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## RURAL DEVELOPMENT FORUMS IN URUGUAY: PARTICIPATION AND POLITICAL CHANGE

Virginia Courdin<sup>1\*</sup>, Pedro Arbeletche<sup>2</sup>, Maria Fernanda de Torres<sup>3</sup>, Eric Sabourin<sup>4</sup>, Martine Guibert<sup>5</sup>, Alejandro Saravia<sup>6</sup>, Hermes Morales<sup>7</sup> and Jean Francoise Tourrand<sup>8</sup>

<sup>1</sup>Facultad de Agronomía, Universidad de la República, Paysandú, Uruguay; <sup>2</sup>Facultad de Agronomía, Universidad de la República, Paysandú, Uruguay; <sup>3</sup>AnimalsLab, UMR Innovation, INRAE, Montpellier, France; <sup>4</sup>Centre de Coopération internationale en Recherche Agronomique pour le Développement CIRAD, Umr ART-Dec, MUSE, Montpellier, France; <sup>5</sup>Université Toulouse-Jean Jaures, LISST/Dynamiques rurales, Toulouse, France; <sup>6</sup>Instituto Plan Agropecuario, Montevideo, Uruguay; <sup>7</sup>Instituto Plan Agropecuario, Montevideo, Uruguay; <sup>8</sup>Centre de Coopération internationale en Recherche Agronomique, Montpellier, France

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\*Corresponding author: Virginia Courdin

### ABSTRACT

The article examines the participation of farmers in the *Mesas de Desarrollo Rural* (MDRs) established in Uruguay in 2007. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with various stakeholders between 2016 - 2018 to explore their participation, analyse official documents and do participant observation of meetings. The main findings indicate the adaptability of these mechanisms to territorial and producer conditions; their openness to other non-agricultural sectoral institutions; and difficulties in maintaining or renewing the participation dynamic, particularly of farmers' representatives. The impacts of the political changes in 2020 and the COVID-19 pandemic on MDRs were also examined after new interview of new policy responsables.

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## INTRODUCTION

In Uruguay, the Ministry of Livestock, Agriculture and Fisheries (MGAP<sup>1</sup>) established Rural Development Forums (*Mesas de Desarrollo Rural* – MDR) in 2007 as part of its strategy to decentralise and territorialise its activities; through a more comprehensive vision of development rural area form in changes un the ideological conception of the government. The MDRs constitute arenas for policy dialogue (Olivier de Sardan 1995) between rural social organisations, the MGAP, and other institutions for the development of local projects and public-private articulation in rural development. They are monitored and supported by the General Directorate of Rural Development (DGDR) (Vadell 2015). The MDRs represent one of the main tools for the decentralisation of the MGAP at the level of the 19 departments of the country and its openness to the participation of farmers in discussing local actions<sup>2</sup>.

This article presents part of the results of a research study on the functioning and effects of MDRs in three departments in the northeast of the country: Río Negro, Rivera, and Salto. It specifically addresses the processes of participation of farmers and public institutions in this space, their functioning, and evolution. The proposed analysis is based on the sociology of public action (Lagroye et al. 2006; Hassenteufel 2008), as a way of reflecting on the new configurations of the State and civil society. This paper about an original experience in Uruguay contributes in two ways to the debate on participation in rural development policies. First, similar to other countries in the region (Argentina and Brazil until 2016) the MDRs it takes place within the framework of a sectorial ministry (Favareto 2010; Berdegué and Favareto 2019), namely, the MGAP. Second, it is a part of the process of de-concentration of this ministry (Dubois 2009), as has been the case in Brazil and Argentina, albeit on a very different scale (Sabourin et al., 2016; Perafan et al. 2020). Moreover, this process is occurring simultaneously with efforts for administrative and political decentralisation in the country, with the creation of new municipalities. The victory of the right-wing coalition in 2019 has brought significant changes in the General Directorate of Rural Development (DGDR) and threats to the participation process within

<sup>1</sup> All the abbreviations are expanded in the first instance.

<sup>2</sup> Sanctioned by Law 18.126 on 'decentralization and coordination of basic departmental agricultural policies' on 12 May 2007.

the MDRs. The article consists of three sections. The first introduces the object of the study, the conceptual approach, and the research method, the second analyses the participation processes, and the third discusses the results and the recent perspectives associated with the government change in 2020.

### Institutional and theoretical contexts of MDRs

**The origin of the MDR in the Uruguay Rural Project (PUR) (2000–2006):** As a public policy instrument, MDRs originated in the early 2000s. During the second phase of Uruguay's agreement with the United Nations' International Fund for Agricultural Development, PUR was created with the general objective of contributing to poverty reduction in rural areas. Among other purposes, it aimed to experiment with a new form of decentralisation based on the participation and decision-making of poor rural sectors in policies related to rural development (Vadell 2015). From 2001 to 2005, the PUR promoted the creation of more than 20 MDRs in different areas of the country, which had associated with Project Approval Committees (CAP), created simultaneously. The function of these committees was to evaluate local projects presented by the farmers organisations to the MDRs for their subsequent approval. Both the MDRs and the CAP comprised representatives of the civil and public sectors, although the latter were primarily more technically oriented. Thus, according to Riella and Mascheroni (2012), local organisations participated in the approval and monitoring of projects being recognised as reference actors for the development of policies. In practice and during this period, CAPs and MDRs basically functioned for the management and processing of projects financed by MGAP, with little participation of organised civil society. The change in the political orientation of the government in 2005 when the main leftist coalition *Frente Amplio* took office for the first time generated a new PUR leadership, which proposed to revitalise and provide relevance to the MDRs as an instrument of participation and decision-making for rural development policies. A series of measures began to be implemented to test changes to improve functioning, including reducing the number of MDRs and focusing on territorial insertion in the areas with the highest concentration of rural poverty. This process consolidated 10 MDRs throughout the nation and led to the creation of sub-MDRs, which were installed in the most underserved rural areas (Vadell 2015). The territorial vision of this public policy recognized the main transformations that neoliberal globalisation has produced in the rural sector and seeks to focus on social actors and institutions, fostering alliances to strengthen local governance (Kay 2009; Berdegué et al. 2015).

**The progressive institutionalisation of MDRs:** In a highly centralised country such as Uruguay, with the hegemonic MGAP handling the administration of the rural environment, the MDR policy represented a rupture that was linked to the arrival of a government led by the *Frente Amplio* (Piñeiro and Cardeillac 2017). For the MGAP's DGDR, the MDRs correspond 'to an ideological will, that is being translated into a public policy of the Ministry, according to a vision and a commitment that all other ministries do not yet share'<sup>3</sup>. This policy is based on a conception of development as an opportunity to make free choices that considers farmers not as a target public, but as actors in development, and that tries to reduce asymmetries and ensure the strengthening of their capacities (Sen 2001).

The *Frente Amplio* government wanted to consolidate its social base in family farming and involve producer organisations in decisionmaking (Courdin 2018, 2021). This policy is reflected in the creation of the National Agricultural Council (CAN) and the Departmental Agricultural Councils (CAD) that comprised the Departmental Director of the MGAP, two delegates from the Departmental Administration (*intendencia*), one delegate from the National Institute of Colonization (INC), and one delegate from each non-state public agricultural institute, namely, research (National

Institute of Agricultural Research - INIA), extension (Agricultural Plan Institute - IPA), and meat institute (National Meat Institute - INAC) (Riella and Mascheroni 2012). Initially, in 2007, there was only one MDR per department; by 2017, there were 40 in the 19 departments (Figure 1). They brought together over 450 civil society organisations, Rural Promotion Societies (SFR), trade unions federated by the National Commission for Rural Promotion (CNFR), associations and groups of producers or rural employees, cooperatives, community organisations, and public institutions working in rural areas (Villalba 2015; Tables 1 and 2).



Figure 1. Location of MDRs in Uruguay's 19 departments (2017)

**Conceptual approach and method:** The approach used sought to avoid two pitfalls related to the study of participatory processes. The first one is the reification of these mechanisms as autonomous decision-making arenas (Massardier 2008). In contrast, public action theories insist on polycentrism, 'joint action', (Pressman and Wildavski 1973) and interdependence between actors in the form of networks and coalitions that overflow and cross institutions, organisations, and participatory spaces (Sabatier and Jenkins 1993). The second pitfall is the belief in a '*homo consensus participus*'. At the entrance to a participatory arena, an actor does not abandon their socialisations (social, professional, religious); trajectories (political, militant, professional); resources (social capital, education); social representations; or positions (Massardier et al. 2012). The challenge is to place the technical or financial debates around local projects in the broader framework of public action (Hassenteufel 2008). In this context, the diversity of the participants makes it necessary to cross-reference the types of political participation and the repertoires of collective action in the analysis (Tilly 2006), which allows actors to legitimise themselves and to play on several levels: partisan, union, professional, social mobilisation, institutional militancy (Nonjon 2005).

A second conceptual approach applied to integrate the recent political change in the country pertained to policy change (John 2015) and policy dismantling (Bauer et al. 2013). In fact, since 2020, with the change in the government, there has been a reduction in projects, a decrease in funds, 'new' guidelines for MGAP-DGDR officials, and changes to technical staff, particularly in departmental referents (professionals in positions of technical responsibility at the department level).

<sup>3</sup>Interview on 25 May 2015 with the Director of the DGDR of the MGAP.

The manipulation in the elements of public policies, and thus, in the format of the instrument, shows a clear trend dominated by the ideology of the acting government. The study focused on the MDRs of the departments of Río Negro, Rivera, and Salto, where family farming predominates. In addition to accounting for time and resource constraints of the research project, this choice is related to the differentiated configuration of the actors. The Department of Río Negro combines animal husbandry (family and corporate) and intensive agriculture (grain field crops and eucalyptus plantations). The Department of Rivera presents several forms of family and corporate livestock, eucalyptus and pine plantations, and mining activities. The Department of Salto combines intensive (milk) and extensive (cattle and sheep) livestock systems, fruit production, and market gardening. Data collection involved analysis of the official documents of the MGAP, MDRs (project evaluations, studies, and meeting proceedings) and member institutions<sup>4</sup> as well as participant observation of meetings of the Rivera, Salto and Río Negro MDRs. Between 2016-2018, a total of 57 semi-structured interviews were conducted with those working in the MGAP services (DGDR, Directorate of Decentralisation (DD) and Departmental Directorates) and other members of the MDRs: sectoral ministries, INC, local authorities (communes and departments), producers' organisations, family farmers' unions, cooperatives, and producer groups set up by the INC. The interviews, conducted using a common interview guide, involved 12 participants from the MDRs of Rivera, 11 from Río Negro, 15 from Salto, and 19 national officials from the MGAP and other institutions (Udelar; INIA); INC; CNFR; Ministry of Housing, Territorial Planning and Environment of Uruguay (MVOTMA); *Instituto Plan Agropecuario* (IPA); and Inter-American Institute for Cooperation on Agriculture (IICA)). Of the 57 interviews, 26 corresponded to producer delegates in the MDRs, with emphasis in the interview guides on aspects related to individual trajectories, taking into account the age and gender. Later in 2020, semi-structured interviews were conducted with the new DGDR and DD Directors, and the coordinator (transitory) for the MGAP of the Salto MDR. The information from the interviews was analysed in two grids: one dedicated to participation that included four points: 1) history and evolution of the MDRs; 2) characterisation and profile of the participants, their representativeness, and their individual and/or collective trajectory; 3) operating methods and internal and external dynamics of each MDR; 4) main results and effects (projects and actions selected and implemented). Another dedicated to representativeness within the MDRs that included two points: a) forms of delegation of power and responsibility; b) regulation and learning.

### Participation processes in the MDRs

**The functioning of the MDRs:** The MGAP convenes the meetings through the DACs, which already represent a form of trusteeship over the MDR mechanism. However, other Ministries, primarily those of Social Development (MIDES), Public Health (MSP), Interior (MI), Transport and Public Works (MTOP), Education and Culture (MEC) represented across the different levels of education, primary, secondary and Udelar, participate as guests. They also participate as guest the state-run power firm (UTE), water utility (OSE), and the departmental administrations (via their agriculture commissions). The frequency of meetings is 30 to 45 days on average. Pre-established procedures, by protocol, make it possible to set the dates, prepare the agenda, and maintain records in the form of proceedings book and attendance list. Several of the MDRs founded in 2007 have been subdivided and reorganised on territorial bases, often according to the areas of production systems. Each MDR adopts a specific way of functioning that is suitable to the reality of its territory and the participating organisations: such as the geographical division of the

department and whether the meetings are fixed or itinerant, among others. According to a farmer delegate, *'to survive, the MDR must respect the territory and respect its people'*<sup>5</sup>. Various instruments have been developed to strengthen the activities: annual evaluation and planning, monitoring of the addressed themes, local participatory diagnostics, territorial development plans, construction, and implementation of projects. However, a significant amount of the meeting time is still devoted to the approval of individual and collective projects submitted in response to the internal calls of the MGAP programs (subsidies are provided for the production).

In the Río Negro department, where the agricultural presence (soybean) is very important, two MDRs were operating in 2016: one was based in Young and linked to beef cattle breeders, and the second was based in Fray Bentos and focused on milk producers. Due to the pervasiveness of the problems of access to basic services, these two MDRs were linked to the Rurality Commission of MIDES through its inter-institutional social policy forum. In the Rivera department, the move to four territorial MDRs starting in 2007 was justified by transport difficulties (long distances and poor road network conditions). The dispersion and isolation of hamlets (*comunidades*), without formal producer organisation, led to representation by locality rather than by organisation. The itinerant meetings that are held in one of the four MDRs takes place every two months. The plenary meeting of the departmental MDR is fixed and allows to channel the themes that have already been addressed in the territorial MDRs. In the Salto department, where extensive livestock rearing on natural grassland (*campo*) is dominant, three territorial MDRs were created from 2007 based on the diversity of the farming systems: the fixed *Intensive Production* MDR (citrus fruits and horticulture) and two itinerant MDRs, namely, the *Deep Basalt* MDR (family livestock rearing of beef cattle, milk, and agriculture) and the *Superficial Basalt* MDR (extensive cattle and sheep rearing). The requests processed in the MDRs of these three departments mainly pertain to access to basic services and issues considered as social priorities by the interviewed delegates: electrification, housing, rural roads, health, access to high school, the condition and role of women, etc. The themes classified as production support (collective equipment for agricultural machinery, access to new land, breeding animals, etc. are not included in the list of topics) are primarily the topics of individual and collective projects that are submitted in response to the MGAP calls for proposals and submitted to the delegated farmers of the concerned MDR for approval of a joint guarantee. This guarantee is intended to reflect the suitability, responsibility and commitment of the applicants to comply with the execution of project.

**A large diversity of members in the MDRs:** MDR standards distinguish between representatives of civil society, public institutions, and producers. Before presenting these categories, it is necessary to underline the diversity of the forms of representation of farmers (Table 1). There are three types of historical organisations with formalised legal status that are represented within the MDRs: the SFRs, federated by the CNFR, the main national union for family farming; a few municipal-scale cooperatives or cooperatives associated with a colony (locality bringing together the beneficiaries of the same land allocation by the INC); and producer associations that are general or specialised by sector (milk, sheep, honey). A fourth type is that of groups of producers with diverse and often informal statuses; they bring together farmers offering services (holders of agricultural equipment) or those jointly exploiting a parcel of land obtained from the INC, women involved in a processing activity (honey, cheese, crafts), or young people. This diversity in the forms of farmer representation explains the need for adapting the rules of their functioning to local conditions; it is also important to understand the expectations about representation among the farmer delegates. Faced with the lack of interlocutors in certain large livestock departments in particular, the MGAP has adopted two strategies: accepting representation from localities (*comunidades*) where no organisation existed previously and setting up 'Institutional Strengthening Projects' (ISPs) for organisations, primarily to revitalise old associations or SFRs that had become inactive.

<sup>4</sup>The various MDRs were visited as follows: Salto in May and June 2015, Rivera in November 2015, and Río Negro in November 2016. Interviews in Montevideo with institutions and ministries were conducted in November 2015 and 2016. A restitution workshop with the MGAP was held on 23 November 2017 in Montevideo in the presence of the National Director of the DGDR, the President of the INC, and MGAP technicians from the three departments.

<sup>5</sup> Interview with Producer 1, Salto, 29 May 2015.

**Table 1. Producer representative organizations in Uruguay in 2017**

SFR (Society for Rural Promotion)	Cooperatives integrating family producers	Associations of producers	Producer groups
-Articulation between trade union activity and promotion of local rural territories -But shares reserved for members -Management of shared resources and equipment -Decisions and communication managed by local management Moderate participation of other members.	-Mainly cooperatives created for access to INC land under collective management.  - The agricultural cooperative sector in the departments studied mainly brings together large and medium-sized enterprises for the purchase of inputs and the marketing of products. Some of them include a few family producers, but hardly ever participate in the MDRs such as those of Río Negro.	-Old, formal and claiming organizations. - Defense of the general interests of the partners (branches or administrative area) - Difficulties in partner participation and commitment, limiting the renewal of governance.	-Joint INC land management to improve working and living conditions. -Great diversity of legal status and organizational mode, often informal. Few members: this facilitates the flow of information and their more intense participation in the decision-making process.

Source: Authors' elaboration

**Table 2. Breakdown of the main institutions' participation in the MDRs of the three departments studied, according to their involvement**

Types of actors	Producer Organization		Ministries, public institutions	
	Permanent staff	Occasional	Permanent staff	Occasional
Río Negro	3 SFR, 2 producer groups	2 SFR, 1 association, 1 group of producers, 2 cooperatives.	MGAP-DGDR, IPA, INC, INASE. Town Hall of Fray Bentos	Udelar, MIDES, MTOP, INIA, ANEP, CEPE.
Rivera	3 SFR, 2 producer groups, 6 localities	1 SFR, 1 coop. INC, 2 groups of producers, 1 association, 1 locality	MGAP-DGDR and CAD, IPA, INC, MEVIR, OPP, SNIG, ASSE, MSP	MIDES, MEC, UTU, UTE, Rivera Town Hall
Salto Basalt Superficial	4 SFR, 2 cooperatives and 2 producer groups	1 SFR, 1 association and 1 group of producers	MGAP, IPA, INC, SUL, INIA, Udelar, Salto City Council	MSP, ASSE, MI, ANEP. municipal councillors
Deep Salto Basalt	4 LICO, 2 cooperatives	1 association, 2 localities, 2 cooperatives, INC, 3 producer groups	MGAP, IPA, INC, SUL, INIA, Udelar, Salto City Council	MSP, ASSE, MI, ANEP, municipal councillors

Source: Authors' elaboration

New acronyms: ANEP-National Administration of Public Education, ASSE-State Health Insurance Administration, CEPE-Public Employment Center, INASE-National Seed Institute, MEVIR-Eradication Movement of Insanitary Rural Housing, OPP-State Planning and Budget Department, SNIG-National Livestock Information System, SUL-Uruguayan Wool Secretariat, UTE-Public Electricity Service, UTU-Uruguayan Labor University.

**Table 3. Diversity and distribution of producer representation in the MDRs of the three departments studied**

Types MDR /Departments	Association of producers by department and/or sector	Local Associations	SFR	Cooperatives	Producer groups	Comunidade slocalities	Total
2 MDRs of Río Negro	1	1	3	3	3		11
3 MDRs of Rivera	1		4	1	3	8	17
2 MDRs of Salto	2	1	8	6	7	2	26
Total	4	2	15	10	13	10	54

Source: Authors' elaboration

Among these farmers' organisations, the distinction within the MDRs lies mainly in terms of the continuity of their participation. The same is true for the representatives of civil society and public institutions: DAC member institutions are considered as permanent—even unavoidable—members. Public institutions in the non-agricultural sectors, which intervene on request, are occasional members (Table 2). Table 3 shows the distribution of these different forms of producer representations in the studied MDRs.

**The representation of the producers:** For the interviewed producers, beyond the standards provided by the legislation of the MGAP, representation means *'being present at activities and representing the members of a collective or community when not all the interested parties can attend'*<sup>6</sup>. They emphasise that they *'give power to a trusted person in the group'*<sup>7</sup>. The consequences of choosing delegates and representatives are thus evaluated particularly in the case of groups and communities that do not have formally elected leaders. Representativeness is associated with the mode of designation, the legitimacy of the person delegated and whether or not he or she correctly fulfils his or her function. This entails making known the demands or proposals of the collective and conveying the findings of the meetings to the group being represented (debates, answers, and decisions), as indicated by the following: *he or she must take responsibility for what he or she has committed to or promised to*

*deal with*<sup>8</sup>. When the delegate no longer meets these commitments, the organisation loses its representativeness. A certain asymmetry is then established between the members of the group, in favour of those who know how to express themselves in public and give back and those who have time to attend meetings, which includes women sometimes and retired people in particular. According to the MGAP coordinator of the MDRs in Salto, a professionalisation of representation, that is, the incorporation of learning that improves performance as representative, among the SFR delegates who have received training and among the better-off or retired farmers who combine representative functions in several areas: *'active and efficient farmers do not have time to dedicate to MDRs and are represented by retired people'*<sup>9</sup>. Just like the capacities of negotiation, speech, and defence of collective interests, trust is not a given; it must be socially constructed through interactions as clarified by Bernoux and Servet (1997). These institutionalised interactions, associated with collective meetings, are easier or more frequent within small collectives (producer groups) or those operating according to a minimum of rules (SFRs) than within an informal group or even a locality. The representation and representativeness of the delegates is, therefore, sometimes criticised by their bases (their own organisations or the farmers they represent), mainly for the MDRs of Rivera and Salto where almost half of the delegates are not elected or leaders of formal organisations. Representativeness is often questioned in

<sup>8</sup> Interview with Producer 4, Rivera, 14 November 2015.<sup>9</sup> Interview with agronomist and MGAP coordinator for Salto's MDR, 05 June 2015.<sup>6</sup> Interview with Producer 2, Rivera, 13 November 2015.<sup>7</sup> Interview with Producer 3, Rivera, 12 November 2015.

relation to the lack of feedback to grassroots organisations or localities (communities or hamlets): *'We transmit our requests through our delegates, but we do not always know what the answers are'*<sup>10</sup>. This aspect is not unrelated to the quality or legitimacy of the delegates; in fact, it highlights the need for training farmers' representatives to ensure a more democratic and transparent flow of information, reduce asymmetry with representatives of public institutions and businesses, and allow a rotation of representatives/delegates by integrating more women and young people, given that the latter are often ignored. MDR participants believe that it is not enough to demand it is a matter of proposing and ensuring that farmers and technicians work together and creating relationships that only farmers with political resources can access does not suffice. The challenge behind the asymmetry between farmers and MGAP technicians is twofold: on the one hand, it must be ensured that their demands (from farmers) are listened to and passed on, and on the other, imposing standard projects that do not correspond to farmers' expectations or the specificities of local conditions should be avoided: *'Often, the delegate accepts what the MGAP proposes, but in dry periods, what is the point of accepting aid in cereal straw to feed cattle if what we need is an irrigation authorisation?'*<sup>11</sup>.

**Profiles of farmer representatives:** Semi-structured interviews with leaders and representatives of grassroots organisations indicate three main typical profiles, which, excluding variations or intermediate situations, clarify the differences in terms of resources, motivations, and skills. These profiles were developed by analysing interviews of leaders and delegates of MDRs.

**The 'militant or elected' profile:** This profile is linked to political parties/trade unions, involved in several professional or political spaces. It is characterised as multi-positioned, knowledgeable about the mechanisms of public administration, and experienced in negotiations. A delegate with this profile sometimes has key information (funding, calls for projects, strategic meetings) before it reaches his/her colleagues via MGAP technicians. Even if he/she is not always present at MDR meetings, being a delegate with this profile in his/her organisation makes it possible to accumulate differentiated resources and advantages. Often, the presence of a delegate with this profile leads to a change in the representation of his or her organisation within the MDR because he or she will assume other responsibilities, travel, or even become a union or political representative. This type of delegate is found mainly in land management cooperatives related to INC and in unions such as SFRs.

**The 'manager' profile:** Due to sense of personal responsibility or in the absence of other volunteers, a delegate with this profile agrees to manage the collective facilities of the group, association, or cooperative. They do not have political resources, but they have technical resources. Such a delegate is rigorous with the handling of information, writes minutes to record the information. He/she may not know a lot about a certain topic and may fear getting overwhelmed about it, but acts guided by the confidence shown by his/her collective, through your personal trajectory of socially recognised commitment. This profile is typical of producer groups, particularly the oldest and most stable, and can give rise to two sub-types: the discreet and modest manager (associated with a smaller network of ties between family members and neighbours) or the cause entrepreneur who sets up projects (associated with a greater network of ties, especially with the environment outside the organization).

**The profile 'of the available':** This profile is of a retired elderly person, or even a local shopkeeper who is often poorly informed, not very involved, and not representative of the group. Regardless of the political capacities and resources of such a delegate, they may be disconnected or lack legitimacy or spaces for interaction with the members of the group. This profile is typical of representatives of

localities, groups benefiting from INC land, or producer organisations that are not very active or are declining.

**Other profiles:** In addition to these three types, new profiles of representatives (young people and women) are emerging with the revitalisation of the SFRs and union training, the activities of the Specialized Meeting on Family Farming (REAF) of MERCOSUR (Southern Common Market), and the increase in women's organisations. Young farmers from poor families, such as those interviewed north of Salto<sup>12</sup>, have become collective representations in the MDRs. However, these are exceptions. According to local technicians from the MGAP in Salto<sup>13</sup>, *'young people are perceived by their elders as lacking experience and the ability to negotiate'*, causing them to participate in a limited manner in the MDRs, being another reason for migration to the city. In fact, farmers deplored the impossibility of pursuing secondary education in rural areas, young people leave early for nearby towns. Among the more affluent, medium-sized family farmers, *'often, the woman migrates to the city to facilitate the children's studies, sometimes as early as elementary school, and the man travels between his farm and the city'*<sup>13</sup>. For most families, this child only returns on vacation. The interview respondents agreed that under these conditions, *it is therefore very difficult to take over the parents' farm once secondary school is over'*<sup>13</sup>.

**Women's groups:** The main objective of the women's groups is to improve the quality of life of families and to conquer a space of social recognition. They can become a majority when the MDRs are itinerant. They are rigorous in how they process information. They have an active role in the management of social and family issues (education, training, health, youth issues) and are able to link agricultural and non-agricultural activities (product development and marketing, rural tourism, etc.). On the other hand, they are not always respected by men on productive and technical issues *'although we women think correctly, the word of a man has more value'*<sup>14</sup>.

**Evolution of participation processes:** At the beginning, the MDRs were integrated at the civil society level by producers' organisations, women's groups and associations, youth and rural workers groups, non-governmental organisations, etc. At the public sector level, they were integrated through development secretaries of the departmental governments, technical representatives of these secretaries and of other public services, and representatives of MGAP or other State agencies. However, participation in the initial period (between 2001 and 2007) was centred on the producer organisations with the largest number of members. Participation, which was very intense at the beginning of the program in 2007, occasionally decreased as the most urgent problems were resolved, even if the ISPs of the grassroots organisations maintained a collective dynamic. However, this was not true for the Superficial Basalt MDR of Salto, which has a more regular and strong participation due to the animation capacity of the local MGAP technician, who is skilled in stimulating initiatives and collective action.

Progress has been made with regard to the convening process. Although the presence of young people is rare, that of women has increased. Participants' ability to express themselves, especially that of women, has improved with the establishment of territorial MDRs and the inclusion of representation from women's groups. However, in Rivera and Salto, despite the itinerant MDRs and carpooling organisations with technicians, the lack of resources to finance participants' travel remains a major concern. In Río Negro, the local SFRs are actively involved, unlike the producer associations and groups. While the MDRs are perceived as a place to obtain information (institutional levelling) and to coordinate actions, outside of specific emergencies, they are not always seen as a space for analysing problems and proposing solutions, as intended by the initial

<sup>12</sup> Interview with a young female producer delegated by SFR to MDR, N°7, Salto, 30 May 2015.

<sup>13</sup> Interview with agronomist and MGAP coordinator for Salto's MDR, 05 June 2015.

<sup>14</sup> Interview with female producer 8, Colonia Rubio, Salto, 30 May 2015.

<sup>10</sup> Interview with Producer 5, Cerro Pelado, Rivera, 14 November 2015.

<sup>11</sup> Interview with Producer 6, Estacion Itapebí, Salto, 29 May 2015.

MGAP project. According to one farmer delegate, *'people want to receive, but not necessarily to propose and participate'*<sup>15</sup>. The limitations include the isolation, distances, poor condition of dirt roads, and transportation difficulties, especially in Salto and Rivera: according to the facilitator of the Superficial Basalt MDR of Salto, *'farmers must have or find a vehicle to travel, pay for fuel; for them, it is expensive. Sometimes they lose a whole day for a two-hour meeting. For some, communication is very difficult, there is no electricity or internet coverage'*<sup>16</sup>. MDRs' continue to depend on MGAP technicians, including for access to meetings. The personality (personal resources, charisma, etc.) of the local MGAP referent makes him or her a determining actor for the functioning and animation of the MDR. In Río Negro, for example, the change in the MGAP's Departmental Director caused a strong discontinuity in the process. The national trade union organisations also have their share of responsibility. According to a farmer delegate of the SFR in Colonia Rubio (Salto), *'some employers' organisations, on the one hand, and trade unions such as CNFR, on the other hand, perceive the MDRs as competition and prefer to leave them'*<sup>17</sup>. The meetings of Young's MDR were initially held in the premises of the Río Negro Rural Society (departmental union of large cattle producers) until the latter boycotted them. In fact, at the national level, there is a historic rivalry, between the cattle farmers affiliated with the Rural Federation and the SFRs affiliated with the CNFR, which has been revived by the victory of the left-wing *Frente Amplio*. In Rivera and Salto, the participation of groups of producers or localities without legal status is irregular, unlike the more constant presence at the meetings of cooperatives and SFRs. Some organisations claim that the CNFR is more an instrument of government action than an autonomous mechanism for producers, who do not always feel heard. The difference between an instituted and controlled public space and a more autonomous citizen public space open to civil society organisations is clearly visible, but such an open public space is quite rare in the studied rural territories (Micoud 2001). The reduction in participation is linked to these questions of legitimacy and sometimes to the overlap between established spaces (such as the MIDES forums in Río Negro or the new town halls) and to the delay in improving local roads and other conditions of access to meetings. However, according to technicians and producers, it is also linked to the fact that the number of problems to be solved urgently has reduced. This initial success of the MDR policy should not mask the weak prospects for development after ten years: producer organisations are critical of the lack of transposition of the achievements of the MDRs at the regional or national levels, as claimed by the CNFR *'from the CNFR board of directors, we are concerned about the reduction in resources allocated to policies for family farming'*<sup>18</sup>.

### Lessons and perspectives about the MDRs in a new political context

#### The dual learning process of participation and decentralization:

The analysis findings reveal that the MDRs have responded to a broad demand in terms of decentralisation and de-concentration of public action for rural development, intra and intersectoral coordination, territorialisation of forums and, finally, have consulted with the population via their local organisations. All the consulted stakeholders approve of the flexibility and adaptability of the functioning of the MDRs as well as their capacity to move from sectoral to territorial and intersectoral dimensions. Most recognise that this process relies on close support from officials of the MGAP, the INC, the IPA, and local authorities, thus placing technicians at a central role. Beyond this supervisory role of the MGAP, as in the case of the National Program for Territorial Development (PRONAT) in Brazil (Porto 2015), there is evidence of cross-learning about processes and tools of participation among both technicians and

farmers, but also from their interactions and shared experiences (Fernandez and Weason 2012). These are undeniable achievements attributable to the MGAP and farmers' collectives around participation, although participation has been fragile or irregular at times, which leads us to examine the relevance and causes for MDRs' limitations. The first limitation pertains to the institutional filter: although it is the MGAP (on behalf of the MDR) that passes on invitations to address the problems communicated by farmers, it is often dependent on other sectoral institutions. In addition, projects that can be financed at the individual, and especially at the collective level (such as institutional strengthening and access to land for collective use), correspond mainly to pre-formatted calls by the MGAP and the INC. This poses a risk of non-renewal due to exhaustion of the themes or projects proposed, particularly when these projects no longer correspond to the priorities of local organisations. The second limitation lies in the ability to transform the MDRs into spaces for building local or territorial projects rather than implementing the actions recommended by the MGAP. The vote for the joint guarantee of individual or collective subsidies, even if it is provided for by law, is rarely perceived by farmers as an act of joint social and financial guarantee: according to a producer delegate of the Deep Basalt MDR of Salto<sup>19</sup>, *'one votes more for the person than for the quality of the project or its amount'*. However, the joint guarantees also considered by the MGAP and the INC as a source of information, an act of socialisation and transparency: *'We first of all guarantees that the beneficiary is indeed a farmer, not a merchant or an urban owner'*<sup>20</sup>. A third limitation corresponds to the asymmetries between the actors involved in the MDR and decision making. This is an inevitable counterpoint to the opening up of MDRs to civil society (Hope 2011), to the diversity of forms of its representation, and to the flexibility assumed with regard to the perimeter and functioning of territorial MDRs.

Reducing inequalities in terms of political resources and social and educational capital between representatives of family farmers and those of public institutions requires information and training actions. ISPs created for the benefit of farmers' collectives are in line with this approach. However, training ministry and local government officials on the conditions and specificities of participatory functions in rural areas is also necessary. The professionalisation of technicians and delegates of farmers' collectives both establishes and requires increasingly institutionalised functions in terms of technical or political participation (Nonjon 2005). The challenge is also to anticipate and reduce inequalities of power between territories, localities, and organisations, and even between political tendencies. In the MDRs, the profiles and trajectories of farmers and civil servants who are also activists, trade unionists, entrepreneurs, and even elected officials of local authorities intersect (Massardier et al. 2012). Failure to take these elements into account leads to the legitimisation of privileged or selective sharing of information, or to taking anticipated decisions in parallel spaces that are private or, at the very least, privileged groups (Le Naour and Massardier 2013).

**Perspectives about MDRs after policy change in 2020:** The change in the political direction of the national government after the 2019 elections had a series of impacts on the actions and functioning of the MDRs, which in turn came to be associated with the almost simultaneous advent of the COVID-19 pandemic. The new administration has emerged from the formation of a political coalition led by the National Party and is made up of the whole spectrum of right-wing and centre-right political parties. It has promoted a series of changes, perhaps less forceful than could previously have been expected from the announcements made during the electoral campaign. To a certain extent, this is also associated with the socio-economic situation that has resulted from COVID-19. In this sense, and according to the classification of Bauer et al. (2013), the changes can be considered to have a symbolic dismantling effect, more rhetorical than effective. Initially, both the DGDR and the DD carried out a reduction of personnel. On the one hand, the DGDR relieved all

<sup>15</sup> Interview with Producer 9, Río Negro, 16 November 2016.

<sup>16</sup> Interview with MGAP animator from the Superficial Basalt MDR of Salto, 05 June 2015.

<sup>17</sup> Interview with Producer 10, Salto, 29 May 2015.

<sup>18</sup> Intervention of the president of CNFR during restitution of results (27/11/2017).

<sup>19</sup> Interview of Producer 8 Estación Itapebí, Salto, 29 May 2015.

<sup>20</sup> Interview with agronomist and Departmental Director of the MGAP in Río Negro, 16 November 2016.

departmental directors who were not effective in their positions and called for competitive examinations (several of them are still being conducted), which put the operations of the DACs on hold. On the other hand, the DD dismissed technicians from territorial teams who had been directly hired, thus reducing the number of personnel involved in the operation of the MDRs. To some extent, these changes in the technical teams modified the initial effect of the DD on the functioning of the MDRs in their territories, which generates a certain uncertainty and poses a problem that cannot or does not want to be solved. In terms of Bauer *et al.*'s (2013) typology of policy dismantling strategies, such a reduction of resources without visibility and structural change in the policy is characteristic of a process of dismantling by default. The budget from the state coffers was reduced by approximately 20% compared to the previous one, and there is no precise information about the budget from international loan funds. In any case, there is a lack of new projects and programs (financed with international funds) for and with rural producers, which has weakened the link with family producer organisations. Because of the pandemic, the MDR's operating format has changed to virtual modes, which were initially resisted by producers, given their lack of knowledge about technologies and connectivity difficulties. With the passage of time, this situation has improved, and participation nowadays is similar to pre-pandemic face-to-face participation levels<sup>21</sup>. The novel change due to the shift to the virtual mode has been the presence of senior managers from the central administration in almost all the meetings of the different MDRs, which was very difficult to attain in the pre-pandemic face-to-face meetings.

This change in presence can be interpreted in two ways: although it can be seen as an approach adopted by the government authorities to tackle the problems of the poorest population expressed through the MDRs, it is also a mechanism of political recruitment that simultaneously reduces the dialogue and discussion among peers, transforming it into a more unidirectional relationship from the political power to the civilian population. For example, practically all the meetings are attended by the Director of Decentralization and/or the Director of the DGDR, in addition to the presence of a Minister and/or Director of the State Entities. However, institutions such as the INC that had a more leading role in the period previously analysed by the research (2016–2018) currently have a more passive role, given the absence of land offers and the fall in demand by producers and their organisations. Shifting to the virtual mode has also fostered the exchanges and relationships between the different MDRs from different departments because of discussing common issues. This is mainly associated with the reduction of travel time and the costs of face-to-face meetings, which aid problem solving. The topics are very similar to the ones discussed in the previous stage, although with reduced discussion (less dedication in time and depth of the discussion of the issues).

Issues related to the demand for basic services (electricity, connectivity, education, health, etc.) continue to predominate, although there is a lower incidence of issues related to production, such as access to land. The organisations that decreased their participation are mainly those that refer to small producers' cooperatives that exploit the collective land of the INC or the recently created SFR. The reduced participation has been mainly attributed to the absence of technical teams due to the completion of projects and the follow-up in the territory from the MDRs. However, producer organisations linked to traditional cattle-ranching landowners and large businesspersons, who previously did not participate in the MDRs, understood that, since they had other forms of access to political power, they did not see the MDRs as necessary for their advocacy strategy with the government. Currently, although their participation is not active, they have begun to make their presence felt and to propose discussing certain issues (rural security). Finally, it is necessary to highlight that the new authorities of the DGDR and DD aspire to maintain the space provide by the MDRs and to recognise it as valid for promoting territorial rural development.

## CONCLUSION

From the perspective of the decentralisation of the MGAP's actions, the interviewed actors consider the MDRs to be a significant step forward, even if they regret that the participation of local authorities is sometimes irregular or not very effective. Moreover, the process of administrative and political decentralisation in Uruguay is recent, and some rural departments continue to have a few municipalities. In fact, the departmental directorates of the MGAP have acquired new human resources, with young candidates recruited from outside the Ministry, including agronomists and veterinarians, and new profiles such as social workers, sociologists, and economists. This renewal and broadening of profiles have contributed to the establishment of a more professional and participatory dynamic within the MGAP and led to the consideration of requests at the local or territorial levels. From the point of view of participation, the results are encouraging, even if they are still linked to the profile or determination of the local technical referent who may be a civil servant of the MGAP or of a public enterprise (IPA, INC, etc.). In terms of public policy dialogue, because of the typical inter-knowledge and proximity of a small country, the interrelation and social proximity dimension of the debates often takes precedence over the more technocratic, mercantile, and financial relations. This characteristic confers a specificity to the relationships in the context of the political reforms of present-day Uruguay, which is very different from those that may prevail in Argentina (Kay and Vergara 2018) or the Brazilian cordial populism (Porto 2015; Sabourin 2020).

However, this advantage is reduced by the inadequacies or even the absence of larger or more autonomous citizen public spaces within the country, especially in rural areas (Micoud 2001), which is one of the limitations to participation in the MDRs. Nevertheless, the interviewed farmers emphasised the value of coordination between MDRs in the same department or the creation of a unified MDR, even if it meets only periodically. Similarly, they suggested exchanges between MDRs from different departments. These proposals, which tend to strengthen the constitution of coalitions of causes at the national level (Sabatier and Jenkins 1993), may certainly run counter to the MGAP's position of supervision, which prefers to channel demands or compete with the strategies of elected officials from the departments or trade unions. According to the director of the DGDR and the president of the INC (from the previous administration<sup>22</sup>), the difficulties would stem from other sectors that do not share a participatory vision of development. Representatives of these sectors, even when they participate in meetings and respond to requests from the MDRs, emphasise the overriding and tutelary position of the MGAP. Thus, there is tension between sector ministries. Moreover, the CNFR (the main union running public spaces), which is aware that entrepreneurial agriculture has other channels of access to the government, regretted the lack of transposition at the departmental, and particularly at the national level, of the territorial coordination offered by the MDR system: farmers' organisations are not represented in the DAC or the CAN. In their view, the participatory process could be extended or at least tested at the national level with an inter-sectorial National Rural Development Council, similar to the one that existed in Brazil from 2001 to 2016, before the abolition of the Ministry of Agrarian Development (Favareto 2010). Certainly, as Bebbington *et al.* (2008) show, in other Latin American countries, the strengthening of this type of approach depends on the capacity of rural social movements to exert pressure and make proposals. The policy modification in 2020, with the coming to power of the new national government, accentuated some problems and generated some changes that can be seen as positive, although many of them can be associated more with the COVID-19 pandemic than with the new administration. In this sense, the dependence of the operation on the different departmental heads of the MGAP has become accentuated. There is now greater interaction between the central government authorities and the MDRs, which is closely associated with the shift

<sup>21</sup>Interview on 12 May 2021 with DGDR and DD Directors of de MGAP.

<sup>22</sup>Based on expressions expressed during the presentation of the results of the project, of which this research was part.

to the virtual mode. Simultaneously, however, it accentuates the unidirectional nature of the relationship, with the authorities' approach to organised civil society playing a predominant role, rather than the other way round. It can also be seen as a mechanism of recruitment and/or partisan political action by the authorities or as a way of limiting the proposals and/or dialogue and problem-solving on the part of MDR participants. Finally, the pandemic has not allowed the government to impose its more radical liberal stamp but has rather been a period of transition.

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