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Hemp as a multifunctional alternative: the case of the Quilombola communities of the Brazilian Sertão

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ABSTRACT

This piece aims at exploring the potential capacity of the landscapes in the São Francisco river valley, Brazil, to provide industrial hemp products (seeds, leaves, fibers) to a growing global demand and potential local market in Brazil (food, cosmetics, industrial) through the empowerment of alternative trends and food labels in traditional Quilombola communities, countering environmental degradation and social marginalization. The São Francisco river valley, is the main agricultural landscape of the Brazilian *Sertão* region - an area subject to droughts, food insecurity and social inequalities - but is also the biggest producer of narcotic cannabis in Brazil. Traditional communities living here, such as the indigenous groups and Quilombolas - historically subjected to racism, poverty and land confiscation - often join the traffic networking and crop narcotic cannabis for subsistence matters. Thus being exposed to police persecution and violence. In addition, the predatory effects of agribusiness in the region made smallholder farmers living in Quilombola communities suffer threats to their productive resources, therefore hindering their alternatives. But cannabis is also a multifunctional crop, drought tolerant, used for centuries to provide mankind nutrition, textiles and medicine. Recently we have seen a relaxation of social stigma and consequent change in legislation, showing a growing global trend towards de-penalization and market regulation of this crop, together with a growing demand of ethical and sustainable alternative products, all of which is pushing the discussion towards regulation and marketization of cannabis products for industrial hemp, medicinal and recreational matters in Brazil. This would represent a way out of the illegal market for these populations, but political and market conditions might be a hindrance for them. The chance represented by newly established geographical indications such as the 'Selo Origens Brasil', which are valorizing and fostering sustainable agricultural practices of traditional communities, can provide added value and access to markets to marginalized communities and their products, among which hemp represent an ideal candidate, empowering these rural communities to overcome a current social problem, securing livelihoods and sustainable management of landscapes. The study was based on a participatory observational qualitative research with seven Quilombola communities in the presented region.