Integration of sustainable development to higher education: Innovative practices between federal universities and Bank of Brazil with impact over associative and cooperative production

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Abstract
Higher education incorporates growing responsibilities in the context of globalization of socio-economic-politico-cultural processes. The movement towards universalization of access to primary education in the planet, with growing registration in upper levels of basic education in differentiated regions of the globe, whereas entry into higher education is accelerated, poses new challenges to public power with a special emphasis in the systems of education, but with a special weight in higher education. Universities and other higher education institutions are given a double challenge. First, universities are faced with the challenge to build up strategies articulating modalities of education to allow a larger entry of students making sure that academic standards are maintained. Open and distance education taking into account the incorporation of new
technologies of information and communication are relevant references for this challenge. Second, the emergence of new forms of higher education, such as corporative universities, community and third sector alternatives, electronic modalities, though not necessarily accredited academically, also poses the challenge to universities to rethink and to reposition themselves on new bases to society.

The search of new bases of development within this perspective of incorporating growing societal segments to knowledge and formal education implies to universities (and other institutions aimed at the production of new technologies and knowledge) the formulation of development strategies social and environmentally sustainable. Such incorporation into the educational system is accompanied by growing questioning from society, firstly demanding its larger participation in the consumer market. Secondly, by realizing the finitude of natural resources (and its possibilities of transformation into commodities and services), as far as the global incorporation of society to consumer practices are supposedly acceptable.

An innovative experience is now on course in Brazil involving a group of public federal universities and Bank of Brazil, associated to other financial institutions controlled by the federal government, aimed at implementing a strategy of sustainable regional development (DRS) strongly impacting regions and segments social and economically excluded. DRS stimulates productive activities economically viable, socially fair and environmentally correct, with an emphasis on cultural diversity. Its goals are: (1) to promote social inclusion by means of the generation of jobs and income, (2) to democratize the access to credit, (3) to stimulate associativism and cooperativism, (4) to contribute to the improvement of life quality indicators, (5) to strengthen business with mini and small rural and urban entrepreneurs, both formal and informal. DRS was launched in 2003 in the poorest regions of the country, i.e., northeast and north Brazil, later extended in 2006 to other regions as well. One million families are involved, 65% concentrated in north and northeast.

The implementation of DRS and later its enlargement and consolidation within Bank of Brazil, implied a transition process to a new business culture. An innovative business culture was built up between the Bank of Brazil and a social segment – mini and small entrepreneurs, or those aspiring to be so - to which access to banking institutions was denied in the past. But how to operate such a change in a mammoth
institution, present in every corner of Brazil, a country of continental dimensions? It is widely known that federal universities have in Brazil different research and training programs based on sustainable development. This marks the beginning of an association between these universities and Bank of Brazil, posing themselves the challenge of promoting the transition in its staff’s mentality to face the goals of DRS strategy.

The realization of potential mini and small entrepreneurs is operated via a business plan that involves the concertation of all participant actors in a value chain where both primary resources and final commodities are considered. Economic feasibility and the constant betterment of the final product or service within the framework of sustainability provide for the basis of viability of the business itself.

DRS concentrates its diagnoses and business plans in around 70 productive activities and services: cassavaculture (11.38%), bovinoculture (10.63%), ovinocaprinoculture (10.18%), fruticulture (9.96%), apiculture (8.46%), horticulture (6.89%), pisciculture (6.29%), artícrafis (6.14%), recyclable material trade (2.1%), and other activities (29%). (Filmic illustration in DVD format will be presented of successful cases of families that have been consolidated as mini and small entrepreneurs in different value chains.)

Federal universities in Bahia, Brasília, Lavras and Mato Grosso are responsible for training managers and officials of DRS in an MBA program in “Business Management in Sustainable Development”, thus preparing the Bank staff for their new role. The first MBA group (2007/2008) involves 2000 managers/students, whilst the second one was just launched in March 2008 with 1000 students. 3795 Bank agencies operate focused on DRS in at least one productive activity, abridging 4200 municipalities in all 26 States and the Federal District, involving almost one million families.

Training of Bank staff at federal universities has profound impacts in its routine of teaching and research. On the one hand, it contributes to questioning the academicist character that used to prevail in training administrators and other professionals involved in the concertation process of different actors participating in a value chain. On the other hand, transition towards changing mentality of Bank staff, on which the institution has put an emphasis since 2003 stressing a sustainable
perspective of incorporating mini and small entrepreneurs, allowed the extension of training to other areas.

Under the leadership of the Ministries of Government and Education, the Forum Pro-Education of Brazilian State Enterprises gives support to a national program of training of administrators at university level from state companies. As such, it is part of a strategy that aims at integrating transition to sustainability, thus increasingly involving universities in processes of social change, whilst the universities themselves critically incorporate sustainability as a dimension relevant to training future professionals. A communication of double direction is established, where both partners feed each other. This experience, which was extended to social demand beyond state enterprises, contributed to the genesis of the Open University in Brazil (UAB), whose activities are mostly concentrated in school teachers’ education, a major priority of President Lula government. A National Plan for the Development of Education (PDE) was launched in April 2007, whose overall goal is building up a high quality national system of basic education. Both PDE and DRS can open up new opportunities of collaboration between Brazil and other Latin American and Caribbean countries, with support from Bank of Brazil and the Brazilian government.

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Figure 1: DRS Regional Distribution in Brazil (Source: Banco do Brasil, 2008).

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Figure 3: Model of Value Chain applicable to DRS.
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