



Brazil's Agricultural Politics in Africa: More Food International and the Disputed Meanings of “Family Farming”

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Summary. — Brazil's influence in agricultural development in Africa has become noticeable in recent years. South–South cooperation is one of the instruments for engagement, and affinities between Brazil and African countries are invoked to justify the transfer of technology and public policies. In this article, we take the case of one of Brazil's development cooperation programs, More Food International (MFI), to illustrate why policy concepts and ideas that emerge in particular settings, such as family farming in Brazil, do not travel easily across space and socio-political realities. Taking a discourse-analytical perspective, we consider actors' narratives of family farming and the MFI program, and how these narratives navigate between Brazil and three African countries – Ghana, Mozambique, and Zimbabwe. We find that in Brazil, family farming has multiple meanings that expose contrasting visions of agricultural development as determined by history, geography and class-based power struggles. These multiple meanings are reflected in the disparate ways MFI is portrayed and practiced by Brazilian actors who emphasize commercial opportunity, political advocacy, or technological modernization. We also find that African countries adopt their own interpretations of family farming and MFI, and that these are more attuned with mercantilist and modernization perspectives, and less mindful of Brazil's domestic political struggles. This has prompted a reaction from those on the Brazilian side fighting for an alternative agricultural development trajectory. The significance of this reaction is yet to be determined.

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1. INTRODUCTION

The complementarity between one model of large-scale agribusiness and another of small-scale family farming is a common narrative reproduced by the Brazilian government (Presidência da República, 2006, 2011), and one that is reflected in Brazil's development cooperation in Africa (ABC, 2010). For example, the ProSAVANA program in Mozambique draws mainly on Brazil's experience in large-scale agribusiness development in the *Cerrado*, an area portrayed as similar to the African savannah (Shankland & Gonçalves, 2016). Alongside ProSAVANA, the Brazilian government is implementing More Food International (MFI), a cooperation program inspired by Brazil's More Food Program and that aims at strengthening the productive capacity of smallholder farmers in African countries, who are claimed to bear a resemblance to Brazil's family farmers.

However, the complementarity argument is disputed and an alternative view portrays Brazilian agriculture as a dualism in which a hegemonic battle is fought out between the two paradigms (Pierri, 2013). The social mobilization against ProSAVANA which called for a family farming alternative to the program's agribusiness thrust (Shankland, Gonçalves, & Favareto, 2016) is such a battle. In the present paper we engage with a less visible dispute—regarding the contested meaning of family farming in Brazil—and analyze how this dispute travels to African countries through the implementation of MFI.

As our analysis illustrates, policy constructs that emerge in particular settings, such as Brazil's family farming and the dualism argument, do not travel easily across socio-political realities. Yet, although following a universal development

formula has long been criticized (e.g., Cornwall & Brock, 2005), it remains standard practice. South–South cooperation of the type Brazil claims to exercise (de Abreu, 2013) adds a new rationale to the blueprint bias in development, in that it claims affinity across the so-called South—particularly between Brazil and Africa—and is used to justify common strategies (Scoones, Amanor, Favareto, & Gubo, 2016). Indeed, the idea that “for every African problem there is a Brazilian solution” has become a popular slogan of Brazilian cooperation in Africa (Amorim, 2011).

Accordingly, the family farming model, along with the *Cerrado*–savannah parallel, has been uncritically incorporated into Brazil's agricultural cooperation framework, with the assumption that the concept and associated policies will undergo straightforward transplantation to the African context. However, the ways in which African countries have interpreted and operationalized Brazil's family farming and associated programs have not quite matched Brazil's own experience. Although this is hardly surprising, in the present article we set out to elucidate why this should be the case by focusing on

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MFI, and considering both the Brazilian context and three African countries—Ghana, Mozambique, and Zimbabwe—all localities in which the program has been implemented.

2. A DISCOURSE-ANALYTICAL PERSPECTIVE ON A CROSS-NATIONAL POLICY DOMAIN

Taking MFI as a case study, our analysis centers on the politics of Brazil's development cooperation; we define the latter as a cross-national policy domain with two distinct spheres of action: the sphere of the provider country, Brazil, and the sphere of its target countries, which, in our case, is represented by the three aforementioned African nations. We focus primarily on the dynamics of the Brazilian side, whereby we seek to explore the sociopolitical climate in which the family farming model and MFI program originated, and examine how they travel to Africa and feedback to Brazil. Although the impact of the program in Africa is beyond the scope of our research, we consider the initial reception MFI and its inherent family farming concept have had in the three countries, as this helps in understanding the dynamics of the Brazilian side, not least the reconfiguration of one of the program's components.

Conceptually, our starting point is the literature that emphasizes the influence of domestic politics over international relations (Gourevitch, 1978), and which has been applied to the analysis of foreign aid (Lancaster, 2007). This literature accentuates the role of domestic institutions, and actors' interests and ideas within the provider country in shaping foreign policy. Therefore, in order to understand MFI in Africa, we first need to consider the domestic sociopolitical climate that generated the program in Brazil. In addition to extending the literature that focuses on traditional aid into the domain of the emerging development actor of Brazil, we also complement the former by adopting a discourse-analytical perspective on the cooperation policy process.

The focus on discourse or "meaning-making" processes is widely present in the study of policy-making (Fairclough, 1992; Hajer, 2005; Roe, 1994; Sabatier & Jenkins-Smith, 1993; Shapiro, 1981; Torfing & Howarth, 2005) and in the study of development policy narratives specifically (Roe, 1991). As noted by Fischer (2003), public policy is a discursive construct, and "at the level of everyday interaction, discourses represent specific systems of power and the social practices that produce and reproduce them" (Fischer, 2003, 73). On this basis, the perspective adopted by our research can be situated within the family of discourse-analytical approaches concerned with the broad manifestation of discourse as a political struggle for the meaning of social phenomena—thus, differing from those that adopt a micro focus on the use of language and linguistic repertoires in spoken or written text, such as conversational or content analysis.¹

Indeed, in its broadest sense, social meaning is understood to be partly or temporarily fixed through discourse (Torfing, 2005). The analysis of discourse in policy-making is connected with the analysis of politics and power struggles, which, in turn, draws on the French philosopher Michel Foucault's notion that discourse and power are mutually constitutive—that is, policy actors use discourse to exercise power but they are themselves constituted by the discourse they reproduce (Torfing, 2005). Within this tradition, Hajer (1997) defines discourse as "an ensemble of ideas, concepts, and categorizations that are produced, reproduced, and transformed in a particular set of practices and through which meaning is given to physical and social realities" (Hajer (1997, 44)); and "storylines" as the narratives on social reality that provide actors with

a set of symbolic references that suggest a common understanding or the achievement of discursive closure (Hajer (1997, 62)).

Drawing on these definitions, in this paper we use the term "discourse" to signify a higher-level theoretical concept that concerns the meaning-making process, and "narrative" to represent the translation of such a discourse into storylines that relate to concrete policy issues. However, while Hajer (1997) is concerned with the visible, "argumentative battle" between different narrative storylines out in public spaces, we are interested in examining concealed discourse dynamics within a shared family farming construct. These dynamics reflect "*hegemonic struggles* that aim to establish a political and moral-intellectual leadership through the articulation of meaning and identity" (Torfing, 2005, 15).

We start by considering narratives of family farming and MFI in Brazil, and find that the meaning of family farming is not fixed, but, rather, a "floating signifier" (Torfing, 2005) that is open to multiple interpretations. These not only represent an expression of different agendas and understandings of the agricultural sphere, but also operate as a tool for constructing and reinforcing such agendas and ideas. MFI reproduces the multiple meanings of family farming as reflected in the distinctive narratives of the program, which we respectively label "productivist modernization", "territories of life", and "conservative modernization".

We then consider how these Brazilian narratives travel to Africa through the channel of cooperation, and explore the extent to which Brazil's domestic discourse gains new contours when it reaches a different continent. This approach connects our analysis with research on the policy transfer process, which is concerned with the transfer of policy content, instruments, institutions, and ideas from one setting to another (Dolowitz & Marsh, 1996, 2000; Evans, 2009; James & Lodge, 2003). In our study, we provide an account of how such transfer entails the navigation of discursive constructions across different contexts (Brazil and the three African countries) and, specifically, how narratives of MFI and family farming in these contexts compare and why. With this focus, our empirical evidence indicates that, for reasons around the preferences of African governments and the prevalence of a commercial agenda in Brazil's cooperation framework, the particular view that emphasizes mechanization-led agricultural modernization dominates program practice. Yet, this view is resisted by those both inside and outside government who advocate for a "territories of life" perspective on family farming, or one more akin to "agroecology" practices and "food sovereignty" goals.

Our analysis draws on research undertaken in Brazil, Ghana, Mozambique, and Zimbabwe between November 2011 and February 2015. Fieldwork consisted mainly of qualitative interviews with individuals directly or indirectly connected with the MFI program. In Brazil, interviewees were selected from across government agencies,² rural social movements, civil society organizations, and the agricultural machinery industry. In Ghana, Mozambique, and Zimbabwe respondents included a combination of Brazilian diplomats and resident cooperation officials, and local government officers. In Mozambique, civil society organizations that had actively monitored Brazilian cooperation in the country were also interviewed. The analysis also draws on the program's media coverage in the four countries, including MDA's own news releases, and the limited available documentation on the program—industry brochures (Baldan, 2011), leaked listings of requisitioned equipment (ABIMAQ, 2014) and, in the case of Mozambique specifically, official program

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