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**WOMEN, MOBILIZATION AND THE REVITALIZATION OF  
WATER RESOURCES: THE CASE OF NORTHEASTERN BRAZIL<sup>1</sup>**

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<sup>2</sup> The Joaquim Nabuco Foundation (FJN) is a Federal Government Institution engaged in applied research devoted to influence policy-making. The Rural Women Workers Movement (MMTR) is a Women's Grassroots Organization.

<sup>3</sup> The Sertão Central is the semi-arid portion located at the centre of the Pernambuco state in Northeastern Brazil.

## 1. INTRODUCTION

Brazil is a vast country with a high regional diversity. The North-eastern region of that country occupies 18.2 percent of the nation's territory, is comprised of nine states and has a high population density. This region has a population of 47.741.711 inhabitants, 49% are men and 51% are women. This accounts for 28.12% of the country's population. Most of the North-eastern region is located in semi-arid areas, and is exposed to periodic droughts. The semi-arid has been considered the poorest region of Brazil and one of the poorest of the world. Poverty, famine and underdevelopment come to our minds when we think about the area. Income and wealth are very unequally distributed and the quality of life of the majority of the population is very low. It is important to call attention to the fact that within the semi-arid region itself, there are areas characterized by a very high socio-economic development. One of these so-called "pockets of development" is the area located on the margins of the São Francisco river. This area benefits from large-scale irrigation and relies on the labour force of those who live in the drought-prone areas. It can be said that the development achieved by the irrigated semi-arid region takes place at the expense of the underdeveloped drought-prone semi-arid region since it relies on the cheap labour force of those exposed to the drought. There is, therefore, a diversity within the semi-arid in regards to the levels of socio-economic development. This leads us to realize that besides the environmental reasons, the scarcity of water faced by the majority of the population in most of the region is closely related to political and economic factors.

Water shortage poses serious hazards to the well-being of the population, particularly to the poorest sectors as the government mitigation measures to minimise the impact of the water scarcity usually have not targeted specifically the needs of the poor. Such measures are mostly short-term and palliative in nature. The majority of the wells and dams constructed with public funds are found in large private properties. This leads to the privatisation of water and fails to fulfil the needs of the poor.

A great portion of the population in the drought-prone region has been poverty stricken. The regional economy is primarily based on cattle raising, hence wage labour opportunities are severely limited. Furthermore, during drought periods, those who engage in agricultural production, i.e., the small landholders and sharecroppers, face a reduction in production capacity, and wage labour becomes virtually nonexistent. In this context, women have limited or no access to wage labour opportunities and their contribution is more visible at the domestic sphere, where they engage primarily in activities devoted to the reproduction of the domestic unit. Women, thus, have to face severe hardship during most of the time. They have to walk long hours to fetch water for the consumption of the household. Moreover, when their husbands migrate to urban centres in search for work, during drought periods, they become the heads of their households on a temporary basis. There is also the case of women who are the heads of their households on a permanent basis, such as those who have lost their husbands or who are separated. Furthermore, some of these women are community leaders and on top of all of their tasks, they are still involved with political activities at the grassroots level. Due to all of these factors, there is a great need to consider women's important role as well as their needs in the design of policy devoted to mitigating poverty and water shortage in North-eastern Brazil. By doing that, policies will not only benefit women, but the family as a whole.

As it has been mentioned before, the government main focus of attention has been on water resources for large-scale entrepreneurial activities, as it has centred mostly on water for large scheme irrigation devoted to the production of commercial crops. One of the most important areas where this is found is the area of the São Francisco river, the main river in the Northeast as it is found in the heart of the semi-arid area. There has been very little interest on water for household consumption and for small-scale irrigation. In recent years, however, due to the pressure of the civil society sectors, the Government has been supporting initiatives towards the provision of rainwater harvesting to fulfil the needs of the poor. A major advancement on that has been the **Project A Million Cisterns**, which has been coordinated by ASA (The Semi-Arid Articulation), an NGO formed by several others. The Project is devoted to construct one million cisterns throughout the region. The Federal Government has been supporting this Project, particularly through the involvement of ANA (The National Association of Water), which is an organ of the MMA (Ministry of the Environment) and the Ministry of Agrarian Development. This Project relies on funds from International donors and from the Federal Government. The civil society also provides a very important input as the beneficiary communities offer their labour force to construct the cisterns.

The limitation of water resources has become more serious as a result of the degradation of the environment. Due to the few work opportunities and to the uncertainty of small-scale agriculture in the hostile north-eastern environment, the production of charcoal for both the household and the market is one of the alternatives for the poor to meet their needs. The reliance on such activity has contributed to a high deforestation process, which has been intensified by the need of large land owners to plant grass for the animals they raise as cattle raising is the main economic activity in the region. Beyond that, the local population usually adopts inappropriate practices such as, slash-and-burn to clear the land. This type of activity has a very negative impact on the environment. Those women and men also lack knowledge about ways of how to deal with the resources properly so that they are not destroyed. These factors have led the region to have serious environmental problems, including desertification.

The rivers found in the region have also been suffering and many of them have had a decrease in the volume of water and no longer flow as they once did. Some of the areas along these rivers are “humid pockets” in the sense that they are less dry and the vegetation is greener than in the remaining drought-prone semi-arid. In those areas, there is usually water available and the population usually dig wells to fulfil their need. These humid pockets are referred to as *brejos de altitude*. In a hostile environment such as that of the semi-arid region, these areas are distinct in the sense that they maintain their population and the out migration flow is quite low when compared to other locations. This does not mean, nevertheless, that the population have learned how to deal with these areas on a sustainable way by preserving it. On the contrary, due to the high reliance on these water resources and to the absence of measures to guarantee the preservation of these areas, these rivers are literally “**dying**”. Most of them are very polluted as they do not only fulfil the needs of the riverine population, but also of many others who have to walk long distances in search for water. As they are not aware of the implications of destroying these resources, they through trash along the river banks and make the water contaminated. Furthermore, most of the

houses located in those areas do not have sewage system and this makes the contamination worse. There is, therefore, an urgent need to **save** these water sources so that the population can benefit from them.

The objective of this paper is to present a case study on the mobilization of women from the MMTR (Rural Women Workers Movement of *Sertão Central*) toward the revitalization of a small river in the semi-arid region of the Pernambuco state. Since the water problem is so closely related to the lives of women and they had been noticing that the only and most important water source was disappearing, they decided to save it. Such an initiative shows the absence of governmental action to solve the problem and the importance as well as the strength of women's mobilization at the grassroots level.

## 2. THE AREA AND ITS CHARACTERISTICS

The Olho d'Água small river is located in the municipality of Santa Cruz da Baixa Verde in the semi-arid portion of the state of Pernambuco. The community occupies the margins of the river and engages in the production of agricultural crops and vegetables for subsistence and for the market. The community is formed by 1.000 people. Besides the scattered houses which form this community, there is also a small village which stands on the margins of the river. This village is known as Jatiúca. It is formed by approximately 150 families. The river also fulfils the needs of those who live nearby and come there to fetch water and wash clothes. The river is found on an area of approximately 15 km. Besides the pollution found in the areas occupied by the small landholders, the Jatiúca's sewage system is thrown straight into the river. The local population has a series of health problems, including hepatitis, which can be seen as a result of their exposure to contaminated water. The municipal government has not taken any initiative in order to solve the problem, neither has the state government, as the conditions found in this river are also present in other rivers.

It is important to call attention to the fact that North-eastern region of Brazil is very vulnerable in terms of water resources. This Region holds only 3% of the water found in Brazil and 70% of this water is found in the São Francisco River, the most important river in the Region and thus, there is a great need to save the few existing resources. The São Francisco basin occupies an area of 640.000Km<sup>2</sup>. The river has an extension of 2.700 km. There are around 500 municipalities, 97 of which are located on the margins of the river. The population of this area is 14 million inhabitants. Although this is the most important water source in the region, the river is facing serious problems. There are several hydroelectric dams constructed along the river where 70% of the electricity is generated. The São Francisco River is responsible for the generation of 90% of the energy utilized in the Northeast. Despite the great importance of the river, it is facing serious problems, which contribute to its **“death”**. Some of the problems are based on the fact that the water is polluted as the sewage of the houses located nearby flow into the river, its margins have been exposed to deforestation as they have lost the ciliary forest due to the expansion of the agricultural frontier. The water is also utilized for large-scheme irrigation. These problems are worsened by the absence of Governmental planning and policies toward the preservation of this important source. Several rivers in the Region flow to the São

Francisco river. One of them is the Pajeú river, which is located in the central portion of the semi-arid in the Pernambuco state. All of these rivers face serious problems and in case attention is not given, they tend to disappear.

Due to the absence of public attention to solve this problem, the women who belong to the Rural Women Workers Movement from *Sertão Central* (MMTR) and the STR (Rural Workers Labour Union), have decided to organize themselves in an effort to revitalize the river. It is important to mention that this area and those under the same characteristics are of great importance since the majority of the areas found in the semi-arid are much drier. The idea to revitalize the river came not only from women who belong to the Olho d'Água community and suffer the consequences of the polluted river on a daily basis, but also from those who suffer from it indirectly. Access to water is an issue closely related to women and their lives, especially in an environment such as that of the semi-arid, which is so hostile.

The Rural Women Workers Movement of *Sertão Central* was founded twenty years ago in the municipality of Serra Talhada. This Movement has a strong leadership and has been the basis for the rise of the Movement at the Regional and National levels and most recently, at the level of the Latin American and the Caribbean Region. The women organized in the Movement have been achieving several goals and are very politically organized. One of the Movement's leader is very active and is a member of the CNDM (National Council for Women's Rights), a governmental organism which belongs to the Ministry of Justice.

### **3. WOMEN'S ACTIONS TO SAVE THE RIACHO OLHO D'ÁGUA**

As it has been previously stated, the situation in concern is found in several other areas of the Semi-Arid throughout the Northeast. In face of the absence of governmental mitigation measure, local women have been discussing the problem among themselves and have actually initiated efforts to solve the problem by revitalizing the river. According to them, the revitalization of this small river will lead to that of the Pajeú and eventually that of the São Francisco river, which is referred to by the local population as "the *Velho Chico*". Although this initiative is at its initial stage, all of the steps have been planned by the local population and are the following:

1. contact each of the riverine families to raise their consciousness toward the problem and the importance of mobilizing towards the revitalization of the area. This is done through visits in each of the houses. This step is of crucial importance since it is an opportunity for the population involved to know all of the residents as well as to visit the whole area;
2. proceed with the cleaning of the area. This will be done collectively and will involve not only the local population, but all of the women who belong to the Movement and come from other municipalities;
3. involve the local authorities in the process;

4. promote workshops to discuss the problem and the importance of environmental education. These workshops will count with the participation of experts on gender, environmental sustainability, environmental education and water issues. The workshops will involve children, young adults and the elderly. It is expected that the children play an important role;
5. plant native trees in the area so that the native vegetation can be revitalized;
6. this initiative is being considered as a pilot project and it is expected that upon the completion of this Project the same will be done in other areas.

Besides the involvement of the local Women's grassroots organization and the Rural Labourers Union, an NGO based in a nearby municipality, and which focuses its actions on environmental education and on sustainable small-scale agriculture in semi-arid environments has already been involved. This NGO named as CECOR counts with the expertise of agricultural engineers who will advise what types of native trees should be planted and other issues related to agri-forestry. It is important to point to the fact that, although this is na initiative of women, the men have become involved and are very active as well as supportive. The belief is that by revitalizing the river, they will assure their survival needs and this will lead to an improvement in the quality of life of the whole community.

The population involved in this initiative has not invited the local government to participate yet because the belief is that it is important to show the efforts of the civil society, particularly of women, to request a more effective involvement from the government sector. This is an important strategy to pressure the government to take action. This is the first action by the local population in regards to the revitalization of water resources and, according to several sources, there has not been any other experience on the revitalization of water resources in the state. The women involved in the Project have had previous experiences in pressuring the process of policy-making. They have mobilized to acquire rights such as paid maternity leave, equal salary in agricultural labour, retirement pension among others.

At this stage there is not financial resource available and the only effort has been made by the women for the reasons mentioned above. However, CECOR, the local NGO has already been supportive in discussing the work to be done. Besides the STR - Rural Labourers Union at the municipal level, FETAPE (the Federation of Agricultural Workers at the state level) will also be involved.

#### **4. THE PROJECT AND ITS SUSTAINABILITY**

At this initial stage the population is very interested and enthusiastic about the Project and its outcomes. The Project is already contributing to strengthening the organization and collaboration of community members. This is a vehicle for the empowerment of the women

and men. Furthermore, since this is an initiative of women, it definitely shows their close relation to the well being of the community as a whole and their determination to struggle for change. The Project is a major advancement for the sustainability of water at the community level as well as the conservation of the environment. It shows that the intervention in natural resources is possible through the local commitment of the population. It also shows women's involvement in the struggle against the destruction of water resources.

## 5. KEY MESSAGES

- capacity for bringing change
- environmental conservation
- access to good quality water
- struggle against the destruction of the environment
- empowerment
- capacity of grassroots women to pressure the governments for change



## SITES CONSULTED

[www.ana.gov.br](http://www.ana.gov.br)  
[www.cptec.inpe.br](http://www.cptec.inpe.br)  
[www.embrapa.gov.br](http://www.embrapa.gov.br)  
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