the environmentalisation of struggles can be observed in the disputes over urban planning in the Vargens region,<sup>17</sup> which in 2016 became the epicentre of an important popular resistance movement. This struggle concerns the neighbourhoods surrounding the southern and south-eastern slopes of the Pedra Branca Massif, where, thanks to agroecological conversion, farmers were already taking on a prominent role in defending their ways of life.

During the series of global sports events hosted in Rio de Janeiro – the Pan-American Games, the FIFA World Cup and the Olympic Games – this region came under intense pressure from real estate speculation and the mega-events themselves. In this context, the struggle for agroecological urban agriculture enabled the implementation of a form of popular planning to define local land use. Building on earlier struggles and resistances of the Vargens and on an awareness of the region's environmental fragility, a group of activists created the Vargens Popular Plan Alliance (APP-Vargens).<sup>18</sup> This organisation became the principal group opposing Complementary Bill PLC 140/2015, which at the time established “the Consortium-based Urban Operation of the Vargens Region and the Vargens Urban Structuring Plan (hereafter PEU Vargens),” which “defines rules for the application of instruments for the management of land use and occupation and provides other measures.” The APP-Vargens coalition emerged in 2016 as a counterpoint to market-oriented urban planning in the region, following meetings and mobilisations between the Experimental Centre for Conflictual Planning (Neplac) of the State, Labour, Territory and Nature Laboratory at the Institute of Urban and Regional Planning and Research, Federal University of Rio de Janeiro (Etern/Ippur/UFRJ), alongside movements, collectives and associations from the Vargens region itself.

The 2015 version of PEU Vargens was presented and defended by the municipal executive in public hearings convened by the legislature between May 2016 and mid-2017, led by Councillor Domingos Brazão. The local population perceived these hearings as insufficient for fostering any critical engagement

with the neighbourhood's pressing issues. Restrictions on speaking, insufficient time to develop proposals and even the reluctance of some people to attend – in the belief that the hearings offered no space for genuine participation – were all identified. In a national and international context of intensified capital accumulation through space, real estate speculation and mega-events, the region became the latest target. According to the *Dossier of the People's Committee on the World Cup and Olympics in Rio de Janeiro* (2015b), this region faced the highest number of evictions in Rio de Janeiro city. Among the clearances effected were the communities of Restinga, Vila Recreio II, Notredame and Vila Amoedo in Recreio (Comitê Popular da Copa, 2015a).

In this sense, it is unsurprising that agroecological urban agriculture and urban planning often come into conflict, since space is essential for deferring crises of overaccumulation, and urban planning and its instruments become essential for legitimising the expansion of capital. Nevertheless, as class struggles unfold in the territory, it also becomes an obstacle (Harvey, 2006). It is there that resistances and alternatives take root.

From this perspective of urban planning and its instruments being appropriated for the expansion of capital over territories, the Urban Structuring Plan (PEU) and the Land Use and Occupation Law (Luos),<sup>19</sup> in addition to endorsing the increase in real estate production, also shrank the areas designated for agricultural production. A historical overview makes this scenario explicit when comparing the PEU established by Complementary Law n. 104/2009 with the PEU intended to replace it through Complementary Bill n. 140/2015. According to the Municipal Housing Secretariat,

construction licences in the Vargens region, under the influence of the 2009 PEU, rose from 3,154 in 2010 to 9,822 in 2011.

At that time, following intense mobilisation by academics, residents, associations and organisations, including Rede CAU, Decree n. 37.958 was signed in November 2013, designating the neighbourhoods covered by the PEU Vargens as a Special Area of Environmental Interest, suspending future permits for demolition, construction, expansion or modification, land subdivision, or the opening of new roads in the region. However, licences already granted remained valid and works related to the Olympic Games were permitted (Rio de Janeiro, 2013).

On 5 May 2014, the suspension of licensing was extended for a further 180 days via Decree n. 38.647. On 12 November 2014, Decree n. 39.465 introduced another extension. In 2015, however, Complementary Bill n. 140/2015 began to move through the legislature. In this PEU, the municipal government set out a new version of the plan and established the Consortium-based Urban Operation for the region.

In this Law Bill, following the model of the Porto Maravilha project,<sup>20</sup> provision was made for the issuance of Certificates of Additional Construction Potential (Cepacs). Floodplains and marshes would continue to serve as a basis for capital valorisation. Also worth highlighting are the densification of the region and the risk of evictions, as had occurred in the port area (Guterres, 2016). Thus, the pressure of the real estate market on land subdivision was concentrated precisely in a region where agricultural activity is part of the everyday life of many families. According to Baptista (2012), hundreds of farmers have established

agriculture as both activity and livelihood in this area. At least 380 farmers are engaged in the production of bananas, persimmons, cassava, greens, medicinal herbs and spices (Emater, 2019) – not to mention the backyard (*quintal*) producers,<sup>21</sup> who are not counted by either the institution or the IBGE.

With regard to the Land Use and Occupation Law (LUOS), established by Complementary Law no. 57/2018 (Rio de Janeiro, 2018), there is also an alignment with real estate speculation to the detriment of agricultural production. In AP4, except for the Environmental Conservation Zone, where activities are effectively limited by the restrictive legislation of the Pedra Branca State Park, no areas are designated for agriculture in the region. In AP5, although the territory with the largest number of farmers (around 975), the agriculturally usable area is smaller than would be expected given the municipality's overall situation.

As we can see, the instruments cited above promote the expansion of real estate capital in the region while simultaneously curbing agricultural activity in order to safeguard capital's interests. In this context, in 2017, the APP-Vargens<sup>22</sup> formalised a document outlining an alternative type of urban planning, defending the establishment of an agroecological belt as well as the conservation of wetland areas. In this struggle for the ongoing resistance of agroecological farming in the region, and in defence of agrobiodiversity (Santilli, 2009), these instruments – which tend to increase population density on the basis of class distinctions, thereby pressuring long-standing residents whose practice of cultivating crops is not only productive but also a way of life – are rejected. Moreover, if, as Lefebvre

(2011) argues, the right to the city entails resisting the subordination of lives to capital, then the struggle for the right to dwell on and cultivate the land – as led by Rede CAU, APP and other movements advocating the defence of agroecological agriculture – is, by definition, counter-hegemonic.

APP-Vargens initially highlighted a history of threats to the right to a healthy environment and to secure housing tenure for everyone, not just an elite. At its inaugural meeting, therefore, the following points were raised: a) the clearance of low-income housing in the city, particularly in communities closest to the Vargens – Vila Recreio, Vila Harmonia, the forced resettlement of Vila Autódromo – and the unsuccessful attempts to remove the Canal do Cortado and Taboinhas; b) during preparations for the Pan-American Games, the vegetable garden and home of the farmer Rita Maria Aguiar had been summarily destroyed: this event led local collectives to recognise the simultaneous threat to housing and urban agriculture; c) in parallel to this process, a major television news outlet reported the threat to evict 5,000 residents from the Pedra Branca State Park. The area is home to descendants of quilombolas and to the city's main experiences of traditional agriculture. The threat was not carried out, in part because of the certification of the Quilombo Cafundá Astrogilda in 2014, the result of its residents organising for its recognition.

Women's community organisations played a leading role in this process. They studied, deliberated and opted for a popular and holistic notion of environment. The use of urban land was taken to be an integral part of the concept of environmental justice (Acserald, 2010). Faced with these diverse strands of campaigning

and advocacy, the community began to seek an element that could link this priority. In this context, the expression *Morar e Plantar* (To Live and Plant) emerged and continues to serve today as the synthesis of the socio-environmental struggle in this part of the city.

Within this holistic notion of environment, it was possible to delineate a number of priorities. The first of these was the issue of water. Known in the past as the Castle of Waters, the Pedra Branca Massif produces crystalline water that still supplies a significant number of residents in its neighbourhood. Water is also fundamental for the agriculture practised within and around the Massif. This empirical knowledge of the traditional community is also supplemented by specific studies highlighting the ecosystemic relationship between wetlands, forest and the production of drinkable surface water.

From this ecosystemic perspective, the protection of wetlands was identified as a secondary priority. This is a lowland region, also known as the Campos de Sernambetiba, located between the Vargens and Recreio dos Bandeirantes. Through this political struggle, launched first by local residents, environmentalists have joined in defending the creation of a fully protected conservation unit in the remnants of this natural reservoir, which still offers protection to bird species on the verge of extinction. The third element prioritised by the group is the strip of land at the 100-metre contour line, where the Pedra Branca State Park (PEPB) is located. It is considered indispensable to transform this area into an agroecological belt, prioritising agroforestry initiatives that prevent the enclosure and consequent privatisation of the conservation unit.

The Vargens Popular Plan was presented to the public on 30 September 2017 and submitted to the authorities at a public hearing held in October the same year. Negotiations and struggles for its implementation are ongoing, providing the city of Rio de Janeiro with further tools for adapting to the adverse effects of imminent climate disasters.

In this regard, APP Vargens, by opposing market-driven urban planning through a Popular Plan for urban development in contrast to the PEU and linked to the Luos, asserts the right to cultivate not only as an economic activity but also as a way of life. It is this practice which, through agroecology, can elicit transformations in everyday life, re-signifying the right to the city as a right to cultivate (Lima, Baptista & Arruda, 2019). Given an increasingly urban world and the deepening rift in the social metabolism – understood here as the labour through which human society transforms external nature and, in so doing, transforms its internal nature, creating use value – pursuing this perspective becomes ever more necessary (Marx, 1996, p. 1992).

## Conclusion

This article has sought to demonstrate that agroecology has both enabled the reconfiguration of rural and urban conflicts and provided environmental struggles with knowledge practices that have brought diverse groups closer to achieving sustainable and dignified conditions of housing, territory, land, water and food. Likewise, agroecology has made possible the de-singularisation of struggles, previously understood as restricted to specific social groups, by fostering alliances among different social sectors.

Moreover, the text has argued that the environmentalisation of struggles, examined in this article from an agroecological perspective, occurs in the context of the contemporary ecological crisis. It thus echoes the need to transform the relationship between humans and society-nature: in other words, this connection must not be detached from urban conflicts and from those spaces of power that directly reflect and shape the territories.

**[I] <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-2659-9547>**

Universidade Federal Rural do Rio de Janeiro, Departamento de Ciências Sociais, Programa de Pós-Graduação em Ciências Sociais. Seropédica, RJ/Brasil.  
annelisecff@ufrj.br

**[II] <https://orcid.org/0000-0001-7716-7229>**

Universidade Federal do Rio de Janeiro, Instituto de Pesquisa e Planejamento Urbano e Regional. Rio de Janeiro, RJ/Brasil.  
S2baptista@gmail.com

**[III] <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-1168-4183>**

Universidade Federal Fluminense, Faculdade de Economia, Departamento de Economia, Programa de Pós-Graduação em Economia. Niterói, RJ/Brasil  
carenfreitas.lima@gmail.com

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## Notes

- (1) Here the concept of environmentalisation (*ambientalização*) is used as developed by Leite Lopes (2006) in reference to the emergence of the environmental agenda as a new public issue. According to the author, environmentalisation is a neologism that – like others used in the social sciences with a suffix denoting action such as industrialisation or proletarianisation – refers to a processual perspective of the internalisation of a new phenomenon, recognised as important to social life. The author emphasises that internalisation of the environmental agenda has taken place through transformations within the state itself and in people’s behaviour.
- (2) The Metropolitan Region of Rio de Janeiro is composed of 22 municipalities: Belford Roxo, Cachoeiras de Macacu, Duque de Caxias, Guapimirim, Itaboraí, Itaguaí, Japeri, Magé, Maricá, Mesquita, Nilópolis, Niterói, Nova Iguaçu, Paracambi, Petrópolis, Queimados, Rio Bonito, Rio de Janeiro, São Gonçalo, São João de Meriti, Seropédica and Tanguá.
- (3) In Portuguese, *Parque Estadual da Pedra Branca*.
- (4) The Baixada de Jacarepaguá is located in Rio de Janeiro’s West Zone, while the Baixada Fluminense encompasses thirteen municipalities within the Metropolitan Region. The term *baixada* refers to a geomorphological definition of low-lying coastal areas (Rocha, 2013, p. 5). In the past, these were vast floodplains, which were gradually filled in or drained over time. In Tupi-Guarani, the name *Jacarepaguá*, for instance, means “shallow lagoon of alligators.” Despite this geophysical reference, the term Baixada Fluminense historically came to incorporate a set of meanings that overlap with, or blur into, those attributed to the Metropolitan Region. According to Rocha (ibid.), the representations associated with the Baixada Fluminense produce a veritable geopolitics of inclusion and exclusion. One of the political meanings of the term is associated with the history of land struggles and the creation of rural settlements.
- (5) For the purposes of this article, the Metropolitan Region has been used as a parameter since the scope of agroecological experiences transcends the municipalities of the Baixada per se and extends across the entire Metropolitan Region. Precisely for this reason, the Metropolitan Region ceases to be merely an area officially designated by the state and becomes a territory with dynamic and performative meanings, constructed by the social movements linked to agroecology. Nevertheless, use of the term Baixada Fluminense is retained when used by the authors cited here.
- (6) In Portuguese, *Fábrica Nacional de Motores*.
- (7) According to Prado (2012, p. 12), the initiative united around forty people, including representatives of non-governmental organisations, aid agencies, municipal secretariats, universities, farmers’ associations, groups organised through churches and pastoral organisations. These people came from various parts of the city, though predominantly from the West and North Zones.
- (8) The Serra da Misericórdia separates the old suburbs served by the Central do Brasil and Leopoldina railways and extends over approximately 35 km<sup>2</sup>, spanning 27 neighbourhoods across six administrative regions of AP3 (Planning Area Three) – North Zone. It is also where the favela complexes of Penha, Alemão, Sapê and Juramento (Bessa & Guia, 2014) are situated.

- (9) Barros, 2013. Composed of Verdejar, the Permanent Assembly of Entities in Defence of the Environment (Apedema), the Municipal Council (Consu), the NGOs Os Verdes da Ilha do Governador and Bicuda Ecológica da Vila Kosmos, the Centre for Studies and Research of Leopoldina at the Oswaldo Cruz Foundation (CEPL/Fiocruz), the Penha Women's Health Centre (Cresan) and various presidents of Residents' Associations and inhabitants of the Alemão and Penha favela complexes.
- (10) According to Bessa and Guia (2014), the per capita vegetation cover index for AP3, where the Serra da Misericórdia is located, is 3.5 m<sup>2</sup> per inhabitant, while the city of Rio de Janeiro as a whole has a per capita vegetation cover index of 55 m<sup>2</sup> per inhabitant. The minimum recommended by the UN, through its various programmes, is 8 m<sup>2</sup> per inhabitant.
- (11) For a history of the construction of a national policy on urban agriculture, Mattos et al. (2004) show how it acquired strength from 2003 onwards within the Ministry of Social Development (MDS) and the Fight against Hunger.
- (12) In Portuguese, *Centros de Apoio à Agricultura Urbana e Periurbana*.
- (13) In Portuguese, *Câmara Interministerial de Segurança Alimentar e Nutricional*.
- (14) In Portuguese, *1º Plano Nacional de Agroecologia e Produção Orgânica*.
- (15) In Portuguese, *Declaração de Aptidão ao Pronaf* (National Programme for Family Farming: *Programa Nacional da Agricultura Familiar*). This document officially certifies that the farmer is a family farmer and grants access to institutional markets, credit and other benefits.
- (16) In Portuguese, *Circuito Carioca de Feiras Orgânicas*.
- (17) The Vargens region comprises the neighbourhoods of Vargem Grande, Vargem Pequena, Camorim and parts of the neighbourhoods of Recreio dos Bandeirantes, Barra da Tijuca and Jacarepaguá. These neighbourhoods form part of the Baixada de Jacarepaguá and correspond to Planning Area 4 of the city.
- (18) In Portuguese, *Articulação Plano Popular das Vargens*.
- (19) In Portuguese, *Plano de Estruturação Urbana and Lei de Uso e Ocupação do Solo*, respectively.
- (20) Known as Porto Maravilha, the Consortium-based Urban Operation of the Port Region was a public-private partnership between the Municipal Government and consortium companies, which set off a process of gentrification involving evictions and the remodelling of surrounding neighbourhoods.
- (21) According to the dictionary, a *quintal* (backyard) is defined as a small plot of land at the back of a house. In the Northeast, the term may refer to agriculture practised in the "around the home." *Quintais* exist in both rural and urban properties and have gained increasing visibility through the recognition of their role in household food security and in women's economic autonomy (see Public Call Notice 01/2023, MDA, on Productive Backyards). The adjective productive, when attached to the term *quintal*, conveys meanings of subsistence, the production of life, food security, income generation, urban supply potential and more. In urban contexts, backyard agriculture (*agricultura de quintal*) can be considered one of the typologies of urban or urban family farming, and its dimensions are generally smaller than one fiscal module (*módulo fiscal*: see Lima 2019, Fernandez & Baptista, 2019). This form of agriculture faces difficulties in accessing public policies.
- (22) See [http://sertaocarioca.org.br/dynamic/content/uploads/2018/01/CADERNO\\_PLANO\\_POPULAR\\_VARGENS\\_COMPLETO.pdf](http://sertaocarioca.org.br/dynamic/content/uploads/2018/01/CADERNO_PLANO_POPULAR_VARGENS_COMPLETO.pdf). Accessed: 12 October 2019.

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#### Authorship contribution

Annelise Caetano Fraga Fernandez: formal analysis; conceptualization; data curation; investigation; methodology, writing—original draft; writing—review & editing; supervision; validation; visualization.

Silvia Regina Nunes Baptista: formal analysis; conceptualization; data curation; investigation; methodology, writing—original draft; writing—review & editing; supervision; validation.

Caren Freitas de Lima: formal analysis; conceptualization; data curation; investigation; methodology, writing—original draft; writing—review & editing; supervision; validation; visualization.

#### Declaration of conflict of interest

The authors declare that there is no conflict of interest.

#### Data Availability Statement

The entire dataset supporting the results of this study was published in the article itself.

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