



Workshop of the SUMA CUD project of APODU

The Organic Farmers' Association of Uruguay (APODU) is a national organisation of rural and periurban organic farmers. A study was undertaken by CIEDUR in 2005 and 2006²⁾, which concentrated on farmers from the Montevideo metropolitan area, the country's capital.

Strategic Alliances: the Organic Farmers' Association of Uruguay

The Eastern Republic of Uruguay, with a population of 3,240,887³⁾, is located on the Atlantic coast, in the area between the Brazilian plateaus and the Pampas plain. Its economy is primarily based on export agriculture (meat, grains, milk). Social services are widespread in terms of health (96%) and education (97%). The Department of Montevideo is home to 42% of the country's total population. Uruguay's Gross Domestic Product fell in the years 1999 to 2003 from about USD 21 billion in 1999 to a low of USD 11 billion in 2003. By 2005, it had rebounded to nearly USD 17 billion (representing a GDP per capita of USD 5,081), but the economy of Uruguay is still in the process of recovery.

As a result of the 2002 crisis, the poverty rate in the Department increased significantly, reaching 41% in 2003. While this rate has since gone down, it is still above what it was before the crisis.

MAIN CHARACTERISTICS OF APODU

APODU is a national organisation founded in 1997 that was created and is now run exclusively through the voluntary efforts of its more than 150 members, mainly individual producers. It is legally

Alfredo Blum¹⁾

Interdisciplinary Centre for Development Studies, Uruguay (CIEDUR)

✉ alfredo.blum@mageos.com

constituted as a non-profit civil association. Its highest authoritative body is the General Membership Assembly, which is held every two years and elects a Board of Directors to represent it. Affiliation is on an individual basis, and membership is open to anyone who is a certified organic producer. There are three different types of farmer members of APODU: rural farmers (located in other interior regions of the country), periurban farmers (located in metropolitan Montevideo), and urban huerteros, or garden-farmers located in the inner city of Montevideo.

APODU is divided into four autonomous regional divisions: South, West, East and North. It does not have its own offices, but rather uses facilities provided by other institutions or the members themselves for carrying out its activities. The operating costs (communication, transportation, etc.) are paid for by the members.

APODU has consolidated itself as an "ideological"⁴⁾ organisation. The leadership team is made up of farmers whose origin is mainly urban but who decided to move and live in the rural and periurban areas. Its members are deeply committed to agro-ecological production and they have an alternative vision of society. Their activities are in that sense related to the urban dynamic. These characteristics shape their actions: frequent meetings, prioritising direct sales and customer

relationships, political advocacy and alliances with groups or organisations that support alternative practices, environmentalists and research organisations. APODU is a formal organisation, but its internal organisation is relatively limited, in the sense that leadership is in the hands of a small group. However, this does not affect its functioning in a negative sense. On the contrary, APODU has a strong presence in public and political spheres, especially in related themes (such as organic production and food system thinking).

APODU MEMBERS' PROFILE

The members of APODU are characterised by a very high level of education, unlike the educational and cultural profile of traditional farmers and the average Uruguayan. Their houses have most commodities and basic services, and only 15% live below the poverty line. Their family size is relatively small, and the members tend to participate in many other non-farm activities (like civil organisations). They are considered neo-rural farmers in that they live on their farms (located in periurban and rural areas), but for the most part are of urban origin. The participation of APODU's women members is significant in production and commercial efforts, but it is still quite low in the organisation's management functions. The majority of the income of APODU's members comes from organic food production.

As an organisation, APODU is constantly looking for alternative ways to sell members' products in order to provide them with better incomes. APODU facilitates the farmers' participation in three different "intermediary-free" marketing systems: weekly farmers' markets (located in areas with high purchasing power), the Baskets (involving house-to-house, personalised delivery), and the Eco-store (a permanent point-of-sale located in downtown Montevideo).

Most of the members are accustomed to working in a participatory way in various events. Within APODU, there are various thematic groups that address topics such as commercialisation, or in some cases joint production and planning, which implies elevated levels of unity and trust that are not common in traditional agriculture.

ALLIANCES AND STRATEGIES DEVELOPED BY APODU

APODU is seeking to find its own path that will allow it to have political influence without being isolated as an organisation. For that purpose, it has established temporary and strategic alliances with various organisations, which has made it possible to carry out activities aimed at improving production and commercialisation as well as defending and promoting organic farming.

In order to reinforce its relationship with local stakeholders in promoting ecological agriculture, APODU engages in a strategy of decentralisation, incorporating consumers, technical specialists and NGOs into its regional affiliates.

At the national level, it maintains alliances with public institutions, social organisations, academic institutions and international cooperation agencies. In addition, it has strategic alliances with civil society organisations like the Association of Organic Product Consumers (GACPADU), which has led to improved commercialisation and the promotion of campaigns on certain issues of interest (avoiding the use of pesticides, responsible consumption, etc.).

In order to publicise organic agriculture, APODU promoted the creation of the Agro-ecology Network, an inter-institutional entity currently in the process of consolidation that brings together NGOs

(CIEDUR, CEUTA, Foro Juvenil, REDES), consumer organisations, research institutes, some departments of the University of the Republic and representatives from different governmental bodies.

It also has a specific alliance with FAO, with which it is implementing a project on participatory certification, which is seen

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by the producers as their only chance to get certified given the high costs of the traditional procedure. This project has put the Association to the test in terms of the direct management of cooperation funds.

Nevertheless, the establishment of these kinds of alliances concerns many members, and at the moment, APODU is facing some internal tension between those who are pushing for closer relations with urban stakeholders linked to the production, commercialisation, and consumption of organic products and those who prefer to relate to other rural farmers.

While its members recognise the value of establishing alliances that promote ecological/organic agriculture (and therefore its producers), there is some question as to the capacity for advocacy that the Agro-ecology Network has.

As a result, APODU wears two hats: that of a producers' union (demanding attention for issues related to production, commercialisation, access to credit, inputs, etc.) and that of a social organisation that is open to other demands and interests (of consumers, NGOs, environmentalists, academic institutions, etc.).

MAJOR ACHIEVEMENTS

APODU has managed to achieve social objectives (the settlement of rural and periurban farmers, a decent level of income, a better quality of life) and productive objectives (varied commercialisation channels, strengthened native seed varieties) as a result of the strong commitment of its members to achieving political influence through broad alliances (NGOs, universities, local governments, various national government offices) and vertical

integration (production-processing-commercialisation-consumers).

Partnerships with NGOs have allowed APODU to gain access to an appropriate infrastructure in order to operate (offices, certain resources, etc.). In addition, its organisational strengthening has given it access to markets (farmers' markets, Baskets and the Eco-store) in partnership with other stakeholders.

The alliances with international organisations, like the FAO, and with the national government have allowed APODU to improve upon research aimed at increasing production (biological pest control, etc.). In a similar way, there has been progress in the consolidation of the Agro-ecology Network.

Its alliances with NGOs and social organisations has allowed APODU to become



An APODU workshop in the open air

an important player in political advocacy, opposing the liberation of genetically modified (transgenic) organisms, in the National Biosecurity Committee and in the promotion of participatory processes for the certification of organic farming.

NOTES

- 1) Ivet Alvarez and Hugo Bertola, Board Member and President of APODU, respectively, generously contributed to this article.
- 2) "Social organisations of urban farmers: management models and innovative alliances for political influence" coordinated by IPES-Peru with financing from IDRC.
- 3) 2004 Census, phase I, National Statistics Institute.
- 4) GUINOT, C., refers to the first works on organic farming movements in France, in the 1970s, and identified as urban those movements that entered into organic farming for "philosophical or ideological" reasons. The first organic or biological agriculture in France was the GABO (Groupement des Agriculteurs).